

2006

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Recommended Citation

Adkins, King (2006) ""The Snow Filled Forest": Robert Frost's Influence on Robert Penn Warren," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 6 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol6/iss1/9>

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“The Snow Filled Forest”:
Robert Frost’s Influence on Robert Penn Warren

KING ADKINS

Virtually all critical studies of Robert Penn Warren’s poetry turn at some point to an examination of those poets by whom he was influenced. There is certainly a kind of logic that underlies such studies: Harold Bloom’s comments on “the anxiety of influence” aside, the sheer volume of Warren’s work as scholar and critic would make it unlikely that he could have escaped being influenced by the work of others. His role in developing some of the most important literary textbooks and anthologies of the twentieth century¹ testifies to the number of writers and works with which he was familiar. More importantly, however, these books are not simply collections of works, but represent an attempt to set forth New Critical principles of analysis, to change in a fundamental way how literature was viewed. In other words, they point not merely to Warren’s fluency with an enormous body of works, but to a familiarity in a far deeper, more critical sense with these works. Such a depth of fluency with so many poets’ styles, techniques and themes must certainly have colored Warren’s own poetry, and this means that studies of such influence can, in many cases, offer valuable insight into his poetry.

In fact, the importance of influence can be traced far back in Warren’s career. There is, for example, the fact that Warren was so taken with Eliot’s “The Waste Land” that he could recite the poem by heart², an indication of Eliot’s importance to Warren, but also of a certain level of intimacy he was able to maintain with the work.

¹See *Understanding Poetry; Understanding Fiction; Modern Rhetoric; Short Story Masterpieces; Six Centuries of Great Poetry; American Literature: The Makers and the Making.*

²Lesa Carnes Corrigan, *Poems of Pure Imagination: Robert Penn Warren and the Romantic Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 23.

Perhaps more telling is Warren's admission that he began writing poetry "by writing imitations" at Vanderbilt: "There was the miracle of people like Donald Davidson, who in sophomore English would allow you to write imitations instead of the biweekly critique. . . . Every two weeks I always chose, or nearly always chose, to do an imitation."³ While this is the practice of an undergraduate, and perhaps not something that Warren would have relied on as a mature poet, it speaks to a philosophy that learning can be achieved through close attention to the work of others.

Warren's poetic career — sophomore imitations aside — can be divided into two distinct phases, separated by a period of poetic inactivity from 1943 to 1954. Critics typically regard T.S. Eliot as the dominant influence on Warren's early period. James Justus, in particular, draws attention to Warren's stated opinion that "the dissociated modern sensibility, exploited so forcefully by Eliot and Pound, could be accommodated to the southern temperament" and goes on to explore Warren's use of a number of Eliotic tendencies in his early work, such as the juxtaposition of "intellection and naturalistic observation."⁴

Likewise, Coleridge is generally seen as the dominant influence on Warren's later career. Several critics have pointed out the fact that Warren seems to have overcome his inability to write poetry through the writing of his essay on Coleridge, "A Poem of Pure Imagination."⁵ The consensus is that, in dealing with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Warren was able to discover new direction for his own work: "This essay on Coleridge served as a catalyst that defined a whole range of themes and concerns that appear in Warren's later poetry."⁶

A number of critics have argued that it was necessary for Warren

³David Farrell, "Poetry as a Way of Life: An Interview with Robert Penn Warren," *The Georgia Review* 36 (1982): 318-319.

⁴James H. Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 51.

⁵See Corrigan, *Poems of Pure Imagination*; Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*; Dave Smith, "Notes on a Form to be Lived," *Homage to Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Frank Graziano (Durango, CO: Logbridge-Rhodes, 1981), 33-55; and Anthony Szczesiul, "The Immolation of Influence: Aesthetic Conflict in Robert Penn Warren's Poetry," *Mississippi Quarterly* 52:1 (Winter 1998-1999): 47-72.

⁶Corrigan, 13.

to subvert Eliot's influence in order to develop fully his own voice and discover his own themes in his later career.⁷ For other critics, his relationship to these two poets is often seen as part of a single thematic impulse, a view of Warren in Yeatsian terms, as a writer who both embraced Romanticism and yet saw its impossibility in the Modern world.⁸ In either case, the fact of influence is clearly established.

