Tell Me a Story: Metaphysics and the Literary Criticism of Robert Penn Warren and Wendell Berry

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ABSTRACT

Robert Penn Warren and Wendell Berry share more than a home state. Both have produced prodigious and varied literary oeuvres that include accomplished fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, and both have written extensively on literature's indispensable function within a healthy culture. This latter shared vision is not unanimously held in academic literary scholarship. In fact, many contemporary critics, who often see literature as a mere material participant in potentially oppressive power structures, oppose the idea that literature serves a valid and definable social function, or at least regard it with skepticism. For this reason, Warren's and Berry's views of literature's proper function provide a productive counterpoint to much contemporary literary criticism.

Indeed, Warren's and Berry's visions of the function of literature make their respective approaches to literary criticism both highly coherent and eminently practical not only to scholars but also to unspecialized readers of literature. Their work achieves such usefulness because each writer forthrightly deals with the teleological and, ultimately, metaphysical questions that necessarily follow from the question of literature's cultural function. That both of them connect metaphysics, which is to say a rigorous and convincing account of truth, to literary criticism is what ultimately sets them off from many contemporary strands of literary theory and makes their work so useful. Furthermore, that Warren, an agnostic, and Berry, a Christian, can produce metaphysically-informed philosophies of literature that agree to a large extent demonstrates the possibility and desirability of productive conversations that do not shy away from metaphysical questions, even in a time when there is no unanimous view as to the truth. An examination of each writer's work, then, demonstrates the value of metaphysics in writing on literature, both for the critic and for the reader.

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Introduction

"Tell me a story," pleads the speaker in the final poem of Robert Penn Warren's *Audubon: A Vision*, "In this century, and moment, of mania, / Tell me a story" (267). "Tell Me a Story," at first blush, seems to be a strange way to end *Audubon*, a meditation on the inseparable good and evil propensities of human nature that takes the life and work of a nineteenth-century naturalist as its subject. However, a consideration of Warren's commitment to the idea that literature, along with historical knowledge, gives us a way of knowing and evaluating ourselves and our time may shed some light on this choice. In "The Use of the Past," he writes that "literature—and in another mode, history" is useful in that "the truths it presents come in the images of experience, and the images tease us out of thought toward truth as experience. The truth we want to come to is the truth of ourselves, of our common humanity, available in the projected self of art" (*New* 48). In "Tell Me a Story," then, the titular imperative at the end of a poem examining the life of Jean-Jacques Audubon points to Warren's emphasis on literature—the telling of stories—as a way of restoring our sense of "common humanity" in a "century, and moment, of mania."

That "moment"—or at least the moment of the poem's publication—was, of course, 1969, which was indeed a moment of mania for many reasons, not the least of which was the Vietnam War. Throughout his work, Warren holds up the forces of modernity—the unbridled proliferation of industrial technology, the resulting consumer culture, and, of course, the horrors of modern warfare—as dehumanizing influences, as forces that distance us from our human *selves* by destroying the individual's connection with his or her

community and by severing his or her ties with the past[1]. The "mania" *Audubon*'s narrator speaks of, then, is the frantic, multifarious fracturing of modernization. This means that his plea for a story perhaps comes from a desire to be restored to his *self*, to experience a common humanity that he shares with people across time.

In a similar way, Hannah Coulter, the narrator and protagonist of Wendell Berry's 2004 novel named for her, turns to literature during that same century, but in a different moment of mania. Hannah speaks of the "pleasures" that keep her sane during a period when her husband is serving (and eventually dies) in World War II, and literature is among them:

> Books were a dependable pleasure. . . . Back then I read . . . books from Mr. Feltner's mother's library that was still in her bookcases in the living room. She had been a reader . . . and had bought good books—classics, some of them: Mark Twain's river books and *The Scarlet Letter* and several thick novels by Sir Walter Scott and Dickens. I read *Old Mortality* and thought more than I wanted to of the horrible deeds people have done because they loved God, but it was a good story. (44-5)

For Hannah, literature is perhaps a distraction from the horror of the war her husband is fighting, but it is also, it seems, a way to reckon with that horror. At least in reading *Old Mortality*, she takes "pleasure" in it as "a good story" but also concedes that the novel took her through the unpleasant task of meditating on the human propensity toward doing

[1] I shall have plenty of time to discuss Warren's concept of the self later, as it figures prominently in his later writing on literature. For now, though, I want to merely gesture toward *Democracy and Poetry*, where Warren remarks that the "true self" is both "the result of a vital relation with a community" as well as a "development in time" that necessitates a respect for and knowledge of the past (56).

"horrible deeds" in the name of God, or, in more general terms, pursuing immoral and damaging means for presumably good or just ends. The effect of literature on her, then, is something similar to what Warren describes in "The Use of the Past." It allows her to confront, to see fully, the possibility and danger of human error and, perhaps, the alternative possibility of human good, at a time when she is experiencing firsthand the horror of war on a scale that was hitherto unimaginable. She turns to a story, then, in much the same way as the narrator of *Audubon* does.

I bring up these two examples not only to introduce Warren's and Berry's work, which will be the subject of this project, but also to point to a foundational assumption that underlies both writers' thinking on literature, an assumption that is by no means a given in the current atmosphere of academic literary studies—namely, that literature serves a legitimate and definable purpose. Indeed, throughout Warren's and Berry's critical work, we see both writers wrestling with and giving answers to the question, so seldom asked any more, "what is literature *for*?" One reason this question may have fallen out of fashion is that critics, especially of the New Critical persuasion, began to feel that they already knew its answer and that ink was therefore more profitably spilled over what a given piece of literature means. A more important—and more contemporary—explanation, though, is that critics now may think, in a time when intellectuals have supposedly abandoned metanarratives, that the question is meaningless. And in the current politicized atmosphere of literary criticism, many might feel that accounts of literature's function occlude understandings of how literature participates in ever-fluctuating structures of power. In this case, the critic is primarily concerned with what literature *does*—with giving an account of which power structures a "text" challenges and which ones it reinforces—as

opposed to what literature is *for*—what unique value and use it may have for us. The fact that both Warren and Berry concern themselves with the question of what literature is for, then, puts them at odds with the zeitgeist of professional literary criticism as of 2013, as do their answers to the question. Though often different in their particulars, these answers can be summarized by saying that they both believe that the function of literature is the edification of the human.

I find that Warren, a critic who strayed in important ways from the New Critical camp during that camp's heyday, and Berry, a critic still writing today, offer helpful approaches to understanding literature precisely because they ask what literature is for and give the answers that they do. As I have already hinted, I find that their views are in many ways contrary to current critical perspectives primarily because it is no longer fashionable or in some cases even acceptable for literary study to be informed by an avowed metaphysics. Because literature is a human enterprise, giving a satisfying answer to the question "what is literature for?" probably requires also having an answer to the question "what are humans for[2]?" Thus, thinking about literature in this way presupposes thinking in teleological terms, which necessarily leads to questions that can only be answered by metaphysics.

Giving a philosophically rigorous demonstration of my own metaphysics is beyond the scope of my project. I am mainly concerned with showing that literary theory that embraces metaphysical questions—questions of what is true—give a more useful account of the function of literature than theory that avoids such questions. In order to arrive at a satisfying definition of "metaphysics," especially in relationship to literature, I find it

[2] This is an especially important question for Berry—so much so, in fact, that he titled a 1990 collection of essays *What Are People For?*

helpful to turn to John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*. Gardner offers an inclusive definition of "metaphysics" (adapted from Alfred North Whitehead's) which defines the term as "*a coherent, convincing, necessary system of general ideas and feelings in terms of which every element of our experience is illuminated*" (171). Such a definition includes theistic, atheistic, and agnostic systems of belief, insofar as those systems claim a relatively certain, although not necessarily complete or final, understanding of how the world works. And, thus, Gardner is able to talk about how one can conceive of art as serving a moral function even in an age of skepticism, noting that one can answer the skeptic's objection that "the universe has no moral laws" by understanding "universe" not to mean "planets and stars" but instead "humanity grandiosely conceived" (23-4). And indeed, we know that people are able to found more or less satisfying ethical frameworks on comprehensive systems of belief about the world that deny or conscientiously doubt the existence of a divine order to the natural world. The point, I think, is that even if the larger questions surrounding the origins and the workings of the universe remain unanswered, workably certain metaphysical systems—conceptions of human truth "grandiosely conceived"—are still both available and valid.

This inclusive conception of metaphysics is important to my project because my argument is that both Warren, an agnostic, and Berry, a Christian, offer approaches to literature that, because they are built on metaphysics, are useful not only to academics specializing in literary studies but also to the general reading public. I believe, along with Warren and Berry, that this general reading public, by which I mean thoughtful people who value literature but do not specialize in the study of it, read literature because it helps them, in a way characteristic to itself, understand themselves and the world. In Warren's

words, literature explores metaphysical "truths" through the "images of experience" in order to steer its readers away from abstract concepts and toward "truth as experience." Thus, literature is a way of knowing and exploring the implications of metaphysics, and, as I hope my examination of Warren's and Berry's work will show, only literary theory that takes metaphysics and its relationship with literature seriously is apt to be highly profitable for both critic and reader.

Of course, one potential danger of talking about the relationship between literature and metaphysics is the temptation to conflate the two. I see this temptation as leading to serious error because I take seriously the fact that providing a satisfying account of what literature is for also involves a corollary account of what literature is *not* for. I do not wish to argue that literature and metaphysics are the same thing, or even that literature is necessarily the best medium of metaphysical truth. Indeed, as a believing Christian, I cannot make such a statement, as valuable as I think literature is[3]. Furthermore, one helpful aspect of Warren's and Berry's work is their careful refusal to claim too much for literature. In order to arrive at a proper understanding of the relationship between metaphysics and literature, then, and in order to situate Warren and Berry as figures in a continuing debate over what this proper understanding is, I would like to briefly examine its history in the years leading up to Warren's and Berry's work as a discussion between two camps defined by two figures who tower over modern literary theory: Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot.

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[3] By this I mean that I take Christian doctrine, founded on the Bible, to be the best and most comprehensive (which is not to say perfect or complete) way to know metaphysical Truth. While I acknowledge that the Bible was indeed written by humans and can certainly be profitably thought of as *literary*, I also take it to be divinely inspired and, thus, authoritative in a way that literature cannot be.

Many would say that Matthew Arnold made the error of conflating metaphysics with literature, and I would agree. Poetry was the governing force of his private metaphysical vision, and he is a test case for why seeing literature as a surrogate metaphysics or surrogate religion can be of only limited use to a broader community because of its necessary emphasis on the individual reader or critic. Arnold is known, of course, for purveying the idea that, in an era when religion has been discredited, literature offers a surrogate for what religion has tried, and failed, to give people. One strain of his argument in *Culture and Anarchy* is that poetry, instead of religion, should be the driving force of culture. He claims that culture "is of like spirit with poetry" in that poetry's "dominant idea" is "the idea of beauty and of a human nature perfect on all sides," whereas the dominant idea of religion is mere moral perfection (50-1). The vision of poetry, then, ought to "to transform and govern" the areas of perfection formerly presided over by religion and thus act as a guiding force for culture (51). In other words, the Good in Arnold's view becomes a subset of and subservient to the Beautiful.

Poetry, then, replaces religion for Arnold, and thus becomes culture's ultimate guide. The problem with this is that, as Arnold certainly knew, not all poetry is created equal, and not all poets are to be trusted. So the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes "perfection on all sides" is not the poet but the individual reader, or, to be fair to Arnold, the well-informed but still individual critic. Granted, it may be true that such a state of affairs is all one can hope for if one rejects the claims of metaphysics. If we allow that truth is a necessary quality of perfection, and if we hold that truth as such does not exist or is unavailable, the only possible reference for perfection is a private, provisional truth, and poetry is as good a source for it as any. It is on precisely this point, however, that T.S. Eliot challenges Arnold

and shows how an account of literature that takes metaphysical truth as a necessary point of reference escapes such solipsistic limitations. In *After Strange Gods*[4], Eliot remarks that "the kinds of criticism which assumed that the function of poetry was to replace religion" ultimately result in an "extreme individualism in views, and no accepted rules or opinions as to the limitations of the literary job." "When one man's 'view of life' is as good as another's," he argues, "all the more enterprising spirits will naturally evolve their own; and where there is no custom to determine what the task of literature is, every writer will determine for himself, and the more enterprising will range as far afield as possible" (34). Eliot thus challenges the Arnoldian view by giving an account of how it is destined for futility, and this account is more or less based in the traditional idea that in order to know either the Good or the Beautiful, one must first know the True. Judgments of ethical and aesthetic value, in other words, depend on metaphysics. So it is not only wrong but also strange that Arnold would suggest that Beauty, epitomized in poetry, should be humanity's ultimate guide in all questions of perfection. As Eliot argues, when the poet or the critic is charged with the task of dreaming up a vision of what human perfection ought to look like

[4] Of course, I recognize the danger of aligning myself with anything Eliot says in *After Strange Gods.* Allow me to say that I find his grossly anti-Semitic remark that "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable" incredibly offensive and morally reprehensible (20). However, I do not count the racial content of this statement as necessary to the main thrust of Eliot's argument, and I do not view Eliot's thought in *After Strange Gods*, or elsewhere, as dismissable because of it. Furthermore, what he has to say in the context of this remark—namely, that the development of a healthy tradition depends on communities of like-minded people living in the same place continuously—suggests that his main emphasis here is on "free thinking" as opposed to "Jews." What seems to be at issue in Eliot's remark, aside from the regrettable racial content, is whether or not freedom from metaphysics is a good thing for the individual or for the community, or whether or not such freedom is even possible in the first place, as claims of metaphysical Truth hold that such Truth exists regardless of an individual's presumed freedom from it.

without reference to a metaphysics (and Arnold does not give such a reference) he or she runs the risk of ending up with a view that is of use perhaps only to him- or herself.

