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Religious Implications in the Novels of Robert Penn Warren

MARDEN J. CLARK

To look for religious implications in the novels of Robert Penn Warren may seem a surprising preoccupation. What we are most apt to remember is the activity, the struggle, the violence—or the cynical flippancies of a Jack Burden, the agonizing introspections of a Jerry Beaumont, or more recently, the candid self-defences and self-revelations of a Manty Starr. Or we may respond only to the fast, violent action only vaguely aware of any implications. But implications crowd in upon the alert and careful reader: implications social, economic, psychological, symbolic, mythic. And implications religious.

Warren embodies these religious implications in at least three kinds of characters and actions: first, in his Bible-thumpers, his passionate religionists; second, in his minor religious characters; and third, symbolically in his major characters and their actions.

Warren grew up in the Bible belt. All three of his later novels have at least one extreme representative of revivalist religion: Corinthian McClardy in *World Enough and Time*, who "had left across the country a smoking trail of carnage, cold fear in the hearts of men and a sweet shuddering in the loins of women"; Seth Parton in *Band of Angels*, who embodies the strict, formal religious training of Oberlin; and MacCarland Sumpter in *The Cave*, who is the young heller turned minister.¹

We see Corinthian McClardy only often enough to see in him a severe denunciation of the kind of religion he repre-

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¹This essay was being set in type before I was able to get a copy of *Wilderness*, published late in 1961. A quick reading of this novel reveals much that would support but little that would essentially change my analysis.

sents. Partly this denunciation gets dramatic expression in Jerry's howling ecstatic flight into the woods after one of McClardy's sermons. Jerry's "wildness of joy" ends when he comes to his senses in the "embraces of a snaggle-toothed hag." His experience is only too typical of McClardy's "smoking trail of blood and carnage." This kind of religious "wildness of joy" is connected over and over in Warren with violence and sex.

Seth Parton, the pride and epitome of Oberlin, has an austere, exalted religious passion that can make him warn Amantha Starr against being deceived by "incidental virtue," by "the small and foolish goodness of a person," can make him preach his exalted sermon on the "possibility of sanctified joy," but can also make him take Manty after the sermon to "redeem" the spot in the woods to which "that lustful boy Norton would have lured a young female." He makes her repeat after him a most revealing prayer: "Oh, Lord, show me the performance of sanctification—that I may know it—and knowing it with my beloved—then enter into the fullness of our joy." He is trying desperately to keep spiritualized his feeling for her. But the sexual basis of that attraction, and how well he can keep it spiritualized, we see in her picture of him kneeling in prayer and then throwing himself "face down, in the snow"—a gesture of substitution that fits with an interesting inevitability the Seth we come to know. But to see Seth as simply an over-sexed religious fanatic oversimplifies him. What seems apparent to us, and what he cannot know, is that the passionate, exalted intensity of both his religious experience and his sexual desires springs from the same source, deep in his psychological makeup, and that mixed with both is a nearly neurotic fascination with evil.

The fascination with evil wins out in Seth. When he reappears in Manty's life, he comes to her with a new version of Oberlin morality: that "what is done in the heart is done already" and "should as well be done in the flesh that the vileness of the heart may be confirmed." Her refusal takes him to Miss Idell, who knows that when he thaws, he "will really be a bedbreaker," and a moneymaker. He turns out to be both.

MacCarland Sumpter is a still more complex character. Less overtly guilt-ridden and sex-ridden than Seth, he moves from his early helling about with Old Jack Herrick, through what we must accept as a genuine conversion—or nearly genuine—to a kind of final Warren salvation. But that salvation comes only late and after great struggle.

In each of the first four novels, Warren shows us a different kind of religious character who contrasts meaningfully with his Corinthian McClardys and Seth Partons. In each the character is minor and his story is told in the tradition of the interpolated story. But Warren embodies much of the positive meaning of his novel in each: Willie Proudfit in *Night Rider*, Ashby Wyndham in *At Heaven's Gate*, Cass Mastern in *All the King's Men*, and Munn Short in *World Enough and Time*. All are "religious," but all share the trait of having come through violence, physical or sexual or both, to a kind of peace and inner certainty that contrasts sharply with the frantic searching and questioning and violence of the major characters. Though the stories differ in many meaningful ways, I must content myself with a look at only one, Ashby Wyndham's.