Additionally, a number of critics have pointed to Warren's connection, in a more antagonistic vein, to other writers. There seems to have been a tendency in Warren's work to address — and in many cases refute — the ideas of certain writers with whom he disagreed. William Bedford Clark, for instance, examines the importance of Whitman to Warren, using similarities to Whitman in an early poem, "Empire," as a means of coupling the two, and then moving to a detailed examination of how Whitman's themes and impulses are turned in new directions in Warren's work.⁹ Lucas Tromly looks at Warren's relationship to Poe, specifically Warren's criticism of Poe's "pure poetry" as opposed to the impure poetry that allows for contradiction and forces the reader to become a participant. Tromly regards *Brother to Dragons*, in particular, as Warren's attempt to respond to this impulse in Poe.¹⁰ Likewise, Harold Bloom and others have looked at Warren's negative attitude towards Ralph Waldo Emerson, his impulse to "attribute most of America's cultural woes over the last century or so to the dire influence of Emerson's unanchored, nonhistorical antinomianism and social myopia."¹¹ Such articles add weight to the idea that Warren obviously felt a strong sense of literary history and devoted

⁷See Szczesiul; and Calvin Bedient, "Greatness and Robert Penn Warren," *Sewanee Review* 89.3 (1981): 332-346.

⁸Corrigan argues that "In several respects the patterns of Eliot's and Warren's long careers involved a connection to the Romantics. Although Eliot emerged as an anti-Romantic modern during the height of his poetic and critical career, a thorough understanding of Eliot's literary career begins at what Bornstein calls 'its neglected beginning, in his obsession with the Romantic poets'" (25).

⁹William Bedford Clark, "Whitman, Warren, and the Literature of Discovery," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 10.1 (1992): 10-15.

¹⁰Lucas Tromly, "Impurifying Poe: Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 53 (2000): 225-236.

¹¹Harold Bloom, forward, *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press); R. W. B. Lewis, "Warren's Long Visit to American Literature," *The Yale Review* 70 (1981): 569.

a good deal of thought to defining his own place within that history.

Rarely mentioned in any study of Warren's models or antagonists is his relationship to Robert Frost, a poet who was writing during a significant portion of Warren's career, and with whom Warren seems to have an important relationship. While there is not much to be found in the letters or interviews with Warren concerning Frost's influence, Warren clearly felt some tie with the New England poet. To begin with, one of his earliest published prose pieces was "Hawthorne, Anderson, and Frost," an examination of several literary biographies including Gorham Munson's study of Frost. The article is not merely a review. In critiquing Munson's volume, Warren makes a number of key assertions about Frost's work. He argues, for example, with the suggestion that Frost was in any way a classicist: "Frost is differentiated from the 'neo-classicists' such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound on the basis of their reference to authority and literary tradition and Frost's reference to nature."¹² Given the early influence of Eliot on Warren's thought, such an assertion in this article — published in 1928 — suggests a less than sympathetic view of Frost. Nevertheless, this work stands as proof that Warren had, from an early point in his own career, considered what Frost was trying to accomplish as a poet.

Far more revealing, of course, is Warren's 1947 essay, "The Themes of Robert Frost,"¹³ a much more detailed and sympathetic examination of the central themes in Frost's work. The fact that it was published within a year of "A Poem of Pure Imagination" could suggest that Frost may have been as much responsible for Warren's return to poetry as Coleridge. In fact, the importance of Frost to Warren's later work is far more significant than a mere chronological coincidence of essay publications might suggest.

What should make this relationship clear is the resemblance of a good deal of Warren's later work to Frost's in key elements such as narrative voice, structure, imagery, and even topic. Taken together, though, these similarities point to something larger: that

¹²Robert Penn Warren, "Hawthorne, Anderson, and Frost," *New Republic* 54 (1928): 400.

¹³Robert Penn Warren, "The Themes of Robert Frost," *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1958), 118-136. All subsequent references to this work will be noted parenthetically by the abbreviation TTORF and the page number.

Warren's poetry bears a thematic relationship to Frost's as well. Specifically, Warren's work seems to create a kind of dialectic with that of Frost. While he adopts many of Frost's ideas, they are modified and used in new ways. The importance of exploring this relationship, then, is more than mere idle curiosity; it helps to clarify in key ways what Warren was trying to accomplish in his work.