Alternatively, Eliot insists in *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* that culture (which certainly includes literature) ought to be grounded in and subservient to a metaphysics, which for him is necessarily a religious metaphysics. He states that understanding the proper relationship between religion and culture involves avoiding "two alternative errors: that of regarding religion and culture as two separate things between which there is a *relation*, and that of *identifying* religion and culture." The way to do this, he says, is to think of "the culture of a people as an *incarnation* of its religion," or, we could say, of its metaphysics (105). Thus, the Good and the Beautiful, which might be understood as the province of culture, are in Eliot's view embodiments of the Truth that transcends and yet sustains them. And while on one level there is a much clearer and healthier distinction between the Good and the Beautiful and the True than in Arnold's view, there are also more legitimate grounds for giving a coherent account of how, exactly, the Good and the Beautiful can be thought of as aspects of the True. So while Eliot does knock literature down a peg from its position in Arnold's view by highlighting the need for metaphysical grounding, he also paves the way for a more practical form of criticism.

In Eliot's view, literature, as an element of culture, imaginatively embodies a metaphysics in the form of a poem, novel, short story, or play. Thus, literature is beautiful to the extent that it embodies metaphysical truth and can thus be judged, at least in part, on how well it accomplishes this embodiment. Indeed, in *After Strange Gods* Eliot takes a line that paves the way for John Gardner's view when he insists that we ought to be able to criticize literature on the basis of its "orthodoxy" or "heresy" in relation to an accepted

religion (and, again, I think it is possible to replace 'religion' here with 'metaphysics' to broaden the relevance of Eliot's view) as opposed to in terms of "the pair *classicism*—*romanticism* which is frequently used" (22). Discussions of literature should, in Eliot's view, actively deal with its relationship to metaphysical truth instead of stopping at discussions of novelty of style, which is exactly what Gardner suggests when he holds up what he calls "moral criticism" as the "true criticism" (133). "Ideals are art's *ends*; the rest is methodology," he writes, going on to spell out what I find to be the logical implications of Eliot's view that culture is the incarnation of a metaphysics for the practice of literary criticism: "Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are . . . , in varying degrees, the fundamental concerns of art and therefore ought to be the fundamental concerns of criticism" (133, 144).

I take Eliot's and position, and Gardner's elaboration of it, on the relationship between metaphysics and literature to be a satisfying correction of Arnold's, and I will have an opportunity to discuss it at greater length later, as Eliot is an important intellectual forebear to both Warren and Berry. Indeed, it is their particular applications of Eliot's thought that I believe make their work of great practical use to the general reading public. And I also believe that their views can be usefully contrasted to the errors of other disciples of Eliot.

Cleanth Brooks is one such disciple. While I believe that much of the invective that has been hurled at Brooks over the years has been immoderate (because fashionable), and while I do find much to agree with in his writing, I wish here to argue that while Brooks is certainly an ideological descendant of Eliot, his brand of formalism places an undue emphasis on the specialization of literary criticism and thus exhibits a debt to Arnold.

Indeed, while he agrees with Eliot that "poetry needs religion" and that we should "be wary of conceptions that would turn literature into an ersatz religion," I find that his definition of the job of literary criticism demonstrates that he falls into the Arnoldian trap of ascribing literature too high of a place and in so doing makes literary criticism less useful than it should be to the general reading public ("Religion" 53, 62). In "The Formalist Critics," Brooks argues that though "the formalist critic knows as well as anyone that literary works are merely potential until they are read" by real readers who may or may not be literary specialists, that critic is necessarily "concerned primarily with the work itself" and thus his or her job involves nothing more than "indicating to an interested reader what the work is and how the parts of it are related" (74-6). While Brooks agrees that "Literature has many 'uses,'" he staunchly maintains that the critic's job is not primarily to discuss these uses but to "[know] what a given work 'means'" (81).

While Brooks, as a believing Christian, certainly holds religion and, therefore, metaphysics in high regard, this devotion to shutting out all concerns but those of literary meaning divined from formal analysis demonstrates his intellectual debt to Arnold. Arnold, because he holds poetry in such high esteem, holds criticism in almost an equally high place. What is troubling about Arnold's account of criticism is that he asserts that it should follow the rule of "disinterestedness" and should thus go about its work by "steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas." Alternatively, the critic's role is "simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas" ("Function" 45-6). Clearly, Arnold pictures some kind of conduit between the "true and fresh ideas" that the disinterested thinker of beautiful thoughts comes up with and the

"practical considerations" of the lowly layperson, but he does not give a sense of what that conduit is. Thus, it is completely up to the layperson to consider how the critic's "sweetness and light" bears a relationship to the ruck of ordinary living. There is, in other words, no priesthood in place to ready the sacrament for the masses. Arnold's rule of disinterestedness and Brooks's adoption of it, then, are completely at odds with Eliot's conception of culture as the incarnation of metaphysics in that disinterested criticism is entirely concerned with "true and fresh ideas" or with literary "meaning" in the abstract, which we might align with the *word*, to the exclusion of "practical considerations," which we might align with the *flesh*. In the incarnation, the word becomes flesh, meaning that the two are inseparable, if not indistinguishable. To avoid, as a rule, practical considerations of literature—considerations of its "uses" by the general reading public—is to deny its proper cultural function as a means of making metaphysics immediate to a reader. So while Brooks does reject the Arnoldian line that literature can and should replace religion and govern culture, his view of the disinterested critic searching for literary meaning alone risks impracticality in the same way that Arnold's approach does.

Of course, I am hardly the first to challenge Brooks on this point. John Guillory, for one, offers a compelling argument about the implications of Brooks's insistence on a disinterested formalist approach to criticism. Guillory argues that Brooks's strict formalism was motivated by a desire to assert literature's position as apart from and as an antidote to two perceived evils of modernity: the epistemological supremacy of positivism and the proliferation of mass culture. To support this argument, Guillory points to Brooks's insistence that the task of reading good literature is inherently "difficult" and, thus, requires that the reader undergo institutional training in the methods of close reading at

the university level. "The argument for the linguistic difficulty of literature . . . revalued literature as the cultural capital of the university by reading it in a new way," Guillory argues, pointing out the obvious implication that this specialization of literature effectively seals the reading of it within the university English department, making the academic institution a "space of deliberate and strategic withdrawal" that involves "the withdrawal of literary culture from 'the world'" (172, 165). Far from achieving his goals, then, Guillory argues that Brooks's project failed in that while the New Criticism trained students to "recognize the superiority of literature to mass cultural artifacts," it gave them no reason not to "consume both kinds of artifacts in the distinct spheres of their consumption" (174).

Brooks's approach to literary criticism, then, was perhaps able to teach large quantities of college students how to read literature and understand its formal techniques, but it did so by fetishizing literature as culture that is to be consumed in an institutional setting and, thus, as something that exists apart from everyday life. So, as I trust it has already become apparent, while I do not share Guillory's qualms with the aims of Brooks's project, I do nevertheless agree with his assessment of that project's failure. Furthermore, I find that, like Arnold's, Brooks's error involves failing to recognize that literature can only be understood as operating in reference to an external metaphysical reality. His formalism thus constitutes what I think can helpfully be called an *idolatrous* approach to literature in that by insisting that the critic should only pay attention to questions of form, it removes literature from its proper contact with the frameworks within which we judge all human actions. The well-wrought urn is thus a graven image for the pure formalist, who abandons contact with the important plane on which people conduct their everyday lives for a pursuit of purely literary meaning.

It is precisely here—the idolatrous purity of Brooks's formalism—where I find that his friend and collaborator on such foundational New Critical texts as *Understanding Poetry* offers an important correction to Brooks's error. Warren's formalism differs from Brooks's in that it recognizes and pursues the connection between literary form and the plane of everyday living. Indeed, as I shall discuss at length later, Warren was highly critical of the idea of literary "purity" throughout his career, as one can see even from the title of his 1943 essay "Pure and Impure Poetry."

I should at this point recognize that, on the surface, holding up Warren's work as a solution to the problem created by Brooks, a figure with whom he is so closely associated, may seem like an odd move. However, as Charlotte Beck has shown, a good number of critics have located significant distinctions between Warren's and Brooks's work[5]. Monroe Spears, for one, argues that "[n]obody was ever farther from being a mandarin or a pure aesthete" than Warren because "his primary concerns have always and undisguisedly been moral, historical, and even patriotic" (99). Spears here recognizes that Warren's writing on literature does violate Brooks's strict sense of formalism that in theory would refuse to address moral or historical concerns that exist outside of a text, but I find it necessary to stress, as I touched on briefly above, that this does not mean that Warren was not a formalist in a broader sense. As Spears later points out in reference to "A Poem of Pure Imagination," Warren's long essay on Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Warren's approach to criticism always involves "[arguing] against any division between moral, aesthetic, and social" concerns (110). Indeed, in Warren's view, examinations of aesthetic

[5] In her 2006 book *Robert Penn Warren, Critic*, Beck traces a critical tradition since the 1970s that has been much more charitable to Warren than Brooks, mentioning figures such as Louise Cowan, Mark Jancovich, William Bedford Clark, Monroe Spears, and Michael Kreyling (166-71).

form not only lead us to an understanding of a poem's *meaning* but also to that poem's relationship with the actual world of experience. "If poetry does anything for us," Warren remarks at the end of "A Poem of Pure Imagination," "it reconciles, by its symbolical reading of experience (for by its very nature it is in itself a myth of the unity of being), the self-devisive [*sic*] internecine malices which arise at the superficial level on which we conduct most of our living" (*New* 399). Whether Warren means by the "myth of the unity of being" that there actually is such a unity or that this unity is a human construction that nevertheless is worth seeking—"humanity grandiosely conceived," as Gardner would have it—is a subject I shall have ample time to address later. The important point here is that in Warren's formalism, poetry is valuable because the formal unity of a poem allows the reader to experience, however dimly, this "unity of being," which is necessarily a unity beyond the poem which the poem seeks to imitate or to embody. Indeed, I see Warren here following Eliot's insistence that the poem is the *incarnation* of a metaphysical truth. This application of Eliot's view of the relationship between metaphysics and poetry, then, allows the reader to go beyond close reading to find the hidden treasure of "meaning" toward a recognition that such "meaning" has an actual bearing on his or her daily experience. Far from merely providing fodder for academics, literature for Warren is an important cultural means of relating otherwise abstract metaphysical truth with an individual's daily life. Granted, Warren does not explicitly speak out against the error of seeing literature as the exclusive province of the academic institution and thus removing it from its primary place in the experience of its wider readership, but one can see how such a proposition is implicit in his criticism.

Such a proposition is explicit, however, in Wendell Berry's writing. Consider this passage from his 1987 essay "Writer and Region":

> To assume that the context of literature is 'the literary world' is, I believe, simply wrong. That its real habitat is the household and the community—that it can and does affect, even in practical ways, the life of a place—may not be recognized by most theorists and critics for a while yet. But they will finally come to it, because finally they will have to. And when they do, they will renew the study of literature and restore it to importance. (*What* 84)

While these statements do come from a time when the New Historicism was gaining prominence in the academy, Berry's remarks here seem to be aimed at the New Critical establishment. After all, the New Historicist claim, insofar as it is standardized, is that literature has political implications outside of the "literary world" of the New Critical establishment, and that the aim of literary scholarship should be to examine these implications.

But it is important to acknowledge that Berry is up to something very different here than the New Historicists. The New Historicists, at first glance at least, may agree that literature "can and does affect, even in practical ways, the life of a place" if such a statement can be taken to mean that literature, like all other material artifacts or "texts," participates in the ever-changing complex of human power structures and is on those grounds a worthy subject for study. In this view, literature either affects the life of a place in ways that rehearse or reinforce oppressive power structures or in ways that challenge those power structures. As I shall explore in depth later, though, in Berry's view the word *place* has definite teleological implications. This means that when he says that literature "can and

does affect, even in practical ways, the life of a place" he means that literature helps humans understand their role(s) within their place(s). For Berry these roles and these places may indeed have political implications, but beyond that they have metaphysical implications, implications which the New Historicists are unable or unwilling to discuss.

Of course, it is easy to see how the disagreement between Berry and the party-line materialist New Historicist could quickly devolve into a chicken-or-the-egg scenario. Berry is apt to be as unsatisfied with limiting discussions of literature to what it tells us about existing power structures as he is with limiting discussions of literary form to the conventions of literary form. And what Berry sees as a metaphysical grounding for his thought about the teleology of the human and the role of literature the New Historicist would mark as yet another potentially or actually oppressive human power structure. To escape such a frustrating and seemingly insoluble tension, or perhaps to look at it in a different light, I will propose a question: which approach to literary study is *practically* better? That is to say, which approach—the current politicized materialist approach or Warren's and Berry's metaphysics-based approach—most successfully illuminates literature's relevance to the lives of the general reading public?

I assert that the latter is the more satisfying approach and that examining Warren's and Berry's approaches to literary scholarship will show how. While I acknowledge that Cleanth Brooks and his fellow party-line New Critics may have intended their close-reading-only approach as a way to give the general reading public a way to understand and apply literary "meaning" to their individual lives, they only get half of the way toward truly useful criticism by refusing to highlight the necessary relationship between literary meaning and metaphysical truth and by avoiding the practical implications of that

relationship. Warren and Berry, then, succeed where the New Critics fail by refusing to view literature as something separate from truth or practical consequence.

In the chapters that follow, I examine each writer's work individually, tracing first his metaphysical vision, then showing how his view of literature builds off of his metaphysics, and finally examining his own fiction and poetry in light of his metaphysical and literary theory. The first chapter on Warren shows how his humanistic metaphysics centers around an understanding of the human self in relation to history, Warren's version of Gardner's "humanity grandiosely conceived," and the possibility of human community based on shared values. It then traces the maturation of his literary theory toward a practical view of form as an aid to the creation of an authentic self and examines Warren's famous novel *All the King's Men* and his acclaimed poem "The Leaf" as exemplars of this metaphysically-minded formalism. The following chapter on Berry discusses his embrace of a religious metaphysics that views creation as divinely ordered and humans as accountable to their place within that order. It then gives his view of literature as an element of culture meant to preserve the human place, both in a divinely-ordered hierarchy and within a physical geography, and demonstrates Berry's own practice of this function in his novel *Remembering* and collection of poems titled *The Wheel*. My aim in presenting these writers in this light is to demonstrate the fruitfulness of conversations about literature that take questions of metaphysics seriously. Such conversations, I argue, will sharpen our sense of why we read literature, what it has to offer, and, therefore, why and how we should study it.