Ashby's long story is in the form of a "Statement" that he has written in jail while awaiting trial as accomplice to murder. Presented in a series of inter-chapters, it acts as a fascinating counterpoint to and commentary on the rest of the action of the novel, in which the characters struggle toward at least their various private images of heaven, only to be turned back "at Heaven's gate" by the breakup of the various worlds they have created—a violent, unpleasant series of worlds. Ashby's too has been a violent, unpleasant world, as his imprisonment testifies, but with a difference. Told in that wonderful regional idiom over which Warren has such mastery, it begins with both a testimony and a question. The testimony:

The pore human man, he ain't nuthin but a handful of dust, but the light of Gods face on him and he shines like a diamint, and blinds the eye of the un-uprightous congregation. Dust, it lays on the floor, under the goin forth and the comin in, and ain't nuthin, and gits stirred up under the trompin, but a sunbeam come in the dark room

and in that light it will dance and shine for heart joy. . . .
I laid on the floor, and didn't know, and the trompin. But
the light come in the dark room, like a finger apointin at
me through the hole, and it was the hard trompin had
stirred me. I shined in the light.

But Pearl has killed a man. The question:

If I han't never come, and named the words on my tongue,
she would been there yet, and it the house of abominations,
but her face smilin. Salvation, what good has it done her?
. . . Gods will, it runs lak a fox with the dogs on him, and
doubles, and knows places secret and hard for a man's
foot. (36)²

The testimony and the question act as a double motif for
Wyndham's story, indicating both the wisdom he has arrived
at and the limitations of that wisdom.

The journey to the jail has its beginnings in an awful
beating Ashby, in terrible anger and "blood guilty in my heart,"
gives his brother Jacob. But after a series of other episodes in
which Ashby is involved in violence, his son Frank dies. War-
ren points up the symbolic import of the death when Frank
comes to Ashby in a vision and tells him,

Oh, Pappy, I couldn't thrive none and it the vittles
of wickedness. I couldn't thrive and it vittles and sop taken
in blood wrath and wickedness. And from Jacob. (216)

The vision, so believable because so naturally recorded, sends
Ashby on his pilgrimage in search of Jacob, a pilgrimage of
seeking and working, of preaching how "the Lord had laid
it on me to tell folks," of telling "how peace come in yore
heart."

Prevented from preaching in the city, Ashby is sore in his
heart:

A saved man has got joy and rejoicin in his heart and
he is bustin to tell. He has got Gods word in him and he
has got peace and he has got to pour it out to them as has
ears. It is a joy to pour it out and the joy is withouten end.
But you don't let him tell and pour it out of his heart and
his heart is sore. He is lak a woman got a baby and her

²Page numbers in parentheses refer to the original editions of Warren's
works.

breast has got milk for that air baby and her breast is swole and sore for the fullness. My heart was sore. (325)

The wonderful simile introduces us to the breakup of Ashby's world. Pearl, in an almost instinctive gesture of self-defense, shoots a policeman. Ashby's statement ends on the same note it began, but minus the testimony:

I am in the jail now and I lay here. I lay here and I pray to God to show me His face. O God make me to rejoice agin and in my salvation . . .

Oh Lord yor salvation it moves lak the wind. It blows the pore mans heart lak a dead leaf. It is lak the wind and no man aint seen it come or go. Oh Lord yore foot has been set in the dark place and it is not seen. O Lord yore will has run lak the fox and sly. The pore mans mind sniffs after it lak a hound dog. But the scent is done lost and ways of its goin. (328)

He has "writ down the truth lak it was."

Ashby may be turned back at Heaven's gate. But there is light and warmth and love and fertility and beauty in his world and in his journey. And there is a deep sense of direction and mission. If Ashby is denied his heaven, it may be simply because the Lord's will, as he says, "has run lak the fox and sly," because His universe and human experience are too complex and mysterious to be approached even by Ashby's simple sense of mission. In which case Ashby has won through to a final kind of insight. Or it may be because his belief and his mission are ignorant and unguided and uncontrolled by a similar sense of belief and mission in those who control so much of the total world he finds himself in, those whose journeys Warren places in contrasting juxtaposition with his. In which case his own failure acts as the final commentary on theirs.

In reviewing Ashby's story I have let him speak for himself as much as possible, because this least known and least appreciated of Warren's novels contains some of his most beautiful writing, but also because that beauty is characteristic of at least two of the other stories. One other passage will illustrate.

Munn Short has come through evil and violence to find that he can be Jesus's, and overcome the effects:

I found the way and the promise, and Jesus come in my heart. He is hung on my heart lak a cow-bell and a cow-bell caint keep no secret. I move and I got to tell about Jesus, how he come. (425)

Again, the beauty and serenity that contrast tellingly with the violence and struggle of the main action.