There is, first, a broad similarity between the uses of narrative in both poets. To put the connection in simplest terms, both tend to rely on narrative, on the power of stories, rather than on strictly philosophical argument, as a basis for much of their work. This is not to deny that both poets firmly ground their work in ideas, but rather to suggest that it is the narrative, the storyline, that typically receives the emphasis. Frost's privileging of narrative is readily apparent; one need only look at a small selection of poems — "Out, Out-," "The Death of the Hired Man," or "Stopping By Woods"¹⁴ — to find evidence of the story's centrality in his work. The importance of narrative for Warren is no less apparent, a fact of which he himself takes note in discussing his years of poetic inactivity: "Many times the germ of a short story could also be the germ of a poem, and I was wasting mine on short stories."¹⁵ The root conflict in such a comment lies in the fact that, for Warren, both poems and short stories should spring from a similar narrative impulse. It is just such an impulse that Warren relies on throughout his later career in poems like "Orphanage Boy" and "October Picnic Long Ago."¹⁶

If both poets rely heavily on narrative, it is equally clear that both use narrative in complex ways. Neither poet entirely excludes philosophical speculation from his work. Rather, they work to interweave story and philosophy, drawing on the former as foundation for the latter. Warren himself points to this tendency in Frost's poetry, in reference, for example, to "After Apple-Picking":

¹⁴Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1969): 136; 34. All subsequent references to Frost's poems will be noted parenthetically by the abbreviation RF and the page number.

¹⁵Peter Stitt, "An Interview with Robert Penn Warren," *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews, 1950-1978* (New York: Random House, 1980): 229.

¹⁶Robert Penn Warren, *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998): 346; 381. All subsequent references to Warren's poems will be noted parenthetically by RPW and page numbers.

“‘After Apple-Picking’ is scarcely consistent at the level of actuality. It starts off with a kind of consistency, but then something happens” (*TTORF* 129). Warren goes on to observe that Frost orders his “literal materials so that, in looking back upon them as the poem proceeds, the reader suddenly realizes that they have been transmuted” into metaphor or philosophical indicators (*TTORF* 136). In looking at a poem such as “Evening Hawk” (*RPW* 326), it is clear that Warren does something quite similar, if in a slightly different form. Here we begin with a straightforward description of a literal hawk, seen by the speaker against the background of the mountains. Though the first stanza is riddled with similes, the event maintains its quality as a literal description. In the second stanza, however, as Warren shifts from simile to metaphor — “his motion / Is that of the honed steel-edge, we hear / The crashless fall of stalks of Time” — the reader is forced to look back at the previous stanza and re-evaluate the experience in terms of its larger significance. Warren returns in line eleven to a more literal depiction of the event, but in the final stanza suggests that history may be “a leaking pipe in the cellar.” Again, the impact is to shift the reader from literal to metaphorical or philosophical considerations. Frost’s structure is, of course, modified here. Whereas Frost’s poems tend to build slowly through experience, reaching metaphor only in the end, Warren here alternates the two. Still, the basic idea is the same: to create a dialectic between the world of the literal and that of the symbolic, to illustrate in dramatic fashion the necessary interplay of these two worlds. In fact, as will become clear, this move is essential to what each poet is trying to accomplish in terms of theme; the similarity in technique points to a pronounced thematic relationship.

Related to the issue of narrative is the development in both of these poets of a particular speaker or persona who evinces a simultaneously simplistic and wise attitude. Dave Smith refers to this similarity in his article, “Notes on a Form to be Lived”:

Critical response to Warren’s recent three collections has been quick to point out the lyrical nature of his poetry and the feeling in it. But it has not linked his attention to feeling with his evolutionary work in form. Annalyn Swan, reviewing *Being*

Here for *Newsweek*, has written that Warren now “achieves the sort of profound simplicity that marks the best autumnal poetry.” It is a remark one might have expected to hear of Robert Frost, suggesting as it does the venerable qualities of sweetness, purity, wisdom, noble song, the pageant of natural harmony, etc.¹⁷