Chapter 1: Robert Penn Warren's Humanistic Literary Vision

In a 1975 interview titled "A Conversation with Cleanth Brooks," Robert Penn Warren and his long-time friend engage in a poignant exchange over both men's deep concern for the possibility of human community, which they differentiate from "mere society," in the thoroughly modernized late twentieth century. Both seem to agree that, at least historically, all thriving communities have had the benefit of unifying "common loves and hates," or shared values, which grow out of, in the terms I have laid out so far, a metaphysics—a shared vision of what is true. But the men come to a point where, despite their obvious agreement on a wide range of ideas, they must acknowledge an important disagreement between them—namely, that Brooks is, in Warren's words, "a [Christian] communicant and a believer," and that Warren is not (72).

"A person like me, who is not [a believer] but who finds in Christianity the deepest and widest metaphor for life, might be described as a yearner," Warren says, later elaborating by admitting, "my whole instinct is to try to find, I suppose, the Christian values in terms of humanistic action, or action based on humanistic means, even naturalistic means." Warren here puts himself in a camp of intellectuals that he has described as believing "that we must find some equivalent to Christianity, some sense of mission that rests upon a naturalistic and humanistic base. Unified by such a sense of mission, modern men might attain to community once more and be, not a mere society, but a functioning community" (72). Warren demonstrates here, as he states later, that the line between the believer and the skeptic need not be as strongly drawn as some might think. "There are many people whose religious sense is so absorbed in their lives that it's not visible to the naked eye, yet the behavior of such people may be totally that of a religious man. Such a

person recognizes values that can only be arrived at by faith—cosmic values, shall we say" (81).

Thus, Warren, the agnostic, acknowledges that, while he cannot admit belief in a divine reality, he does believe in a human reality that he finds is not incommensurable with the claims of the Christian religion. He even seems to go so far to say that he finds that his humanistic metaphysics, at least when it comes to thinking about human action, are very similar to Christian metaphysics. This becomes clear when, at the end of the above cited passage, he remarks to Brooks that "you and I might go very different ways at this point" but then quickly backtracks, saying, "Well, probably not different ways in action, though that is possible. I'm not even sure that we would go such different ways in our thinking" (72).

All of this is to say that though Warren is careful to qualify and limit the scope of his metaphysical vision, such a vision is still present and is evident throughout his writing. I take his comment that he finds Christianity to provide "the deepest and widest metaphor for life" to suggest that he finds much common ground with Christianity, on a metaphorical level, as, to again borrow John Gardner's definition of metaphysics, "*a coherent, convincing, necessary system of general ideas and feelings in terms of which every element of our experience is illuminated*" (171). It only makes sense, after all, that if we assume that there is such a thing as truth—or Truth, as Warren often speaks of it in his poetic voice—divergent perspectives on it, such as Warren's and Brooks's, may agree to some—and perhaps a large—degree. And it is certainly true that Warren's unmistakable devotion to truth as such in his work leads him to conclusions about humanity that are similar to Christianity's and other religions' teachings. To be sure, throughout his work he maintains

a principled doubt in the compatibility of traditional religion with the modern world. But his thought does maintain some, though not all, of the force and robustness of a religious metaphysics in its tireless devotion to connecting a vision of the truth to human action, to connecting abstract theory with concrete practice.

Community, History, and the Self: Warren's Humanistic Metaphysics

Indeed, one result of Warren's yearning towards metaphysics is that good and evil, though certainly not as neatly definable to him as they are to many religious people, are nevertheless, like truth, real—and not merely relative—categories for him. Harold Bloom has rightly noted that "[a] secularized conviction of sin, guilt, and error is an obsessive strand in all of Warren's work, and for him it helps constitute a stance which is more than rhetorical" (Introduction 10). Along these lines, I see Warren finding much to agree with John Gardner's statement that "To say that by the Good a human being can mean only the human good . . . is not to say that the Good is a matter of opinion" (137). Indeed, as T.R. Hummer has noted, even if Warren rejects the "hand-me-me-down morality" that he praises Katherine Anne Porter for eschewing in his essay "Irony with a Center," he still believes that humans are capable of ethical knowledge through intellectual "discrimination" that takes a "dialectical approach" and, thus, "[exercises] as much of the human faculty as possible" (qtd. in Hummer 168). This "dialectical approach," as I shall discuss at length later, involves the individual acting out of a deep and ongoing engagement with his or her place in the human community across time. Indeed, in *Democracy and Poetry* (1975), the expanded version of his 1974 Jefferson Lecture, Warren argues against the idea that individual "authenticity" can serve as a supreme ethical reference point, saying, "'Authenticity' is merely one of the two poles of action, and the other pole is a sense

of objective standards" (47). Good and evil for Warren, while not absolute in the sense of carrying the ultimate authority of divine revelation, are objective in the sense that humans are, in fact, capable of arriving at ethical judgments that transcend the individual's propensities by engaging in a rigorous pursuit of the truth that judges particular situations against the whole of human experience.

This is why history—the human attempt to grapple with and understand the sum total of human action—is ultimately Warren's metaphysical and, consequently, ethical authority. In "The Use of the Past" (1977), Warren argues that instead of evaluating ourselves by the notion of "progress," which he asserts that we too often view as an "objective, self-propelling power, which we then take to be automatically beneficient—or, if we need an alibi, maleficent," Warren insists that the best principle for judgment is the *past*. For Warren, the past, by which he means the human past, is "a sort of measuring rod for our achievements—how great and how little" (*New* 45). Indeed, Warren asserts that proper judgments of human action—even on the level of the individual—should involve a consideration of human action in the past. "The past is, in fact, the great pantheon where we can all find the bearers of the values by which we could live," he says (50).

He is quick to acknowledge, though, that our relationship with the past should not involve mere unquestioning acceptance of the beliefs of forebears—mere "hand-me-down morality." Instead, the past is a mass of examples toward which *and* against which we must define ourselves. And this definition is what Warren calls *history*:

> [I]n a way, [the past] 'gives' us nothing. We must *earn* what we get there. The past must be studied, worked at—in short, created. For the past, like the present, is fluid. History, the articulated past . . . is forever being rethought,

> refelt, rewritten, not merely as rigor or luck turns up new facts but as new patterns emerge, as new understandings develop, and as we experience new needs and new questions. There is no absolute, positive past available to us, no matter how rigorously we strive to determine it—as strive we must. Inevitably, the past, so far as we know it, is an inference, a creation, and this, without being paradoxical, can be said to be its chief value for us. In creating an image of the past, we create ourselves, and without that task of creating the past we might be said scarcely to exist. Without it, we sink to the level of a protoplasmic swarm. (*New* 51)

To say that any understanding of the past—any "history"—is necessarily "created" and therefore that "no positive, absolute past" is available is not to say that the past is merely relative in the sense that no serious or enduring conclusions regarding human good can be arrived at by careful study. After all, while he admits that "new patterns" and "new understandings" of the past may emerge in response to "new needs and new questions," Warren still insists that deriving value from the past is something *earned*, not merely taken out of convenience. Choosing from the pantheon of the past involves a rigorous search for the truth of the past—the whole truth that takes into account the admirable *and* reprehensible elements of individuals and whole societies—and not a mere choice of a great figure for convenience's sake. That the absolute truth of the past as such is ultimately out of the reach of humans is not a relativistic stance for Warren, for he holds that humans ought to seek it anyway, and that they can, in fact, reach it partially. In this sense he is very much like the orthodox Christian (and no doubt the believer of numerous other faiths) that holds that God—the ultimate Truth—is transcendent and ineffable and, therefore,

knowable only in a limited sense. Indeed, one could find much common ground between Warren's view of the truth of the past and Eliot's insistence (and Berry's later adoption of it[6]) that "You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance" (*Four* 29). In short, the past for Warren is, in fact, absolute, for it happened. History, on the other hand, is not absolute in that it is human understanding of the past. It is limited by the capacity of human understanding and the availability of evidence, which is not to say that it is useless or that we cannot draw efficacious and lasting conclusions from it.

Warren's view of history thus constitutes a humanistic metaphysics in that it posits history as a legitimate means of understanding human truth. And this view is not idiosyncratic. John Lukács, in *Historical Consciousness*, written not ten years before "The Use of the Past," argues that historical thought can and should replace nineteenth-century positivist science as the Western world's guiding philosophy. Like Warren, Lukács defines history as the "*remembered past*" and notes that, as such, it is necessarily limited by the capacity of human memory and, therefore, necessarily "incomplete and unsystematic" (9, 264). Still, he insists, history can and should serve as "a kind of philosophy made up by examples"—examples of "ever recurrent human problems incarnated by ever different human beings" (268, 35). By engaging in "the constant, the frequent *rethinking* of the past," Lukács argues, we can arrive at a qualitative, human truth that both different from and better than the abstract, quantitative truth offered by positivist science (35). Indeed, he claims that a historical philosophy "concenrat[es] on the historicity of problems and events, assuming the uniqueness of human nature anew, presenting no new definitions, no freshly jigsawed categories, emphasizing the existential—and not merely philosophical—primacy

[6] cf. *The Way of Ignorance*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2005.

of truth" (267). Like Warren, Lukács argues that by viewing human thought and behavior and achievement in terms of their historicity—their relation to examples of past thought, behavior, achievement—one can know human truth and determine a sound human ethics. Indeed, Lukács, paving the way for Gardner's humanistic concept of the "universe" as "humanity grandiosely conceived," argues that historical thinking gives us a "*historical cosmology*" that recognizes that while "the earth may or may not be at the mathematical center of some universe . . . it is the center of *our* universe" (269). And *our* universe—the human universe—is knowable through history: "Aware of the limitations of the human intellect but aware, too, of the superb imaginative powers of mind, knowing our smallness and yet our situation in the center of our historical universe, understanding our inevitable participation in this universe, we are becoming more and more conscious of the historical reality of our existence in the world" (267).

While Warren's view of the prospect of history as a humanistic metaphysics at the end of the twentieth century may not be as optimistic as Lukács's, he nevertheless shares many of Lukács's assumptions about the ability to find human truth through historical thinking. Indeed, in his later works, he works out the teleological implications of Lukács's recognition of "our situation in the center of our historical universe" and our resulting "inevitable participation in this universe." When Warren calls the past the "great pantheon" of "the bearers of the values by which we could live," he goes on to elaborate by saying that the past "gives us the image of a community and of a role, an identity, within that community, the image of a self to be achieved" (*New* 50). And the term "self" for Warren, as I hinted in the introduction, is of the utmost importance to understanding both his metaphysics and his literary criticism. It is the term he uses for the human individual

living what might be called, in old-fashioned terms, "the good life." In other words, a human thinking, living, and acting in the ways that a human should think, live, and act—fulfilling the telos of the human.

Warren gives his most thorough definition of "the self" in *Democracy and Poetry*, which he revised into two essays: "America and the Diminished Self" and "Poetry and Selfhood." In his introduction to the book, he succinctly defines the "self" as "in individuation, the felt principle of significant unity," elaborating as follows:

> By *felt* I mean that I am here concerned, not with a theoretical analysis as such, but with what a more or less aware individual may experience as his own self-hood, and what he assumes about other individuals. By *significant* I mean two things: continuity—the self as a development in time, with a past and a future; and responsibility—the self as a moral identity, recognizing itself as capable of action worthy of praise or blame. (xii-xiii)

As I mentioned early in the introduction, the self for Warren is a human individual who maintains a coherent relationship with the human past—history—and the human present—his or her relation to other human selves, or, community. A relationship with the past shows the self that humans have acted in ways "worthy of praise or blame"—judged by actual ethical categories—and that, as a result, it too is capable of such action in its community with other selves. Indeed, he later remarks that "if there is no past there can be no self," for "a society with no sense of the past, with no sense of the human role as significant not merely in experiencing history but in creating it can have no sense of destiny" (56). A sense of the past—a "historical consciousness," in Lukács's terms—gives the individual a coherent sense of its own teleological significance and turns its attention to

how its actions are fitting in its community. Thus, Warren's concept of "selfhood," although it does deal with humans in "individuation" is drastically different from individual*ism*. Indeed, he makes this distinction himself: "the prime example of individualism, the man of will who says 'I please myself,' is the victim of the last illusion: he can have no self. Why? Because the true self, among the many varieties of fictive selves, can develop only in a vital relation between the unitary person and the group" (25). So the term "self" ought not to be conflated with the term "individual." Indeed, Warren later asserts, in analogy to his claim that authenticity and objective standards are two poles of human action, that "the individual is one pole of the existence of the self, and the other, society, or more specifically, community" (47).

In *Democracy and Poetry*, Warren thus delivers on the mission he states in "A Conversation with Cleanth Brooks" (not coincidentally, I think, published in the same year), namely, a way to assert a set of values on which community can be built, previously given in religious terms, in *humanistic* terms. Indeed, Warren succinctly notes that what he envisions—and what he acknowledges is extremely difficult to achieve in contemporary society—is "a community of individual selves bound together by common feelings, ideals, and conceptions of responsibility" (45). Of course, the issue that arises here is how this conception of community would account for diversity of thought. What about those who do not share the "feelings, ideals, and conceptions of responsibility" of the community? We can begin to answer this question by noting that Warren's view of community is a democratic one. He remarks, referencing John Stuart Mill, that the "basis of liberty" is "a variety of character and the chance for human nature to expand in different and even contradictory directions" (45). So there is latitude, in his vision of the communally-

coherent and morally-responsible self, for differences of opinion that do not lead to the violation of selfhood. One could imagine members of multiple religious, philosophical, or ethnic groups fitting in to this kind of community. The idea that Warren is working against is not a diverse populace but rather a "society that is merely a mechanism for satisfying man's physical needs and keeping order" (45). Still, the question of whether the kind of consensus Warren insists is necessary for a society to become a community is possible given the level of multifarious disagreement even just within the United States remains open. The only answer Warren's view can give is that if humans should devote themselves to knowing the truth—at least the human truth we know from history and the apparent moral responsibility of human action—we have reason to hope that a meaningful consensus may develop. This is, of course, a position of faith.