The third kind of religious implications in the novels is much more difficult to pin down. To see what Warren is saying about religion through his major characters and the major plot lines, I will need to survey briefly what has happened in their development. Basic to the structure of all the novels is a symbolic pattern that I call the soul-journey. The completed pattern emerges in *All the King's Men*, but is implicit in both the earlier novels.

Night Rider dramatizes the journey of Mr. Munn into the darkness and coldness and emptiness of himself. He is, in his own kind of quiet desperation, seeking some sort of fulfillment and identity. His journey is complete for him, but it ends in the Inferno. Hence in a broader pattern it is incomplete.

Organized around Dante's seventh circle as a basic metaphor, *At Heaven's Gate* is more complex. The violence implicit in the metaphor shows up everywhere, though in different ways, in each of the several worlds of the novel which interact on one another and through which the major characters pass in their almost frantic journeys in search of some kind of fulfillment, of their private images of Heaven. Each character is in turn denied his version of Heaven just as he thinks it within his grasp. In the last of these worlds that Sue Murdock passes through, Sweetie Sweetwater's, she becomes pregnant, suggesting in the symbolic context of the novel that she has finally found a fertile world. But because Sweetie won't marry her she has an abortion, symbolically destroying the nascent life in her that is part of her image of Heaven.

Warren picks up the fetus image in *All the King's Men* to make it the center of the remarkable pattern of rebirth imagery in which Jack Burden figures his own and Willie Stark's journeys, and in which the pattern of the journey is spelled to its completed form. Jack moves from his early inability to violate the image of innocence he has formed of Anne Stanton, into a kind of amoral research man for Willie Stark. He struggles always for his own innocence, as we know by the patterns of escape imagery, particularly the fetus symbol. But he cannot remain innocent. The documents he digs up for Willie proving the guilt of both Judge Irwin and Anne's father help send Anne to Willie as mistress, hence indirectly cause Adam Stanton to kill Willie Stark. And they directly cause Judge Irwin's suicide and with it the silvery, soprano scream of Jack's mother, which becomes the symbolic labor pain for his rebirth into the knowledge that the Judge had been his real father. From here Jack moves, with many hesitations and retreats, into a knowledge of his own responsibility for what has happened, to a knowledge and acceptance of his own guilt, and through that, to an acceptance of the past he had felt tainted and evil, and finally to an acceptance of positive responsibility, the "awful responsibility of Time." His regeneration, though limited and perhaps undramatic, is complete.

I will not need to follow Jerry Beaumont through his tortured and tortuous inner journey to something of the same kind of recognition. But I do want to look briefly at the implications of that strange, drawn-out scene near the end of the novel, in the lair of the Gran Boz. The flight West has been in earlier novels another of Warren's symbols for escape. Though Jerry hardly goes to the lair of his own choosing, he finds, he tells us, a kind of peace there. But it is a place where only a special kind of peace is available: a place where human beings merely vegetate, where no moral distinctions exist, where the murder that has been the focal point of Jerry's life is nothing, "*Rien*," as the old Gran Boz puts it, "*ce n'est rien*." It is a final and absolute escape, but an escape into the "black inwardness and womb of the quagmire." Warren is saying through the episode that the human desire for escape,

In his two latest novels, *Band of Angels* and *The Cave*, Warren finds new sets of symbols: the black-white dualism that is central to Amantha Starr's journey to a hard-won and limited regeneration, and the cave itself. But the old concerns, and many of the old symbols, still control these novels. Manty finally comes to accept the black, the nigger, in her, to accept her involvement in and responsibility for much that has happened, and hence to know and accept herself. The experiences of the cave bring something of the same kind of hard-earned self-knowledge and acceptance to Old Jack Harrick and others, the only kind that means salvation in Warren.

Man, then, as Warren dramatizes him, finds himself in the world torn between two nearly instinctive and conflicting urges: the urge to remain statically innocent or move backward in time to pre-experiential innocence and the urge to move forward in time, to seek experience and knowledge. His own need for identity causes him to separate from others, to deny the past, to reject the father (all the novels work with the father-son relationship). But in so doing he is really denying identity, not finding it. For man is a composite of the past and can achieve identity only in terms of that past. The harder he struggles for selfness apart from his own past, apart from others, or simply through others, the farther he moves into the abstraction of self. The potentiality for evil in him that is part of his condition and that he tends to deny asserts itself, and he is drawn into violence. But he denies his responsibility for that violence. He takes his steps toward knowledge when he becomes aware of his own involvement in the commonality of things, then aware of the evil in himself, then aware of his own responsibility for violence and evil and hence aware of his guilt. But that awareness is not enough. He must also accept himself and his past, his father and his culture, with all his and their weaknesses and commonality and evil. But more, he must accept the responsibility for his own actions and for his future. Accepting these he can move back into the human communion (the phrase is important to Warren). He has achieved his redemption, limited and undramatic but precious for its very limitations.