Smith is unwilling to reduce Warren’s work to this level of simplicity, to accept that Warren’s work is merely an imitation of Frost’s. He is certainly correct in this unwillingness; yet, it is undeniable that the wise old country speaker of many of Frost’s poems bears a striking resemblance to the speaker of many of Warren’s poems. In “Orphanage Boy” (*RPW* 346), for example, the speaker says, “It was a copperhead / Bit Bob, and nothing, it looked like, would make him better.” Through the elision of “that” after “copperhead” and the simplicity of both the diction and syntax, Warren is able to capture a kind of slang speech suggestive of a simple, country speaker. To take but one example from Frost’s work, the diction and syntax of the speaker in “Mending Wall” (*RF* 33) are equally simple and straightforward: “And on a day we meet to walk the line / And set the wall between us once again.” Furthermore, in both cases the lack of complexity in the speaker’s language belies the wisdom that lies beneath what is spoken. What is significant is the desire on the part of both poets to discover a connection between simplicity and complexity. Ultimately, this is simply another way of phrasing the struggle to discover a connection between the literal and symbolic worlds, between the common everyday experience and the transcendent.

In the resemblance between the two poets in terms of imagery, their relationship becomes even more apparent. Katherine Snipes has noted one such similarity: “Warren examines the symbol of the dark woods in several of Frost’s poems. Warren often uses the woods symbolically himself in poetry.” Unfortunately, Snipes is unwilling to follow through with this similarity: “Whether he was influenced by Frost in his affinity for the woods and their literary suggestiveness is hard to say.”¹⁸ In fact, in looking beyond the use

¹⁷ Smith, 37.

¹⁸ Katherine Snipes, *Robert Penn Warren* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1983): 55.

of woods, at the number of other borrowings Warren makes of Frost imagery, it does not seem "hard to say" at all.

Warren does indeed use the woods as an important symbol in his work, and in ways similar to those of Frost. Indeed, in many instances, the way Warren makes use of them echoes the comments he makes in his essay on Frost. There, Warren notes that Frost's woods are almost always "dark." He attributes to them both a "sinister beauty" (*ITORF* 123), and a "lethal beauty" (*ITORF* 125). Woods in Warren's work are typically dark as well. In "Old-Time Childhood in Kentucky" (*RPW* 560), "The woods seemed darker"; in "Passers-By on Snowy Night" (*RPW* 439-440), he uses the phrase "Black the coniferous darkness"; in "Chain Saw at Dawn in Vermont in Time of Drouth" (*RPW* 285-286), the woods are "deep"; in "Snow Out of Season" (*RPW* 477), he describes their "lethality."

Snow too is an important image for both poets. Certainly there may be an incidental relationship here in that Warren lived during his later life in New England, the site of much of Frost's work. Yet the resemblance seems to argue for a more intimate connection. Both poets, for example, intermix the image of snow with that of dust, Frost describing snow as "desert" in "Desert Places" (*RF* 296), while Warren describes the dust in "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home From Party in the Back Country" (*RPW* 333-335) as "powdered whiter than star-dust, or frost." Even more significant is the use of ice. As Warren points out in his essay on Frost, the skimmed ice in "After Apple-Picking" keys the reader in to the movement from a literal world to that of dreams (*ITORF* 129-131). Warren plays on this same image in exactly the same way in both "Passers-By on Snowy Night" (*RPW* 439) and "Old Nigger" (*RPW* 333-335). In "Passers-By" the image is transformed from ice to window, yet the window is still "frost-starred" and the window remains associated with a "dream." In "Old Nigger," the image is even more central: the "ice glitter of glass" clearly indicates that the poem has shifted from the past to the present, a movement analogous in many ways to that between Frost's dream and reality.

Closely connected to the similarity in imagery between these two poets is the similarity of subject matter in general. It is in this

connection that we begin to see not only how clearly Warren is borrowing from Frost but also how these borrowings point to a thematic relationship between the two poets. Warren almost seems to be re-writing Frost's poems in an attempt to both respond to the elder poet and move beyond him. There is, for example, Warren's poem "Chain Saw at Dawn in Vermont in Time of Drouth" (*RPW* 285-286) which, taking as it does the saw as its focus, is reminiscent of Frost's "Out, Out—" (*RF* 136) even to the point of utilizing an "s" sound to emulate the saw's voice. Warren's phrases, "steel-snarl" and "Murders the past, the nerve shrieks, the saw," which emphasize the "s," seem to draw directly on Frost's "saw snarled" and "His sister stood beside them in her apron / To tell the 'Supper.' At the word, the saw / As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, / Leaped. . . ." Indeed, both poems turn on the fact that the sound of the saw dominates all other sound.