Still, even those who accept the claim that a community as Warren describes it is the teleological goal of human selfhood may have problems with its presentation in *Democracy and Poetry*. Since *Democracy and Poetry* is specifically directed at American society and American poetry, the objection could be raised that the United States as a society is far too large to act as a community. Indeed, it may be the case that smaller communities based around more immediate commitments, such as religion, politics, or place, may help foster the "common feelings, ideals, and conceptions of responsibility" Warren is after more effectively. Wendell Berry, as I shall discuss in the next chapter, would certainly be of this mind. Nevertheless, while Warren does not address a need for smaller, more organic, or more focused communities in *Democracy and Poetry*, he does indicate that he values them elsewhere. His 1964 novel *Flood*, for instance, centers around its protagonist Bradwell Tolliver's return to his hometown of Fiddlersburg, which is set to be flooded as part of a

hydroelectric dam project, and thus explores the implications of a responsible self in a small community being swallowed up by the larger society. I suggest, then, that while Warren does think that it is possible for societies as large as the United States to function as communities, he does not see such larger communities as obviating the need for smaller, localized communities.

All of this to say that Warren's concept of the self—the human individual responsible both to history and to community—is certainly not uncontroversial. Of course, it may be that any teleological claim is unlikely to avoid controversy. I have argued, though, that it is in answering the question "what are humans for?" that we may begin to answer the question "what is literature for?" Perhaps unsurprisingly, Warren writes in the Foreword to *Democracy and Poetry*, that this second question has been the primary concern of his career. "For all my adult years, my central and obsessive concern has been with 'poetry,'" he writes, "and I scarcely find it strange that I should seek some connection between that concern and the 'real' world" (xvi). Indeed, in *Democracy and Poetry* and, I would argue throughout his critical and literary work, Warren's project is often to define the purpose of poetry in "real" life, which he does by connecting it to his humanistic metaphysics.

Form and the Self: Warren's Practical Aesthetics

Indeed, Warren's career as a literary critic, or what Charlotte Beck I think rightly calls a "philosopher of literature" (61) to me seems to center around various attempts, which over time become clearer and more concerted, toward explaining the relation of poetry, by which he often means literature as a whole (and sometimes expands to other activities), to the real world.

Perhaps his first important attempt to do this was his 1943 essay "Pure and Impure Poetry," where he argues that "nothing that is available in human experience is to be legislated out of poetry" (*New* 24). The impurities that he argues might, by one or another definition of "pure poetry," be legislated out of poetry include (but are not limited to) "cacophonies, jagged rhythms, ugly words and ugly thoughts, colloquialisms, clichés, sterile technical terms, headwork and argument, self contradictions, clevernesses, irony, realism"—in short, he says, "all things which call us back to the world of prose and imperfection," which we might also call the "real" world. (4). Warren argues that the mistake of the many doctrines of pure poetry, which he attributes to figures from Ben Jonson to Edgar Allan Poe to the Symbolists, is that they fail to recognize that "poetry does not inhere in any particular element but depends upon the set of relationships, the structure, which we call the poem" (24). Warren is, of course, arguing the New Critical line of the primacy of form in poetry. But it's important to realize that here, and increasingly in the work that was to follow, form for Warren is the means by which poetry makes sense, for poet and reader alike, of the "real world."

Indeed, Warren argues against poetry that "tries to be pure by excluding, more or less rigidly, certain elements which might qualify or contradict its original impulse" by holding up writers like Proust, Dreiser, Faulkner, and Eliot. These writers, he says, instead of peddling "hand-me-down faith" or "hand-me-down ideals," "have tried . . . to remain faithful to the complexities of the problems with which they are dealing" and, in so doing, "have tried to define the context in which, and the terms by which, faith and ideals may be earned." (27-8). By ordering the "complexities and problems" of the real world into a

"structure"—into a form—the good poet makes faith and ideals, the province of metaphysics, believable.

Just *how* form relates to the real world in Warren's view is somewhat unclear in "Pure and Impure Poetry" but begins to come into focus in "Knowledge and the Image of Man," originally a lecture given at a Columbia University conference on the "Unity of Knowledge" in 1954 but subsequently published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1955. In the essay, he claims that "Poetry—that is, literature as a dimension of the creative imagination—is knowledge," and this knowledge, he says, is "knowledge *of* form" (190-1). He goes on to elaborate:

> By this I mean the furthest thing possible from any doctrine that might go as sheer formalism. I mean the organic relation among all the elements of the work, including, *most emphatically*, those elements drawn from the actual world and charged with all the urgencies of actuality, urgencies not to be denied or transmuted . . . . The form is a vision of experience, but of experience fulfilled and redeemed in knowledge . . . . It is not a thing detached from the world but a thing springing from the deep engagement of spirit with the world. (190-1)

Form, then, is not merely an aesthetically pleasing arrangement of content from the "actual world." It is an ordering of experience—by which Warren seems to mean the individual's life in the "actual world" and all the problems, confusions, pleasure, pain, and joy that comes with it—in a way that either gives meaning to or reveals the meaning latent within that experience. This ordering is not arbitrary, if the poem is a good one, but comes from "the deep engagement of the spirit with the world" and thus ultimately demonstrates the

poet's vision of the truth. And both the poet and the reader, Warren claims, have everything to gain from this.

"[T]he form is known, by creator or appreciator, only by experiencing it, by submitting to its characteristic rhythm, " (192). The "rhythm" Warren speaks of is the order that the poet achieves, by which "knowledge of form give[s] man an image of himself":

> It does so insofar as it gives the image of experience being brought to order and harmony . . . . The rhythm is, as it were, a myth of order, or fulfillment, an affirmation that our being may move in its totality toward meaning. The soul faces some potentiality of experience, drawn from actuality, and the form is . . . the abstraction of experience by imagination. The form gives man an image of himself, for it gives him his mode of experiencing, a paradigm of his inner life . . . . And this evocation, confrontation, and definition of our deepest life, gives us, in new self-awareness, a yet deeper life to live. (192)

By putting his or her experience or some "potentiality of experience" into the poem, the poet gives the reader an instance of experience rightly ordered, rightly understood. Presumably, if, as he said in "Pure and Impure Poetry," the poetic act done properly tries to "define the context in which, and the terms by which, faith and ideals may be earned," the way of ordering life the reader experiences in the poem may be valuable precisely because it references an actual, if not completely immediate, order that exists beyond the poet's experience. In other words, the ordering of experience in form is not merely the writer's "worldview" but something deeper—something on the level of teleology and metaphysics toward which the poet strives.

And through this striving in the forming of experience, poetry makes one's (the poet's and the reader's) life a "deeper life to live," Warren claims, because it leads one toward a life that is "not merely the life of contemplation" but a life of contemplation that "prepares for the moment of action, of creation, in our world of contingency" (192). Poetry, through form, allows us to get at the deeper order underneath the "world of contingency," which is essential for understanding right action. Thus, far from being the province of admiration by aesthetes, poetry relates directly to action in a world of contingency, i.e., the "real" world we all live in. It is ultimately *practical*.

This becomes even more clear in Warren's 1962 contribution to the *Saturday Evening Post*, "Why Do We Read Fiction?" In fiction as in poetry, Warren argues, experience of a work's form allows the reader to exercise and develop the sympathetic imagination through a more mature process of the "role taking" that began in childhood. This imagination, he says, allows us to "know 'inwardly' in the only way that finally counts, that other people really exist and are, in fact, persons with needs, hopes, fears, and even rights" (*New* 59). Clearly, such a sympathetic imagination is central to practical ethical concerns, and Warren says as much: "this discipline in sympathy, through the imaginative enactment of role-taking, gratifies . . . our yearning to enter and feel at ease in the human community" (59).

But he goes on to insist that the "role taking" of reading fiction also contributes to the reader's necessary process of creating the "self," Warren's notion of the individual reconciled to the responsibility of continuity both with the past and with the human community of the present. By imaginatively taking on the roles of fictional characters, Warren argues, the reader more or less tries on possible selves, and by experiencing the

logic of those possible selves and their actions, arrives eventually at a more coherent vision of "the dominant self, the ringmaster self" (59). "In having some awareness of the complexity of self we are better prepared to deal with that self. As a matter of fact, our entering into the fictional process helps to redefine the dominant self, even, as it were, to re-create, on a sounder basis—sounder because better understood—the dominant self, the official 'I,'" he writes (60).

In this entrance of the concept of the self into Warren's thought on literature, I argue, his claims before about the "rhythm" of the "spirit" in its "deep connection with the world" come into sharper focus. It allows him to say lucidly later in the article that "[i]f fiction begins in daydream, if it relieves us from the burden of being ourselves, it ends, if it is good fiction and we are good readers, by returning us to the world and to ourselves. It reconciles us with reality, or helps us deal with reality" (64). By giving us the image of another person's definition of his or her self against reality, including the consequences of that definition, fiction in particular or literature more broadly helps us "reconcile" or "deal with" reality in our own lives. A different way Warren puts it is to say that fiction gives the reader a new experience of "values": "the reader has, by imaginative enactment, lived through the process by which the values become valuable. What might have been merely an abstraction has become vital, has been lived, and is, therefore, 'new'—new because newly experienced. We can now rest in the value as experienced; we are reconciled in it; and that is what counts" (63). I take Warren to be talking here about "values" that stem from the truth of the human condition, from metaphysical understanding. Literature, then, serves to make metaphysics immediate to the reader. Though metaphysical understanding may be discursively given in a necessarily abstract way, the value of literature is that it

allows the reader to experience it, though at second-hand, in a convincingly ordered rendering by the author.

In his later years, Warren continued to develop the concept of the self and literature's role in relation to it in two important texts: *Democracy and Poetry* and in "The Use of the Past," originally a lecture given as a meditation on the United States' bicentennial and subsequently published in 1976. In *Democracy and Poetry*, Warren expands his argument that literature serves as an aid to self creation by arguing that both the content and form of literary work lead the reader toward selfhood on different levels, with obvious precedence given to the latter. On the level of content, he argues, the reader finds a "'model' of self in its adventures of selfhood" in a character or, in the case of lyric poetry, the speaker of a poem (70). On the level of form, however, the reader encounters "a story behind the objective story," namely, "the author's adventure in selfhood," a view certainly prefigured by the one given in "Knowledge and the Image of Man" (71). Furthermore, the reader, experiencing "adventures in selfhood" at the level of content *and* form embarks on his or her own adventure, Warren says, in a process that gives the reader "echo upon echo, mirror facing mirror" that ultimately "wakes us up to our own life" (71).

This construction, along with its earlier iterations in previous works, gives us, I think, a workable image of how literature, in a way particular to itself, might be said to edify the human, if we accept Warren's concept of the self as a valid understanding of the ethically centered human, the human living the good life. Certainly, if in literature the reader finds the self (the character's or the author's) creating itself in terms of hard-won values taken from experience of the actual world, one can see how the reader might be led to contemplate how to create his or her self in his or her present situation within a

community. But what about the sense of continuity with the past which serves as the other axis of Warren's self? The question of how literature gives us this continuity, of course, remains.

He addresses exactly this question in "The Use of the Past": if literature "returns us to ourselves," he asks, "why should not the literature that gives us images contemporary with our own facing up to contemporary problems be better than the literature of times and cultures different from our own?" (New 46). His answer is that both contemporary literature and that of the past are valuable in that they participate in an ongoing dialectic, "a vital and continuing process" (47). Participating in this process by reading both kinds of literature, Warren argues, properly orients the self of both reader and writer to the past. To explain this, he references Harold Bloom's *Axiety of Influence*, which he says "describe[es] the struggle of a poet with the past as the dynamic of literary tradition." Warren adds his own metaphor of Jacob wrestling the angel as illustrative of this "dynamic," noting: "the self, by such a view, can be discovered only in the attempt to assert it against a powerful opponent from the past. Tradition, in the sense of formula, bars the future. In the sense of a dynamic, it unbars the future" (47). Thus, reading the literature of both the past and the present gives the reader entre into this dialectical process necessary to true selfhood. "And what may be said of the poet wrestling with his angel may also be said for us all, as we confront the literature of the past—or merely the past itself," he argues (47). Literature, in other words, both connects us to the past if it is from the past, but also, by dramatizing the author's creation of self, shows us the dialectic that is the author's struggle with the past, a dialectic in which we too must participate. Reading Hawthorne, then, shows us an author's "wrestling with that necessary angel" of his

"ancestral New England past," which results in "an art that speaks to us profoundly a century and a half later and is part of our usable American past" (48).

"The drama of the discovery of the self is timeless," Warren argues. "In it, the past becomes our present—no, it becomes our future. So far as we understand ourselves, that is, we may move freely into a future and need not be merely the victims of the next event in time that happens to come along. The dynamic understanding of the past gives us the possibility of a future" (48). Literature, then, gives the reader a meaningful understanding of the process by which past becomes present and, in turn, makes us responsible for the future. It aids the creation of selfhood both in reference to the community of the present and the totality of human action comprehended in the past.

Literature, then, edifies the individual by aiding in the creation of the self. A question that understandably arises, though, is "what does literature do for a society as a whole?" This question, though its answer certainly depends on an account of what literature does for the individual, is actually at the center of both *Democracy and Poetry* and "The Use of the Past," although more prominently in the former. Warren's project, which he approaches similarly in both texts, is indeed to argue that literature can perhaps serve a positive function in contemporary American society—a society that, in Warren's view, is makes selfhood hard to come by.