It is difficult to talk about Warren's work without using the terms of religious experience. But neither he nor I mean quite the same thing by them as they generally mean in religious writing. The journeys of Warren's protagonists, nevertheless, do have religious significance. Some of that significance I want now to define.

First there is religious significance in Warren's repeated concern with the problem of free will versus determinism, a problem I have said little about thus far. In all the novels are images which suggest a rather complete determinism: the repeated image of Jerry Beaumont as a chip on the tide of things, Manty's image of her life, or History, as having lived her, the nearly subvolitional move of Mr. Munn into the abstraction of the tobacco growers' association, or Jack Burden's Great Twitch theory that he picks up on the way back from Long Beach, the theory that "all life is but the dark heave of blood and the twitch of the nerve." The problem receives its most detailed analysis in *World Enough and Time*, where the narrator repeatedly refers to the drama Jeremiah *had* to prepare, talks about how he had to bring forth out of his own emptiness "whatever fullness might be his," and elaborates the chip image by talking about the "blind, massive drift" of events with Jerry caught up in them. It all seems to add up to a rather firm determinism. But at the end, Jack rejects his Great Twitch theory and is prepared to go back into "the awful responsibility of Time." Jerry gains his limited redemption when he accepts his guilt and determines to go back to shake the hangman's hand. And Manty's idea that her life and History live her is part of what she recognizes at the end, her own erroneous picture of herself as "poor little Manty" to whom "all the world had happened." The problem is much more complexly embodied in the novels than this brief analysis would indicate. But Warren does come to some kind of resolution, perhaps best stated near the end of his long philosophical poem *Brother to Dragons*: "The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom." Even this can be read as almost complete determinism: freedom is simply the recognition that one has no freedom. But the context of the poem will not permit that reading. Warren would never

permit his characters the too-easy "out" that they were not responsible for their actions. That very responsibility he has repeatedly insisted upon. Further, "beginning" connotes capacity for growth. One must recognize the operation of necessity, but that recognition opens up the possibility for growth in freedom, even if always within the limitations of necessity. In a sense, the end of the completed journey is that moment of recognition and hence of the beginning of freedom.

Second, there is religious significance in Warren's concern with the nature and operation of evil in human experience. We see much of evil and violence in the novels. But the actual violence, the portrayed evil, we sense to be almost after the fact, to be an expression or symbol of a more general and deeper involvement in evil. In everyone, Warren would say, is the latent capacity for evil. That capacity is part of man's condition as man and somehow part of the very nature of the universe. Though evil exerts its own mysterious pull on man, the active expression of it is usually called forth by his withdrawal from the human communion into the abstraction of self. That withdrawal we have seen as part of man's own efforts toward knowledge and definition, but efforts in the wrong direction. If it is a blind withdrawal, however, it is still a willed withdrawal. What is being dramatized through this withdrawal is that same mysterious movement into evil (the first step of which is withdrawal from good), that same illusive fascination that has always intrigued the poet, that draws Macbeth and Raskolnikov toward murder or even Satan toward rebellion. The imagery of dark, coiling inwardness that characterize Mr. Munn and Jeremiah and even Manty is the imagery of that withdrawal, but also the imagery of the deeper positive capacity for evil.

The positive expression of evil usually comes in acts of violence, as with Mr. Munn or Jerry. But it may also be expressed in the evil manipulation of people, as with Willie Stark. Or it may come even in the attempt to deny evil, as with Manty or Jack Burden. The denial of evil, or of communion, becomes itself the evil, or at least the cause of it. Perhaps the primary sin, even, is the "sin of self" that Jerry and Manty finally recognize as theirs, the sin of an absolute

concern for self to the exclusion of others and the harm of others, the sin of separation from the human communion by turning all of experience in upon oneself. The failure is of a most basic sort: the awful failure to love one's neighbor as oneself. We can even summarize Warren's achieved tragedy as the tragedy of self. In one way or another all of his novels gloss the theme, He who would save his life must lose it. The dramatized journey becomes the education of the protagonist to acceptance of the evil and the guilt in himself and hence finally to a sense of positive responsibility and love—to salvation.