Another example is Warren's "Why Have I Wandered the Asphalt of Midnight?" (*RPW* 395) which seems to bear a resemblance, at least on the level of plot, to Frost's "Acquainted With the Night" (*RF* 255). Both speakers walk in both city and country, Frost's outwalking "the furthest city light" and Warren's moving from the "asphalt" of a city to "mountains" and "dunes." In both cases, walking operates as a symbol for traveling through life. Additionally, both stop at points in their travels, ostensibly to ponder the experience. The speaker in Warren wonders, "Why did I stand with no motion under / The spilt-ink darkness of spruces," while the speaker in Frost notes, "I have stood still." In both cases, the speakers listen and hear the sound of silence. Warren writes of the "soundlessness of falling snow" while Frost hears "far away an interrupted cry." In both instances, the speakers hear the note of history. Warren's speaker hears "The heartbeat I know as the only self / I know that I know, while History / Trails its meaning like old cobwebs / Caught in a cellar broom[.]" Frost, meanwhile, writes that the cry is "not to call me back or say good-by; / And further still at an unearthly height / One luminary clock against the sky / Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right."

If, as such evidence suggests, Warren was borrowing from Frost, the important question is what this suggests about the thematic

relationship between these two poets? More specifically, what can be learned about Warren's central themes as a poet by examining his debts to Frost's work? The key would seem to lie in Warren's essay on Frost, in that here we are given a glimpse of what Warren believes Frost is trying to say. By implication, if Warren deals with Frost in his later work, it makes sense that it is his conception of Frost expressed in this essay with which he is trying to come to terms.

The first step, then, is to examine exactly what he finds to be "the themes of Robert Frost." In the most basic terms, Warren finds in Frost a dialectic between two competing aspects of life: first, the importance of action, or work; and secondly, the centrality of contemplation, characterized variously as dream or imagination. The relationship between the two, as Warren notes, can seem deceptively clear-cut, as though Frost is simply suggesting that work is necessary for imagination, that only through the experience of action—or work and practicality—can we become worthy, or able, to experience the wonder of imagination. In fact, as Warren points out in regard to "Stopping By Woods," such a formulation is far too simplistic: "It would set up the essential contrasts between, shall we say, action and contemplation, but it would not be very satisfying because it would fail to indicate much concerning the implications of the contrast" (*TORF* 123). Instead, these two strains must discover a way to coexist, both sharing aspects of the other. In Warren's phrase, it is an "interpenetration, a fusion," that is necessary. As Frost expresses it in "Mowing," "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" (*RF* 17).

This intertwining relationship comes to permeate every aspect of Frost's work. In the choice of a speaker who is at once both country and wise, we are given a glimpse of the interpenetration of action and reflection within a single figure. As Warren points out, in the movement of these poems from narrative to metaphor, from pure image to symbol, we find yet another manifestation of this theme (*TORF* 135-136).

How, then, is this central theme in Frost turned to profit in Warren? In order to understand completely this metamorphosis, it seems sensible that we take a single poem and examine the ways in

which Frost and Warren interact. In doing so, we may hope to get at what Warren is doing: how he calls forth the specter of Frost, what specific aspects of Frost he draws on, and how those aspects are transformed into something purely Warren's. In such a way, Warren's own themes become more prominent and understandable. In this case, I take as my map Warren's poem from the middle of his later period, "●ld Nigger on ●ne-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home From Party in the Back Country" (*RPW* 333-335).