Although, as Charlotte Beck has shown, Warren did much over his career to distance himself from his participation in the Nashville Agrarian group of the 1930s and from "The Briar Patch," his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* which Beck calls "a halfhearted defense of segregation that Warren never ceased to regret" (3), something of his Agrarian roots come out in *Democracy and Poetry*'s estimation of the effects of modernization on society.

Indeed, Beck argues that the lecture which became the book was "energized by the aging poet's dismay at the turbulent 1960s and '70s and reinforced by his Agrarian distrust of science and technology," and while she does cast a somewhat skeptical eye on Warren's Agrarian influence by calling him "something of a luddite," she nevertheless allows that "no one, either then or now, could discount Warren's gloomy prognosis entirely" (158). That prognosis, essentially, is that the assumptions of a techno-centric society at the behest of large organizations driven by the rules of business under industrial capitalism is inimical to selfhood and therefore doomed, at the very least, to deprive its members of a coherent, healthy human existence.

To explain his vision of modernity as of 1975, Warren constructs what he calls "a little fairy tale" in which Science, "a bumbling and kind-hearted old father," begets a "smart, brawny son" named Technology, who "found the father's way of life dull and so set forth to make his fortune":

> Not far on his journey het met a beautiful gold-haired lady with a bewitching smile. Her name was Money. Now Money had a bad reputation in certain quarters, especially among old, stuffy folk, and it was even rumored that she had borne several bastards. . . . Of course this young fellow, having been raised in so retired a way, knew nothing of the gossip about the lady. So they got married and lived happily ever after—at least, until right now—for he was blind to her little private diversions and was wrapped up in a beautiful, thriving little son who grew as fast as a beanstalk and whose name was Business Culture. (52)

It should be noted here that both in Warren's fable and in his serious discourse neither science as such, nor, notably, technology in and of itself, are labeled as the root of modernity's ills. Indeed, Warren writes with great reverence of quantum physics only a page earlier, noting that with its emergence "the big machine model of the universe blew up," causing, he claims, some scientists to "refer to artists as brother symbolists with merely a different kind of net for snaring 'reality'" (51). Still, the point of the "fairy tale" is to show that, because the development of modern technology coincides with the development of capitalism (though this term is absent in his discourse, I should point out), modern society's use and understanding of technology are misguided. "Our reigning variety of technology," he says, "seems to have branched off from science in the age of machine as model, and that gave the image that has been carried into the heart of man. It is the image that still affects his relation to nature, to other men, and to himself" (52-3). And, of course, coupled with money and now enamored of the modern business culture and its promise of endless progress, the modern vision of technology is hard to change and all too often taken as gospel.

And here we return to the self. The state of affairs Warren describes, which he later succinctly marks as "the dominant business-managerial-technological culture," from its inception, constituted a "constantly accelerating system which undercut inherited sanctions and values in a progressive disorientation of the sense of time and a rupture of all aspects of human continuity" (77, 53-4). "With all this disorientation," he remarks, "the self, in a strange new loneliness, fell sick" (54). The self falls sick under the conditions of modernity as he describes them because they alienate the individual from both axes of the self—the past and community. As for modernity's rupture with the past, Warren cites both

the United States' founders' optimism in the American project to become a "City set on a Hill" and Henry Ford's infamous proclamation that "History is bunk" (54-5). More importantly, he refers to *The Death of the Past* by J.H. Plumb, which Warren interprets as suggesting that "the ideal of understanding men and telling their story, noble or vicious, will be replaced by the study of statistics or nonideographic units of an infinite series, and computers will dictate how such units, which do breathe and move, can best be manipulated for their own good" (56). Obviously, if such a state of affairs were to be completely realized, it would theoretically obviate the individual's need to know and react to the past in meaningful ways.

As for modernity's effect on the possibilities of human community, it is not difficult to anticipate Warren's take from his speculation that a purely technological approach toward the social good involves "manipulating" human beings as "units, which do breathe and move." Indeed, he turns aptly to Martin Buber's concepts of "*It*" and "*Thou*" to highlight how a technocratic society can reduce human beings to abstract units in the "machine model" and, thus, deprive them of their common humanity and hope for authentic community. While he does acknowledge that "in all times and places man has necessarily lived a large part of his life in . . . the realm of *It*—the realm of economics, politics, science, military activity, labor, and so on—as contrasted with the realm of *Thou*, in which massive relations of recognition and reverence may prevail," he nevertheless worries that in contemporary society "the realm of *It* has become progressively enlarged" to the point that "in our contact with technology and big organization," which is increasingly inevitable, "the individual is necessarily regarded as an expendable, because replaceable, part" (57). Community, obviously, cannot exist without reference to the "realm of *Thou*," so the

individual in contemporary society, for Warren, is as alienated from community as it is from the past.

It seems that we are quite far from Warren's view of the function of literature in contemporary society, so let us go ahead and ask, "where does literature fit into all of this?" First of all, and most obviously, in all the ways Warren describes, he sees it as offering, by its nature, an aid in the individual's process of achieving selfhood. Perhaps it always served this function, but in Warren's view there is a dire need for it in these latter days. The cultivation of selfhood, even on the level of individual readers, is a way of keeping alive the idea of a community in the midst of a mechanistic and dehumanizing society.

Secondly and perhaps merely in a different register, Warren argues that insofar as literature by its very nature in both content and form strives toward the establishment of selfhood, it stands as an element of culture, however marginalized, to oppose those other elements that work against selfhood. In explaining the potential benefit of literature at the level of society, Warren begins by remarking, "Assuming that man will resist the total transformation that some technologists promise, then it may be pertinent to reflect on the fact that historically a strong and high art is to be associated with societies of challenging vigor[7]" (*Democracy* 75). Art, including literature, Warren claims, cannot be seen as a mere "by-product or waste product" of healthy societies but, rather, as "an element in a vital dialectic . . . by which, in imagining itself and the relation of individuals to one another and to it, a society comes to understand itself, and by understanding, discover its possibilities for growth" (76). And, to the argument that literature as an element of culture may reach a

[7] Warren does not give a clear idea of which societies he has in mind here. However, in the Foreword, he mentions ancient Greece and the Roman Republic as evincing a strong notion of the self and, therefore, a strong poetic art, conceding that "[t]here was in neither case a democracy we would recognize as such, merely a democracy of aristocrats" (xiv-xv).

relatively few members of society, Warren argues that "[t]he value of an institution [within the broader culture] lies in the degree to which, by massive or subtle interpenetration and vital relations, that institution combines with others to sustain and foster the individual in his various potentialities, even though . . . such beneficiaries may be unaware of the process" (76). Literature, then, working as part of a whole culture may exert an influence in favor of selfhood where other institutions may have forgotten this end. In response to what he no doubt sees as the inevitable charge of elitism in claiming a role for "high" art, he argues that poetry is no different than science with respect to presumed elitism in that, like science, art "draws not only those who make it but also those who understand and appreciate it, from all sorts of groups, classes, and races" (77). Furthermore, he argues that if there is, in fact, an "elitism" involved in championing the arts, this particular elitism is in fact a marginalized elitism when compared to the elitism of science because science, to society at large "is recognized as a giver—though at second hand, through technology—of practical benefits" whereas, "The elitism of the arts . . . receives no such acceptance, even at second hand." "Its values," Warren stresses, "truly run against the grain of the dominant business-managerial-technological culture; and in this fact it tends to undercut other elitisms, to work against all the established patterns of prestige" to the extent that "the effect of this special elitism of the arts on social, financial, and technological elitisms will become more marked—and more significant, one is tempted to say, by reason, paradoxically, of its very alienation, for the survival of democracy" (77-8). If the arts are, in fact, elitist, their elitism, we might say, is based on the primacy of selfhood. If the arts promote selfhood, are they not more healthy and venerable than other principles of hierarchy, such as social, economic, or technological status? To appropriate Nietzsche's

turn of phrase, the arts seek to transvaluate the values of contemporary society, replacing the pernicious ones inherent in "dominant business-managerial-technological culture" with the idea of selfhood, which is democratic in that it suggests that every human individual has the potential to create a healthy self.

Still, despite his high view of the possibilities of literature in contemporary society, it is important to stress that literature is far from an absolute panacea in Warren's view. Toward the end of *Democracy and Poetry*, he gives a sane perspective on just how much one should claim in the name of literature. "It is sentimental," he says, "to try to retrace our steps, to try to demote science, the purest expression of the love of intellectual beauty, to the role of scullery maid or to deny the special, and in an economic sense primary, role of technology" (91). Begrudgingly and yet conscientiously, it seems, Warren does see the need to acknowledge that there is no simple solution to the fact of technology's deep enmeshment in the structures of modern society. For all his Agrarian leanings, he is no purist. He continues: "And I flinch, also, from those who like Henry James, would assume art to be the justification of all life, as well as from all others . . . who refuse to recognize the hard costs of mere survival for many millions of human beings, the cost in grinding effort and irremediable pain" (91). Indeed, Warren's social consciousness prevents him from glorifying aesthetics as the ultimate end of life when real injustice and real suffering persist in the world. "How can anybody who has lived through the Great Depression, or even walked through parts of Appalachia or a slum, feel otherwise?" he asks, I think rightly (91).

And yet, he also claims, as he must, that it is likewise an error to assume that literature is therefore of no consequence, given its supposed impracticality:

> I must confess that I flinch, too, from the view of W. H. Auden, . . . who, in an essay on Yeats, implies that art is merely a "product of history'" and, unlike other products, such as technical inventions, never a "cause," an "effective agent"; and who adds that, "if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged." (91)

Warren argues against Auden's view of the necessary impracticality of art by charging it with the error of dualism: "It would seem that, granting the existence of an aesthetic value distinguishable from other aspects of experience, this value has both its origins in, and its effects on, the massive texture of human needs and human life. Can we totally separate the 'material' world, as Auden here does, from what we may call, generally, the 'spiritual' world" (92)? The answer for Warren, of course, is "no." His humanistic metaphysics, the center of which is the self and its morally charged relationship to the human past and present, prevent this easy dualism. True, the spiritual self and the material processes of modernity may be often at odds with one another, but reconciliation is clearly what Warren is after. Toward that end, literature is an "effective agent" and does bring about health, both spiritually and physically.

Theory of the Self in Practice: Warren's Literary Aesthetic

So far I have only been addressing Warren's attempts to lay out his philosophy of literature in his nonfiction work. Warren, of course, was also an acclaimed novelist and poet. Looking briefly at some of Warren's own literary work, then, will give a sense of how his ideas about literature's function flesh themselves out, as well as provide a different window into Warren's metaphysical vision.

I can think of no better place to start than his fictional magnum opus, the 1946 novel *All the King's Men*. Warren's ideas about literature's role in the cultivation of selfhood figure prominently in this novel, even though it was published before Warren began using the term "self" prominently in his critical writing. Indeed, the novel acts as a multilayered study in the movement toward selfhood on the levels of content and form, which, in Warren's view, has implications for both author and reader.

On the level of content, the reader finds the development of the character Willie Stark, the populist-reformer-turned-Machiavellian-demagogue governor of Louisiana, modeled loosely on Huey Long. Willie begins as a country lawyer and small-time local politician bent on reforming the corrupt ways of a small-town government run on the good-ole-boy system. When he eventually becomes governor, however, he resorts to corruption himself, dealing in blackmail and bribery to maintain a chokehold on the state legislature. He explains his position on corruption to Adam Stanton, a dogmatically moralistic doctor he convinces to head up a new state hospital, like this: "When your great-great-grandpappy climbed down out of the tree, he didn't have any more notion of good or bad, or right and wrong, than the hoot owl that stayed up in the tree. Well, he climbed down and he began to make Good up as he went along. He made up what he needed to do business, Doc" (387-8). Willie's ethics, then, are both relativist and pragmatic. He exists as a possible "self" that the reader, along with the narrator (about whom I shall have much to say) may "try on"—a possible self that deliberately cuts himself off from the moral value of the past. How can he, as Warren suggests the true self should, view the past as evocative of "objective standards" if the good is something to be "made up" to "do business?"

Another possible self is Adam Stanton, the dogmatic moralist. Jack Burden, the novel's narrator and arguably its protagonist as well, describes Adam's relation to the past in this way: "[H]e has lived all his life in the idea that there was a long time back when everything was run by high-minded, handsome men wearing knee breeches and silver buckles" (370). Adam's "tidy" ethics, as Jack describes them, are an instance of a "hand-me-down morality" based on a superficial understanding of the past. Predictably, this leads Adam, as a possible self, to look with disdain on the people in his life who show evidences of lacking a "high-minded" moral code (373). "He has a picture of the world in his head," Jack remarks, "and when the world doesn't conform . . . to the picture, he wants to throw the world away. Even if that means throwing the baby out with the bath. Which . . . it always does mean" (370-1). This becomes painfully clear when Adam kills Willie for having an affair with his sister Anne and dies in the process. Adam's unbalanced self, like Willie's, is exposed as dangerously flawed.

Jack Burden, in his narration, meditates on how their deaths highlight such flaws:

> Each had been the doom of the other. As a student of history, Jack Burden could see that Adam Stanton, whom he came to call the man of idea, and Willie Stark, whom he came to call the man of fact, were doomed to destroy each other, just as each was doomed to try to use the other and to yearn toward and try to become the other, because each was incomplete with the terrible division of their age. (657)

This "division of their age," in the terms of Warren's later writings, marks a failure of true selfhood in that both a reductive "hand-me-down morality" and a rejection of the ethical truth of the past all together end in tragic destruction. Adam and Willie exhibit opposing

monomaniacal devotions, Adam to the "idea" and Willie to the material "fact," that prevent either character from developing a coherent, communal self and, indeed, necessarily ends in the annihilation of the self.