Finally there is religious significance in Warren's picture of the nature of man himself. The concept of the evil in man may be taken as an indicator, even itself almost a symbol, of the limited nature of man as Warren sees him. There are no perfect characters in Warren. There are only people who aim at perfection, who think themselves perfect for a time. The reason appears in the total context of the novels. Man, that context tells us, is a limited creature, full of paradoxical capacities for evil and good, torn between his desires for innocence and his necessity for experience capable of terrifying injustice but longing for justice, capable of groveling in animal ignorance but blessed with a capacity for knowledge, blinded into a primal selfishness by his own need for definition but capable of achieving that definition only by accepting self and guilt and responsibility, desiring to reject the past but striving to escape into it and finding eventually that it is an essential part of himself. The paradoxes pile up. The sin of self may be the worst of sins, but it results from, at the same time that it interferes with, the struggle for identity. Man's struggle for identity is his glory, but he struggles in the wrong direction, in the direction of separateness. He must struggle for separateness, but for separateness from the brute in him, not from the human communion. Ultimately the struggle for identity must be away from identity and toward communion. Warren sums all this up best, perhaps, in these lines near the end of *Brother to Dragons*:

Fulfillment is only in the degree of recognition
 Of the common lot of our kind. And that is the death of
 vanity,
 And that is the beginning of virtue.

The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence.
 The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom.
 The recognition of the direction of fulfillment is the death
 of the self.
 And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood.
 All else is surrogate of hope and destitution of spirit. (214-5)

Warren has spelled much of this out in expository prose
 After describing the process of separation, he says,

The return to nature and man is the discovery of love, and
 law. But love through separateness, and law through rebel-
 lion. Man eats of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and
 falls. But if he takes another bite, he may get at least a
 sort of redemption. And a precious redemption.³

Just this limited but precious redemption Warren has given
 fictional form and embodiment in the last four novels.

But what, we ask, does all this add up to in conventional
 religious terms? Here I run the risk of the conventional terms
 blurring rather than clarifying. Clearly, Warren's religion is
 not a conventional, institutionalized Christianity. But just as
 clearly it is not a rejection of religion. Between these ex-
 tremes emerges the picture of a tough-minded writer and
 religious thinker. Warren does reject the cheap and easy in
 religion. Whatever is of value cannot come from the Cor-
 inthian McClardys. It must be earned, earned in the fire of
 experience and suffering, earned as Ashby Wyndham and
 Munn Short have earned their religious peace and serenity.
 Warren does reject the over-simplified in religion. Repeatedly
 his novels dramatize the complexity, the paradoxes of human
 experience, religious and otherwise. Man must win his way
 through these paradoxes to the vision, itself perhaps simple
 enough, but he must win through a world in which human
 beings, their problems, and their experience are far too com-

³"Knowledge and the Image of Man," *The Sewanee Review*, LXIII (Spring 1955), 192.

plex to be reducible to black and white—as Manty Starr tries to reduce them. Warren does reject the fanaticism of a Seth Parton or even the sincere but extreme emotionalism of a Mac-Carland Sumpter. Religion is an emotional experience, but the emotions must be grounded in self-knowledge and responsibility. But Warren is more positive than this. If he rejects as romantic the concept of man's limitless potentiality, he affirms the worth of the struggle for self-realization and self-knowledge. If he criticizes the institution, he affirms the values that lie at the heart of Christianity: the values of love, of human communion, of loss of self in a higher good, of doing unto your neighbor as you would have him do to you. We can go even farther. One of Warren's critics has analyzed the whole problem of man's withdrawal from communion as a problem in "the relation of human will to divine will."⁴ I should hesitate to state the relation in such strictly theological terms, but partly the education of Warren's protagonist is a matter of determining just that relation.

Perhaps I am wrong in trying to see his work in religious terms. Perhaps, since the novels are art, we should simply say that Warren has achieved what he calls the *rhythm* that is a "myth of order or fulfillment, and affirmation that our being may move in its totality toward meaning." But even this is a religious affirmation. And an affirmation that tells us that for Robert Penn Warren there need be, there can be, no dichotomy between the world of religion and the world of art.

⁴Leonard Casper, "The Lost Sense of Community and the Role of the Artist in Robert Penn Warren" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1953), p. 338.