First and foremost, it seems necessary to establish the relationship of Frost to this poem. To lay the groundwork, so to speak — to put the connection beyond question — I would point primarily to lines 88-97:

Have you ever,
At night, stared into the snow-filled forest and felt
The impulse to flee there? Enter there? Be
There and plunge naked
Through snow, through drifts floundering, white
Into whiteness, among
Spectral great beech-boles, birch-whiteness, black jag
Of shadow, black spruce-bulks snow-shouldered, floundering
Upward and toward the glacial assertion that
The mountain is? (*RPW* 334-335)

Leaving aside for a moment the obvious differences here between voice and style and final intent, the connection to "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" (*RF* 224) is clear in both the event and the attitude of questioning that is expressed towards that event. Having established the centrality of Frost to the poem, then, it is possible to return to the opening of the poem, to attempt to read the poem as an interaction with Frost's central theme of a dialectic between action and contemplation, and in such a way come to an understanding of Warren's theme.

The poem begins, as much of Frost's work does, with an event, moving only later to any sort of speculation as to the event's meaning. In this case, the event is a dance, followed by a dangerous encounter, a near collision between the speaker's car and a mule cart being driven by an old black man. The event, in fact, recalls

many of the elements of "Stopping By Woods," particularly in the contrast between the man of action and the man of contemplation. In describing Frost's poem in "The Themes of Robert Frost," Warren identifies contrast first between man of action and man of contemplation and then between man and beast. The man who owns the woods is "practical," a man of action, and uninterested in being out on such a night. In contrast, the speaker is a man "who contemplates," who finds beauty in the woods not for any sort of practical reason, but simply for the fact of their beauty. The horse sides with the man of practicality, in that it is ready to be on its way and unable to understand why the speaker has stopped (*TTORF* 122). As Warren points out, if this were all there were to Frost's poem, it would be a very straightforward statement regarding the importance of contemplation, a sort of Romantic conception of the ability of nature to inspire reverence and awe. But in the final stanza, we are given a "repudiation of the attraction" of the scene. We are led to understand that, in the end, the speaker himself is unable to dismiss practicality. The description of the woods — and by inference the act of contemplation — suggests a dangerous temptation that we cannot long allow ourselves (*TTORF* 123-124).

"Old Nigger" relies on a similar structure of symbolism. As in "Stopping By Woods," there are three figures, two men and a beast, though the mule and black man here seem to be connected as a single symbol, in contrast to Frost's use of the horse as opposition to the speaker. As in Frost's poem, the dichotomy between speaker and black man is complicated, such that neither is pure action nor contemplation, but rather each represents an interpenetration of the two impulses. The black man and mule would initially seem to represent contemplation. This is especially evident in the image of the cart, a nod to a lost time, a slower-moving world. Yet the cart carries a load of junk, signifying the importance of work and action for the black man. At the same time, it would be easy to classify the speaker as a man of action, in such a hurry to get where he is going that he nearly brings about the demise of both man and beast. There is, for example, the description of the dance in the opening stanza, which makes clear the importance of action for him. The "flesh" is "flowing, sweeter than honey" (*RPW* 333) and the

mindless experience of this flesh suggests the urge in this character to escape into a purely physical existence, one that exists without thought. The characterization of the black man as "nigger" in the title, then, might lead us to see the entire poem as a condemnation of the speaker, his racial insensitivity the natural result of his inability to get beyond surface appearances. The poem would then serve as a testament to the value of contemplation over action.

In reality, the point is far more complex. Warren notes that, in "After Apple-Picking," Frost reminds us in subtle ways that his description of the event is a dream (*TTORF* 128-133). Likewise, Warren makes clear in the middle of "Old Nigger" that what he has been describing is not the present but rather a memory. His central image in making this turn is the same as the central image from "After Apple-Picking," that of the ice-window. Drawing on Frost's reference to the "world of hoary ice," Warren writes of the dream in this poem: "It is misty and strange, as seen through the pane of ice" (*TTORF* 130). Warren employs the same image. It is just after Warren lets us know that we have "moved on through the years" that the speaker looks "Through ice-glitter of glass" (*RPW* 334). As if to make the nod to Frost complete, this is followed by the lines so reminiscent of "Stopping By Woods": "Have you ever / At night, stared into the snow-filled forest and felt / The impulse to flee there?" (*RPW* 334). The filtering through memory is important in that it suggests, as in "After Apple-Picking," that we must read what occurs in the beginning of the poem in a particular way — specifically, for what impact the past event has had on the present.