While Adam and Willie serve as examples of the failure of selfhood, Warren also presents the reader with Jack Burden's journey toward authentic selfhood. Jack's achievement of a communal and historical self is present on the level of content along with Adam's and Willie's failures. However, it also includes and transcends Adam's and Willie's abortive selves because Jack Burden is, as I have said, the novel's narrator, which means that his cultivation of a self takes place on the level of form as well. In a 1968 panel discussion moderated by C. Vann Woodward, Warren admitted that Jack Burden was, in fact, a "technical accident, a way to tell the story"—the story, presumably, of Willie Stark and his death at the hands of Adam Stanton (Woodward 108). But it is apparent in the passage quoted above, as it is throughout the novel, that "the story" also involves Jack Burden's attempts to find meaning in the events he narrates and in which he also participates—his creation, in other words, of a self.

Jack Burden, the reader learns about halfway through the novel, is a failed historian. He decided to stop pursuing his Ph.D. in history, he tells us, because the implications of his dissertation, a study of his great uncle Cass Mastern's hard-won moral regeneration, began to disturb him profoundly. "[I]n the midst of the process I tried to discover the truth and not the facts. Then, when the truth was not to be discovered, or discovered could not be understood by me, I could not live with the cold-eyed reproach of the facts," he says (236). Jack is unwilling, in John Lukács's terms, to see history as a philosophy made up of examples that exhibit "ever recurrent human problems incarnated by ever different human

beings." The "facts" are a reproach to Jack because they suggest, by example, a human truth that he cannot bear to understand.

These facts of the case, which Jack learns from Cass Mastern's journals, are that Mastern, a plantation owner in the antebellum South, after experiencing the suicide of his best friend due to the revelation that he, Mastern, had been having an affair with that friend's wife, commits himself to moral reform and seeks redemption in Christianity. This new commitment leads Mastern to become an abolitionist and free his slaves, and also to join the Confederate army while vowing privately never to fire his weapon, a decision which leads to his death[8]. The "truth" of the case, which Jack Burden at the time could not understand or, as he says, "was afraid to understand for what might be understood there was a reproach to him" (284), he is later able to describe in these terms:

> Cass Mastern lived for a few years and in that time he learned that the world is all of one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter . . . . It does not matter whether or not you meant to brush the web of things. Your happy foot or your gay wing may have brushed it ever so lightly, but what happens always happens and there is the spider, bearded black and with his great faceted eyes glittering like mirrors in the sun, or like God's eye, and the fangs dripping. (283)

[8] There is certainly a quixotic element to Mastern's self-imposed penance—especially his quasi-suicidal decision "in anguish of spirit and in hope of expiation" to march in the Civil War without shooting (280). Surely, from a Christian perspective, Mastern did not need to risk his life to earn God's forgiveness. To a degree, this may qualify the moral efficacy of Mastern's example for Jack, but it does not nullify it. In fact, it may present a useful example of human behavior from the past that does not suggest a simplistic "hand-me-down morality" but instead, as Warren says, "a measuring rod" for human achievement.

Jack's attempt to create history thus reveals to him an ancestor who discovers the awful truth of moral responsibility due to the interconnectivity of all of life. This truth is a hard one because it insists that the "enormous spider web" of human existence means that the individual's actions—regardless of the intentions behind them—are inescapably meaningful and therefore subject to moral scrutiny. Indeed, it is this aspect of the truth that renders it wholly terrifying for Jack Burden and precipitates his elaborate attempts, throughout the novel, to avoid it.

In the novel's first chapter, Jack describes himself (his previous self) as a "brass-bound Idealist." What he means by this is that he holds to a conveniently narrow interpretation (or misinterpretation) of Berkeleyan Idealism as a means of avoiding the pangs of moral responsibility: "What you don't know don't hurt you, for it ain't real." "I had got hold of the principle out of a book when I was in college, and had hung to it for grim death," he says. "I owed my success in life to that principle. It had put me where I was" (45). Where he was, of course, was at the right hand of Willie Stark, serving as his personal "historian," or digger up of dirt for use in the blackmailing of rival politicians into submission.

Later, however, Jack undergoes what he describes in the terms of a religious conversion to a different personal philosophy, diametrically opposed to and yet equally as morally evasive as his Idealism. This new philosophy, which he insists is "the dream of our age," says that "all life is but the dark heave of blood and the twitch of the nerve" (467). Jack thus adopts a fatalistically deterministic materialism, a self-interested version of naturalism. The weakness of his Idealism was that sometimes he could not keep from "knowing" things that might hurt him, such as the fact that the woman he loved, Anne

Stanton, was having an affair with Willie Stark. His new naturalism, though, has no such weakness, for if "the twitch is all," as he says, "The words *Anne Stanton* were simply a name for a peculiarly complicated peace of mechanism which should mean nothing whatsoever to Jack Burden, who himself was simply another rather complicated piece of mechanism" (473, 467-8). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, "he came to believe that nobody had any responsibility for anything and there was no god but the Great Twitch" (656).

In the end, however, after Willie's and Adam's deaths, Jack's position changes. It changes for numerous reasons, including the responsibility Jack shares in his friends' deaths. He convinced Adam to work for Willie, in part by exposing to Adam the fact that Adam's father, while governor of Louisiana, had been involved in corrupt practices. This same revelation drives Anne Stanton into her affair with Willie. Thus, Jack, in the end, cannot escape responsibility. Furthermore, the paths his friends take toward their deaths affect his changing ethics as well: "[H]e woke up one morning to discover that he did not believe in the Great Twitch anymore. He did not believe in it because he had seen too many people live and die." The ways of their living and dying, he suggests, pit free will against determinism in a dialectical tension that maintains ethical responsibility: "He had seen his two friends, Willie Stark and Adam Stanton live and die. . . . Each had been the doom of the other. . . . But at the same time Jack Burden came to see that his friends had been doomed, he saw that though doomed they had nothing to do with any doom under the godhead of the Great Twitch. They were doomed but they lived in the agony of will" (657). Adam and Willie were determined not by factors completely reducible to material processes but by their devotions to opposing and yet equally abortive selves—devotions they put into

practice through their individual wills. The "agony of the will," then, is the weight of responsibility against apparent deterministic forces, a realization to which Willie comes in his final words to Jack Burden: "It might have been all different, Jack. You got to believe that" (657). This realization, for Jack, does not do away with the apparent deterministic forces of living in the world, but it does assert the existence of will and

This realization amounts to a secular or humanistic affirmation of the tension recognized in Christianity between free will and predestination, which perhaps renders the truth of Cass Mastern's moral knowledge, which Mastern himself frames in Christian terms, finally understandable to Jack Burden. At the end of the novel, Jack picks up his historical studies where he left them, returning to his book on "the life of Cass Mastern, whom once I could not understand but whom, perhaps, I now may come to understand" (660). Jack can thus acknowledge the truth of responsibility as a continuous human truth knowable through a relationship with the past. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Jack Burden is a coherent self, recognizing his teleological place along the axes of the past and his present community. He recognizes, in the novel's concluding lines, that he must "go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time" (661).

The question, however, of how Jack's achievement of selfhood, which certainly involves his position as an actor in the novel's plot, also exists on the level of form remains. Indeed, from Warren's later accounts of writing the novel, one gets the sense that if Jack Burden, the "technical accident," is the novel's protagonist, he became so inadvertently. In an introduction to a 1953 *Modern Library* edition of *All the King's Men*, Warren writes that Jack was born out of "the necessity for a character of a higher degree of self-consciousness

than my politician [i.e., Willie], a character to serve as a kind of commentator and *raisonneur* and chorus" (226). One reason Warren cites for wanting this kind of narrator is a "desire to avoid writing a straight naturalistic novel, the kind of novel that the material so readily invited. The impingement of that material, I thought, upon a special temperament would allow another perspective than the reportorial one, and would give a basis for some range of style. So Jack Burden entered the scene" (226-7). Thus, while Jack Burden's journey toward selfhood does certainly take place on the level of content, as he can hardly escape being the novel's central character, he is also part of the form that Warren puts on the content of the story, at least partially to strive against what could have been a temptation of the reader, and perhaps Warren himself, to interpret the story as embodying a naturalistic metaphysics—a view that runs contrary to Warren's humanistic metaphysics. Jack-Burden-as-form, then, demonstrates Warren's claim that the form of a literary work illustrates the author's own journey toward selfhood.

Indeed, much of Warren's literary work clearly comes out of his idea that the novel, story, or poem exists as an "adventure in selfhood" for both reader and writer. Harold Bloom acknowledges this in his characteristic approach to Warren's poem "The Leaf," the culminating poem in the *Island of Summer* cycle published in the 1968 collection *Incarnations*. "The Leaf," Bloom argues, marks a crucial shift in Warren's poetry, much like *Ash Wednesday* does in Eliot's. It marks Warren's achievement of an original poetic voice, which comes out of his "agonistic" overcoming, through the anxiety of influence, his servitude to the aesthetic of Eliot ("Sunset" 199). In fact, Bloom claims that this poem is so important because the shift from imitation of Eliot to Warren's authentic poetic voice actually occurs mid-poem. Lines like "I wanted to taste what the world is, wind dried up /

The live saliva of my tongue, my tongue / Was like a dry leaf in my mouth" remind Bloom of Eliot: "We recognize that this is the Waste Land" (Warren 26, Bloom 201). And yet, Bloom convincingly argues that Warren explicitly repudiates Eliot's voice in the section that follows:

> . . . The grape
> Weakens at the juncture of the stem. The world
>
> Is fruitful, and I, too,
> In that I am the father
> Of my father's father's father. I,
> Of my father, have set the teeth on edge. But
> By what grape? I have cried out in the night.
>
> From a further garden, from the shade of another tree,
> My father's voice, in the moment when the cicada
> Ceases, has called to me. (27).

Warren's mention of the cessation of the cicada's sound, Bloom argues, "deliberately alludes to Eliot's 'not the cicada' in 'What the Thunder Said'; but the prophetic trope in its reversal, overcomes the rhetoric of *The Waste Land*" (202). This prophetic trope is the allusion made here to Jeremiah 31:29: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, / And the children's teeth are set on edge," which marks the belief that succeeding generations bear the punishment for their ancestors' sins[9] (NKJV). Bloom claims that the "father" Warren

[9] In its context in Jeremiah, this belief is proclaimed erroneous.

speaks of here, given the allusion to *The Waste Land*, is Eliot, and that, coupled with the markedly un-Eliotic aesthetic in the rest of the poem, these lines assert Warren's authenticity apart from Eliot, setting his poetic father's teeth on edge in a "reversal of the influence process" (202).

This reading is particularly interesting in light of Warren's own evocation of Bloom's anxiety of influence concept in "The Use of the Past" to describe the self's necessarily dialectical relationship with the figures of tradition, literary or otherwise. Bloom, surprisingly without referencing "The Use of the Past," gives a reading of "The Leaf" that is remarkably consistent with Warren's claims that a work of literature exhibits the self's relation to the past in its own dynamic relationship with the literary tradition. Still, I would go beyond Bloom's claim, fascinating as it is, to argue that the reversal of the proverb from Jeremiah represents an achievement of selfhood on a much more universal scale than Warren's personal transcendence of Eliot's influence. I read the "I / Of my father, have set the teeth on edge" as a New Critical paradox par excellence representing the self's acknowledgement of the ethical weight of the past. The poem begins with an evocation of the Fall in the Garden of Eden; "I lurk / In the shadow of the fig," remarks the speaker, saying a few lines later, "Human grief is the obscenity to be hidden by the leaf" (24). Fig leaves are, of course, what Adam and Eve use to hide their nakedness after eating the fruit in the Genesis account, so the "grief" here has the connotation of guilt, as Bloom has noted (196). But "The Leaf" is not, strictly speaking, a poem about original sin, sin committed by a parent and suffered by descendents, but of sin that sets the teeth of the father on edge. Indeed, Warren reverses the direction of original sin, not to discredit it as a concept, but to highlight the self's responsibility as a moral agent inseparable from and thus responsible to

the past. The adventure in selfhood presented in "The Leaf," then, is an adventure in selfhood not only for Warren in his self-definition against the Eliotic tradition, but also for the reader as the reader confronts Warren in his poetic self-definition and the speaker in his universal human self-definition. Like *All the King's Men*, "The Leaf" rehearses the process of self creation on multiple levels, providing the reader with an opportunity to participate in this teleologically necessary act.

A Metaphysics Incarnate: Conclusions

In the introduction I remarked that both Warren and Berry are sons of Eliot in that they view culture in general and literature specifically as an incarnation of metaphysics. This comparison works for Warren because literature, in his view, presents dramas of self creation, the teleological fulfillment of the human, in the terms of experience. The reader, therefore, finds an abstract metaphysics made immediate in a form imposed on "elements drawn from the actual world and charged with all the urgencies of actuality."

It is significant, in this connection, that Warren titled the collection that includes "The Leaf" *Incarnations*. While Bloom's assertions that Warren departs from Eliot aesthetically in this collection may be true, this departure is not necessarily an *ideological* one. Indeed, the second section of "The Leaf" suggests a similar view to Eliot's claim that art must grow out of metaphysics. The speaker, who has come to a hawk's nest at the top of a cliff, identifies with the hawk that he sees flying above him: "I saw/ The hawk shudder in the high sky, he shudders/ To hold position in the blazing wind, in relation to/ The firmament, he shudders and the world is a metaphor" (*Incarnations* 25). Warren returns to the image of the hawk obsessively in his poetry, and here, as Bloom argues, it represents "poetic vision" (6). The hawk's vision that "the world is a metaphor" from its high position

would be an irresponsible claim of an escapist aesthete if the speaker had not proclaimed earlier[10], in "Riddle in the Garden," that "The world means only itself" (7). The poetic vision of the world as metaphor must be chastened by a vision of the world as it exists. Indeed, the metaphor—and, by extension, the poem or the novel—must be true to the world; the poetic vision must *embody* the metaphysical vision.