In fact, as in Frost's poem, once we recognize that the opening scene is a memory, it is possible to see just how much it exists in a shadowy dream-like world. So, for example, in describing that night, the Louisiana landscape of the past is couched in terms of the landscape of the present. The "long lane ahead" is "whiter than snow," the dust behind plumes "whitely," and the weed-growth is "powdered whiter than star dust, or frost" before the speaker returns from the present to the past with "but air / Hot" (*RPW* 333). The memory has come to be filtered through the experience of the present, a present in which the speaker lives in a colder climate.

Recognizing this, we begin to see the opening scene in an

entirely new way. The inability to recall the name of the girl or the name of the song can be ascribed to the distortion of memory. Likewise, the fact that the speaker seems to experience silences and blindness at different points suggests gaps in his memory. In his essay on Frost, Warren notes that Frost's description of picking apples is obviously the product of a dream because it is so vivid in detail: "The richness and beauty of the harvest— magnified now— is what is dwelt upon" (*TTORF* 131). So too Warren in this poem describes the encounter on the road with exaggerated detail: "The eyes, / They blaze from the incandescent magma / Of mule-brain" (*RPW* 333). This description is not only particularly sharp in its evocation of the scene, it also employs the present tense, not the past, to remind us that this is a memory and, as such, maintains an existence different from the actual experience itself.

Warren evokes here the ways in which the mind — particularly the mind of the artist — works to order experience, to try to make sense of what has occurred. The speaker stops just after telling of the party and realizes that he "must tell you what, in July, in Louisiana / Night is" (*RPW* 333), as though he has suddenly realized that this is essential to making sense of the scene. It is this same impulse, to try to find some sort of meaning in events, that causes the speaker to turn the old man into symbol, all these years later. He is unable to accept the possibility that our lives might be merely "out-flung filings . . . on a sheet of paper" (*RPW* 335).

Warren takes Frost's theme as a starting point. The speaker's fantasy of the life of the black man makes this clear. It is in this figure that we see Frost's interpenetration of action and sensitivity. He exists without thought, able to act in the most basic of ways, making water, while at the same time his face is "lifted into starlight / Calm as prayer" (*RPW* 335). Yet Warren adds a twist. The imagination here does not suggest the possibilities, but rather points to the impossibility of such a figure.

For Warren, unlike Frost, action and contemplation cannot truly coexist in a real way: "for life / Is only the fantasy that has happened to us" (*RPW* 335). In contemplation, the best that we can hope to achieve is a kind of pseudo-action, through the creative act. The memory allows us simultaneously to consider the world and

experience it, but only at a remove. The distance of time is essential to achieve this pseudo-union. If we attempt to understand the experience at the time it happens, as the speaker does on that night long ago when he attempts to turn the experience into a poem on the very heels of the event itself, we are doomed to failure. Only with the space of time and distance can the experience ever be truly expressed in any sort of active terms. This is why Warren's poem bursts from the bounds of form in a way that Frost's cannot. For Frost, the poem itself represents a kind of action and contemplation in one, ideas fitting neatly into traditional form. So far as action and contemplation exist in Warren, they exist in a far more uneasy relationship.

Warren makes much of Frost's anti-Platonic viewpoint and his belief that there was no separation of forms. Frost believed he could bring together his "vocation" and "avocation," action and thought (*TTORF* 133-134). In the final line of "Old Nigger," Warren ultimately separates himself from Frost on just this issue. "Can I see Arcturus from where I stand?" (*RPW* 335), uttered to the heavens, suggests a kind of Platonic viewpoint in which the speaker expresses a belief that this life is but the mirror image of forms, where we can experience the unification of action and contemplation only in a kind of shadow way. Arcturus represents that state in which Warren hopes someday to be able to experience that unification in a complete way, but for now it is beyond his grasp.

Surely the great similarities between the works of Frost and Warren demand further scrutiny. Perhaps it is not so unforgivable that such scrutiny has not yet been offered, for Warren has yet to achieve the kind of fame as a poet that he deserves. It is only to be hoped that his reputation will continue to grow, and that with this growth, more thorough and detailed studies of his position within the tradition of American literature will be undertaken. In the final analysis, Coleridge may well be the most dominant influence on Warren's later career. To ignore the influence of Robert Frost, however, is to miss a vital link in Warren's re-invention of himself as a poet.