One of the implications of this for Warren is that his approach to literature, both as a poet and as a critic, is anything but ahistorical. History plays such an important role in his metaphysics that, as Charlotte Beck has said, he "was bent toward a persistent historicism in everything that he wrote" (5). Indeed, in "A Poem of Pure Imagination," his long essay on Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* Warren writes that no poem can be completely understood solely on the basis of form, as important as form is to him. "The application of the criterion of internal consistency cannot be made in a vacuum," he writes, arguing that the critic should consult "the intellectual, the spiritual climate of the age in which the poem was composed," as well as the author's other literary work and the author's thought as available through "nonartistic sources" (*New* 397). This approach certainly runs counter to the common generalizations about the New Critics' literary philosophy, and it legitimizes Warren for many contemporary critics, as Beck's *Robert Penn Warren, Critic* both argues and evidences by its very existence.

And yet Warren's common ground with contemporary literary studies should not be overemphasized. While it is not hard to imagine that there are any number of critics in the academy today who would find much to agree with in Warren's approach to literature, some undoubtedly would not. Fred R. Thiemann has argued that Warren's concept of the

[10] I read all of the poems in the *Islands of Summer* cycle as having the same speaker because of a preponderance of recurring images and themes between them.

self, with all of its teleological implications, especially opposes the poststructuralist strain of contemporary literary theory. He argues, citing examples from Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lacan, and others that "[w]hatever differences they have among themselves, poststructuralist thinkers agree that the human self is an illusion created by the structure of language, an illusion which always supports some oppressive power structure" (84). Such a position is not necessarily at odds with Warren's linking of literature with the creation of selfhood; the difference, of course, is that where Warren sees this as edifying, theorists with poststructuralist leanings would see it as pernicious.

What ultimately sets Warren at odds with this influential strain of literary theory is the centrality of his avowed humanistic metaphysics to his aesthetics, and this, I argue, is precisely what makes his position useful, both to the establishment of academic literary studies and to the general reading public. I do not believe that all contemporary scholars of literature find metaphysics to be a completely empty category, and the fact that there is a general reading public—non-specialists who actually read literature as opposed to avoiding it as potentially oppressive—shows that people do find value in literature. The distinction that Warren's view brings to the surface here, between those that view literature as necessarily oppressive and those who view it as at least potentially edifying in a teleologically meaningful sense, I argue, is an important one. Attention to it can and should begin conversations over the denial of the metaphysical implications of literature implicit in much of contemporary literary theory.

Chapter 2: Wendell Berry and the Place of Literature

Wendell Berry is not widely known as a literary critic. Those familiar with his work are much more likely to know him as a novelist, poet, and essayist on such issues as ecology, farming, and conservation. Still, he has written two full books, *Standing by Words* (1983) and *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford* (2011), along with numerous other essays about literature. It is my argument here that his work on literature is worthy of more attention because his view of literature, like his view of ecology, is eminently and urgently practical. Because he is concerned with questions of metaphysics, Berry is able to establish a clear definition of the proper function of literature that has much to offer the general reading public and, therefore, academic literary scholars.

Religion, Propriety, and Place: Berry's Metaphysics

Indeed, Berry rarely talks about poetry without referring to metaphysics. In "Poetry and Place," the long central essay of *Standing by Words*, he writes, "I believe that at the source of our [Western] poetry is the idea that poetry must be used for something, must serve something, greater and higher than itself. It is a way to learn, know, celebrate, and remember the truth—or, as Yeats said, to 'Bring the soul of man to God'" (112). In no uncertain terms, Berry here affirms the centrality of metaphysics to literature, and literature's edifying role of making metaphysics immediate to the reader. Like his fellow Kentuckian Robert Penn Warren, Berry sees the truth as the ultimate concern of literature. For Berry, however, that "truth" is, at its root, a religious one.

Berry identifies himself as a Protestant Christian, and in essays such as "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," he argues that, at least in the West, a revitalized Christian tradition can perhaps heal the destruction of creation and the indelibly linked destruction

of human community. He vehemently opposes the wide-scale complicity of Christians in the destructive practices of industrial capitalism and thus distinguishes "biblical instruction" and "allegedly respectable Christian behavior," taking up the issue of whether Christianity is "dismissible" on the grounds of the obvious historical discrepancy between them:

> We could simply dismiss it, along with the twenty centuries of unsatisfactory history attached to it . . . . The problem emerges only when we ask, Where then would we turn for instruction? We might . . . turn to another religion . . . . Buddhism, for example, is certainly a religion that could guide us toward a right respect for the natural world, our fellow humans, and our fellow creatures. . . . But there are an enormous number of people—and I am one of them—whose native religion, for better or worse, is Christianity. . . . We can turn away from it or against it, but that will only bind us tightly to a reduced version of it. A better possibility is that this, our native religion, should survive and renew itself so that it may become as largely and truly instructive as we need it to be. On such a survival and renewal of the Christian religion may depend the survival of the Creation that is its subject. (*Sex* 95-6)

This is no easy fundamentalism. It is even possible that Berry's view here is open to criticism on legitimate Christian grounds; it is one thing to say that one is a Christian because one happened to be born in a place where the "native religion" is Christianity, and another thing entirely to claim Christianity because one believes it is the truest, most comprehensive metaphysics. Whether Berry's localism trumps his commitment to

Christianity is not, however, the main concern of this project. It will be enough to note that his writing, as will become apparent, is full of recourse to the Bible and traditional Christian texts, which suggests that he does in fact view the major doctrinal claims of Christianity as true. And, more to the point, unlike Warren, who argues that modern Western society must devote itself to a humanistic replacement for Christianity, Berry argues that it must recover and revitalize Christianity as its guiding metaphysics.

It is important to note, along these lines, that his deference to Buddhism in the passage quoted above is not the result of what most today would understand as pluralism. He certainly respects and values other religious traditions throughout his work, but in his essay "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community" he explicitly opposes a postmodern pluralism based on any "easy assumption that all cultures are equal or of equal value and capable of surviving together by tolerance." Here he is arguing against an egalitarianism that insists on relativizing every culture's metaphysics, which is not to say that he opposes all kinds of equality: "The idea of equality is a good one, so long as it means 'equality before the law'"(*Sex* 172). The point is that legal equality is something altogether different from saying that two individuals' or two cultures' claims as to the truth are necessarily equal, which we can only say if we take the truth to be unavailable or nonexistent. Indeed, Berry makes this distinction explicitly: "If I merely tolerate my neighbors on the assumption that all of us are equal, that means I can take no interest in the questions of which ones of us are right and which ones are wrong" (173).

To be sure, casting egalitarianism and tolerance in the light that he does here may seem off-putting to some. But his suggestions as to the replacements for these terms are sane enough: "In order to survive, a plurality of true communities would require not

egalitarianism and tolerance but knowledge, an understanding of the necessity of local differences, and respect. Respect, I think, always implies imagination—the ability to see one another, across our inevitable differences, as living souls" (173). Indeed, it is both possible and desirable that people who have different views of the truth approach one another in mutual respect as opposed to merely tolerating one another. And it may be that only on the grounds Berry lays out will people be able to have authentic, productive conversations about the truth.

In Berry's view, such conversations are absolutely necessary, as the pursuit of the truth as such is essential to all areas of his thinking—religious, ecological, economic, and literary. In the essay "Standing by Words," Berry outlines a teleological view of the relationship between humans and nature, which he describes as "a system of nested systems: the individual human within the family within the community within agriculture within nature," which he says is "perhaps an updated, ecological version of the Great Chain of Being" (*Standing* 46-7). The "system of systems" is hierarchical in that the interests of the smaller systems must be held accountable to those of the larger systems in order for health and harmony to exist. There must, therefore, be a guiding principle for this accountability, and, Berry argues, "There is no reliable standard for behavior anywhere within the system of systems except truth. Lesser standards produce destruction—as, for example, the standards of public relations make gibberish of language" (48). Without reference to truth, standards become self-serving and oppressive. Truth, however, is only partly knowable to humans, which means that "the system of systems is enclosed within mystery." If there is to be a reliable metaphysics supporting the teleological ethics of the system of systems, then, it must acknowledge that "the system of systems has to be

controlled from above and outside" (48-9). It must, in other words, involve faith in an ineffable order that transcends and yet sustains the natural order of creation.

Berry's account of faith in "Poetry and Place" is instructive here. He sees the rupture of modernity, which he locates around the time of Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility," as unduly separating reason and faith. In his view , however, Milton's sensibility is less dissociated than Dryden's: "Dryden's understanding of faith tends to set it apart from reason, as if the two occupied separate spheres. But Spenser and Milton saw the two spheres as concentric, that of reason being smaller and properly subordinate to that of faith" (*Standing* 140). The modern separation of reason from faith, he argues, takes part in a related "series of dichotomies—faith and work, spirit and flesh, mind and body, Heaven and earth, thought and action, management and labor, poets and executives—that are ruinous in both directions" (134). What makes this separation destructive is the fact that, while it certainly exists in theory, usually to the detriment of faith, it cannot exist in practice. The empiricist's faith in the ultimate epistemological authority of science or the technologist's faith in the beneficence of technological progress, after all, "is just as much a 'faith' as belief in the existence or beneficence of God." And the flip side of this coin is that "these faiths, which are assuredly not empirical, nevertheless have empirical results" (135).

Hence Berry's preference for faith in a "divine authority" that is "both spiritual and moral, requiring humans, if they are to *be* humans, to preserve two kinships, one with God and one with their fellow creatures in nature" (140). Indeed, Berry's argument for faith in a religious metaphysics rests at least partially on the fact that the empirical results of humans' faith in things like the beneficence of technological progress and positivist science have been destructive both to humans and to our "fellow creatures." Belief in a God who

created humans in his own image ultimately entails an account of the telos of the human that necessitates a *preservation* of humanity's connection both to God and creation. Ecologists, Berry argues, have at least partially grasped this: "The second of these kinships is the concern, in our time, of ecologists, and of others who wish to place their work under the rule of ecological health." Still, as he must, he remarks, "Whether the second kinship can thrive apart from the first is a question we will probably be forced to ask" (140).

This drive for preservation that comes from the religious dimension of Berry's metaphysics leads to his deep concern for propriety, which is the foundation of his ethical thought. He defines propriety in "Poetry and Place" as a consideration of "who and where we are, *what* we should do, and *how* we should do it" (140). In *Life is a Miracle* (2000), he devotes a whole chapter to propriety, where he emphasizes its ethical implications—and its ecological necessity—in modern society:

> The idea of propriety makes an issue of the fittingness of our conduct to our place or circumstances, even to our hopes. It acknowledges the always pressing realities of context and of influence . . . . Our life inescapably affects other lives, which inescapably affect our life. We are being measured, in other words, by a standard we did not make and cannot destroy. It is by that standard, and only by that standard, that we know we are in crisis in our relationship to nature. (13)

It is easy to see what Berry has in mind here. Climate change, pollution, deforestation, species extinction, and other ecological disasters that are and will increasingly be a concern for people who care to know the truth about our current state do indeed result from a lack of human propriety as Berry defines it. I can think of no better way to evaluate our

civilization's decision to stake a global economy on the continued availability of fossil fuels, the burning of which is changing our climate in ways that threaten all life on earth, than to deem it a failure to consider the "fittingness of our conduct to our place or circumstances." Thus, the "standards we did not make and cannot destroy," in one sense, are the natural limits of ecological health, the standards by which life on earth can subsist. In another sense, however, these standards are divinely imposed.

Later in "Poetry and Place" Berry returns to the premodern concept of the Chain of Being, which, he argues, gives a comprehensive basis for propriety:

> We are obviously subject to something we do not understand—why else would we be making so many mistakes? What the old believers in the Chain of Being have to say to us is that if we conceive ourselves as the subjects of God, whose law is in part the law of nature, then there is some hope that we can right ourselves and behave with decency within the community of creatures. We will be spared the clumsiness, waste, and grave danger of trying to make up our own rules. (*Standing* 150)

Propriety in its fullest sense, then, must base itself in a divinely ordered teleological hierarchy.

Here Berry's concept of *place* comes into focus. Indeed, propriety can only exist in relation to a place, which for Berry designates a location that "is not just social and geographical" but also "hierarchical." Place is "both horizontal and vertical" in the sense one's location in physical space and in the "system of systems" or Chain of Being—in relation to nature and God—should dictate the purpose and the limits of one's actions. Place, then, is the indispensable basis for propriety: "How you act *should* be determined,

and the consequences of your acts *are* determined, by where you are." An act marked by impropriety "might violate local conditions or mores, or it might usurp divine prerogative," and, by the same logic, "[n]ot knowing where you are, you can make mistakes of the utmost seriousness: you can lose your soul or your soil, your life or your way home" (*Standing* 117).

Of course, Berry's critics, and even some of his supporters, express grave qualms over his notion of place as a limiting principle of human action. Katey Castellano, in an otherwise favorable account of what she calls Berry's "Romantic conservatism" remarks that "Berry's desire to conserve tradition and environment . . . is open to charges of being hierarchical," a concern which she links with his "unapologetic Christian views" (86). As I have shown above, there can be no question that Berry's metaphysics, and therefore his attitude toward tradition and the environment, indeed *are* hierarchical, and explicitly so. Gary Davenport, in a review of *Standing by* Words, offers a more pointed critique of Berry's recourse to the Chain of Being to support his concept of place: "He is at great pains to show how this concept arises organically from his view of nature—and in fact he is successful up to a point. But his attempt to expand the notion of *place* in the geographical sense to include a hierarchical sense as well . . . forces him into an acceptance of authority that is sure to seem rigid and arbitrary to most modern readers" (113). What we hear behind Castellano's trepidation and Davenport's explicit critique is the question of how useful hierarchical thought can be in a time when such thought has ostensibly been rejected. Part of the answer, I think, is that hierarchy, unfavorable as the word may sound, is unavoidable. Even relativism involves hierarchy in that it assumes its deflation of traditional metanarratives is superior to those metanarratives, and does so, we might add, by faith.

Still, Davenport's suggestion that hierarchical thinking will surely seem "rigid" to most readers reveals the deeper concern that openly-embraced hierarchy leads to oppression, which it no doubt has in many instances. Berry, of course, recognizes this problem: "It is certainly true that human hierarchies that are inflexible or arbitrary or oppressive are evil. The best of American and other national histories has been made in opposition to that kind of hierarchy; one of the best human traits is the impulse to resist it" (*Standing* 148). The point Berry makes is that there are metaphysical hierarchies above human hierarchies that are *not* arbitrary. And while it is true that Berry's insistence on a divine ordering of metaphysical hierarchy may remain unconvincing to many of his readers, it is hard to imagine that even these readers would have much of a problem with his insistence that human concerns must be in many ways subordinated to ecological concerns if we hope to survive. Furthermore, those who, like Warren and Gardner, argue for a humanistic metaphysics will certainly find plenty to agree with in Berry's insistence on the need for a preserving propriety of human action.

Propriety in Place: Literature as Preserving Culture

It is of the utmost importance to Berry that humans gain and preserve knowledge of their respective places and of ways of acting with propriety within them. Humans are able to do this, he argues, through the development and sustenance of culture. As for Eliot culture is the incarnation of religion, for Berry culture is the way humans put their knowledge of place into practice, the way they make their *logos* flesh. But for Berry, more so than for Eliot, culture cannot be understood apart from community. In "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community," Berry defines community as follows:

> By community I mean the commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living together in a place and wishing to continue to do so. To put it another way, community is a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy, and local nature. (Community . . . is an idea that can extend itself beyond the local, but it only does so metaphorically. The idea of a national or global community is meaningless apart from the realization of local communities.) (*Sex* 119-20).

Like Warren, Berry holds his idea of a community up against the modern notion of a society wherein basic needs are met by mechanistic means. But while Warren in *Democracy and Poetry* and elsewhere implies that the establishment of "common values" might transform an entire society into an authentic community, Berry insists that authentic community must be local and particular. For Berry, in other words, one of the common values that make a society a community must be the common interest among the people of a particular place in surviving and flourishing in that place.

Of course, the community Berry has in mind is the small farming community. It is not an overstatement to say that in Berry' view the only healthy society—both culturally and ecologically—is one wherein the primary economic base is agrarian and is, thus, made up primarily of small farming communities. In "People, Land, and Community," Berry reasons that because "[h]uman community is virtually synonymous with good farming, and good farming obviously must outlast the life of any good farmer," any individual farmer who expects his or her farm to last for more than just his or her lifetime must be part of a local community of "people who know each other, who understand their mutual dependences, and who place a proper value on good farming" (*Standing* 72). As the

community continues its work in its place over time, culture develops: "In its cultural aspect, the community is an order of memories preserved consciously in instructions, songs, and stories, and both consciously and unconsciously in *ways*. A healthy culture holds preserving knowledge *in place* for a *long* time" (73). For Berry, the function of culture is thus to preserve—to maintain and nurture not just human life, but also the places in which humans live and on which human life depends. Culture, then, is the accumulation of the directing and limiting of human action that a community develops over time to ensure that its members continue to act with propriety. There is, of course, something similar to Warren's concept of the self—the individual in proper alignment with the ethical implications of both history and the present community—at play here. Indeed, Berry's definition of culture is dependent on that culture's development over time, "generation after generation," so that successive generations may learn "the visions and failures, stories and songs, names, ways, and skills of their elders, so that the costs of individual trial-and-error learning can be lived with and repaid" (*Standing* 100).

In Berry's view, culture thus includes everything from farming practices to local mores to, of course, literature. In "Poetry and Place," Berry speaks of poetry as "a part of the necessary cultural means by which we preserve our union, the possibility of harmony, with the natural world and 'higher law'" (186). Of course, this statement is in a different register than his definition of culture in "People, Land, and Community" as a way of preserving a community in a geographical place, as it stresses poetry's role in preserving humans' metaphysical place in a hierarchy. As I shall address later on, Berry does, in fact, see literature as serving a role in a local geographical place as well as a hierarchical place. For now, though, it will be enough to stress that these dual axes of place for Berry are

inseparable; a preserving relationship with the hierarchical axis will lead to a preserving relationship to the geographical axis: "If one knows where one is in the hierarchical, the vertical, order, then one can *see* where one is in the horizontal order, in the world, and one can attain seemly competences of whereabouts" (163).

Thus, when Berry remarks earlier in "Poetry and Place" that poetry "is a way to learn, know, celebrate, and remember the truth," what he means by "truth" is the metaphysical vision by which we know our place(s) and from which we learn to act with propriety in them. Poetry that rehearses this vision and makes it immediate, for Berry, is both beautiful and edifying. Poetry that rejects or occludes it is unseemly and pernicious. He makes this case and elaborates on it by extensively examining the work of major poets in the Western literary tradition, praising poets who hold the individual accountable to the larger concerns of place, and criticizing those who, like the Romantics and some Modernists, assert the absolute autonomy of the individual and, therefore, the individual poem.

Milton, for one, provides Berry with an especially interesting test case for poetry's role in preserving the place of the human in that *Paradise Lost*, he argues, both beautifully rehearses the need for propriety and contains a "momentous flaw" wherein Milton oversteps the bounds of propriety (*Standing* 114). "*Paradise Lost* is written in praise of this hierarchical order [of place], which Satan violates by pride and then causes Eve to violate by pride," he argues (118). Still, he states early on that the value of the poem, which he thinks is immense, is qualified by Milton's own pride in Book III, where the poet takes us into heaven: "[Milton] allowed his artistic pride to carry his inward vision or imagination directly into heaven, and so was forced to bring God on stage *in person*, not as inscrutable

mystery and power . . . but as a heroic king conversing in Homeric dialogue with the Son" (118-9). This is a breach of propriety because it depicts God the Father as a person, as a "voluble discourser" who insists on informing the Son of His omnipotence, whereas "[t]he *revealed* God of the Bible is never more than partially revealed and is therefore not reduced to the scale or the comprehension of the mortals to whom He is revealing Himself." The result, Berry says, is that the passages depicting heaven, while they "contain some magnificent verse," ultimately "are not believable" (119).

More than that, Milton ironically "condemned this sort of pride and condemns it explicitly in . . . Book VIII" (118). Berry here refers to Raphael's admonishment of Adam: "Heav'n is for thee too high / To know what passes there; be lowly wise" (qtd. in Berry 118). And it is this thematic strand of *Paradise Lost* that Berry praises as most valuable, as it rightly shows that disobedience amounts to a destructive impropriety with regard to place. In Satan's "inordinate desire" to "be God" and in Adam and Eve's fall to the Satanic temptation to "be as Gods," Berry argues, the poem teaches us that "[t]o disobey is to break out of the human place in the order of Creation." The cultural significance of *Paradise Lost*, then, is its teaching that "the meaning of obedience rests upon natural order, and that the natural order in one of its aspects is moral and hierarchical: the Chain of Being. To obey is to remain steadfastly in the human place in the Chain of Being" (127).

Berry argues throughout "Poetry and Place" that the iterations of The Chain of Being in Western poetry from the *Divine Comedy* to *Paradise Lost* and even up through Pope's *Essay on Man* are what make such poetry culturally valuable even today. However, he does argue, along the lines of Eliot's dissociation of sensibility though perhaps in a different register, that in *Paradise Lost* we see the beginning of what would become a major

breakdown of Western culture. When Eve contemplates not giving the fruit to Adam in order to maintain a superiority over him and then quickly rejects this idea, Berry argues that "the most significant thing in this passage, so far as the history of culture is concerned, is the fleeting equation of superiority—of *intellectual* superiority—with freedom" (128). While Berry gives Milton credit for recognizing and refuting this, he says that it shows us that "by Milton's time, it had become possible to imagine—perhaps impossible *not* to imagine—a mind to which this equation would be a creed, for Eve's rejection is but the countermovement to Satan's boast in Book I that 'the mind is its own place . . .'" (128). A mind that sees itself as free of the Chain of Being, as having no proper place but the place it dictates for itself, is destined to live without regard to propriety, which is to say destructively:

> As it has developed from an imagined possibility in Milton's time to the romantic rebellion of the nineteenth century to the commonplace of self-centeredness that it has become by now, the mind has shaped itself less on the wish rejected by Eve than on the desperate boast of Satan: though it has sometimes made a cause and a shibboleth of human 'equality,' it has consistently asserted its superiority to its circumstances, whether of the human condition or the natural world. . . . In one of its aspects, this is the mind of the exploiters of the 'unknown,' from Cortes and Pizarro down to the scientists of nuclear energy, genetic engineering, space conquest, and war in our own day. In another of its aspects, it is the romantic Puritanism of Shelley. And these aspects are not so far apart as one might believe. (128-9)

When individuals or groups presume to break (as opposed to adapt) the cultural restraints that hold them in their places, destruction—both of the natural world and of humans and human communities—ensues. As Berry indicates here, poetry has all too often followed in the footsteps of the imperialists, exploiters, and irresponsible "innovators." When it does this, it no longer fulfills its proper cultural role of preservation of the human place: "One cannot divide one's mind from its earthly place . . . without denying the mind's care to the earthly place" (167).

Indeed, Shelley, apart from a few deferential remarks regarding his poetic skill, receives a harsh, but justified, flow of invective from Berry in "Poetry in Place." No doubt, his identification with Milton's Satan is something of a softball for Berry's particular line of critique. While Berry acknowledges that Shelley's error is in part due to the fact that Milton's God does seem like a tyrant, he argues that Shelley completely misses "the poem's traditional idea of order with one hand, and, with the other, makes nothing of Milton's struggle with the problems of authority and obedience," making *Paradise Lost* "much less useful and instructive than it is" (165). More importantly, though, "Shelley's identification of (and with) Satan as a hero generalizes the principle of rebellion beyond any issue," which is certainly problematic in Berry's view of the human place in the hierarchy of the Chain of Being. Shelley, he says, advocates "a kind of ultimate protestantism. *Any* authority or superiority is seen as an occasion to rebel and overthrow" (166).

Berry further argues that Shelley's view of the supreme authority of the mind results, both in theory in *A Defense of Poetry* and in practice in his own poetry, in an "insistence upon dividing imagination from reason, giving poetry to imagination." Indeed, Berry balks at Shelley's insistence that imaginative language "has reference to thoughts

alone," remarking, "Once imagination is divided from reason and from the material world, it loses its power over them; it loses, or begins to lose, even its power to refer to them" (168). This becomes clear, Berry shows, in Shelley's *Epipsychidion*, wherein the poet bemoans his inability to consummate his love for "the Noble and Unfortunate Lady Emilia V—" because of his marriage. The cascade of epithets in praise of this Emilia in the poem's beginning, wherein Shelley refers to her as everything from a "High, spirit-winged Heart" to "a lute," Berry argues, ultimately is a mark of an imaginative language divided from reason—a language that fails to designate anything specific: "The critical point to be made here is that after so much effort, we do not know dependably a single thing about the history, the appearance, or the character of the unfortunate Emilia" (169-70). Berry amplifies this point in his final judgment of the poem, arguing, "The egotism of the poem is omnivorous. The lady, one feels, is only fodder. Shelley exalts, idealizes, deifies her—the better to envelop her in the mist of his self-exalting emotion. She is never in any sense *presented* in the poem, which only tells us how grandly Shelley feels about her" (173). The poem, then, falls mightily short of Berry's standards because of its principled violation of propriety. Shelley's mind is very clearly its own place here—his individual thoughts and feelings and their flowering in his imagination are much more important than their subject. It is no wonder, as Berry goes on to recognize, that the poem involves Shelley's repudiation of marriage—a cultural institution which, like poetry, is intended to preserve humans and their places in that it places bounds on human sexuality that preserve both family relations and community relations.

Berry's criticism of Shelley echoes his similar criticism of Auden, which opens "Poetry and Place." Indeed, Berry situates the entire essay as a refutation of Auden's claim,

in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," that "poetry makes nothing happen"—the very claim that Warren renounces at the end of *Democracy and Poetry*. Berry argues that Auden's poem "lacks decorum"—a term he uses elsewhere interchangeably with "propriety"—because "[i]t is not fitting to its subject" (108). Especially egregious is the "self-conscious and presumptuous modernity" Auden betrays by characterizing Yeats's death as a power outage: "The squares of his mind were empty, / Silence invaded the suburbs, / The current of his feeling failed" (qtd. in Berry 108). Indeed, lines like these, along with Auden's proclamation that poetry makes nothing happen do seem oddly out of place given the poem's ostensible purpose of honoring Yeats. For Berry, of course, this is symptomatic of the same division with which he charges Shelley—the division of the mind and, therefore, the poem from its place. "The poem, the 'art object,' is preferred to its subject. It proposes to exist for its own sake" (110). The poem's concluding lines, "In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise," while they seem to designate that poetry has a purpose outside of itself, are unsatisfactorily vague in Berry's estimation ("But praise *what*? and *why*?") and thus fail to justify the existence of Auden's poem (107). The idea that a poem could exist for its own sake, Berry goes on to argue, is not only false but perniciously so in that it proposes, like Shelley does, an unhealthy division between "words and acts, words and things, poems and effects" that rehearses a division of the human from both aspects of place, setting the stage for Satanic impropriety and the destruction that follows. When poets assume that poetry is divorced from the realms of practical and ethical consequence, Berry argues, we see exactly this kind of degradation.

Berry offers this line of questions for poems that, divorced from the realms of practical and ethical consequence, assume "autonomy":

> But this would make them anomalous, unique in all creation. What else exists for its own sake? What else would want to? Or to put it less affectively, what, having had a cause, can in the nature of things avoid becoming itself a cause? How, once a thing exists, can it be prevented from having an effect? How, once its inevitable power as a cause is granted, can its effect avoid being either bad or good? And how, if there is no conscious effort to make it good, can it avoid being bad? (111)

The idea of "art for art's sake," Berry is arguing, is inherently false. Poems *do* have consequences, even poems that were written with no other purpose in mind but to "accredit their makers as 'poets'" (112). Furthermore, he is insisting that because poems necessarily have effects, they can certainly be judged, like all other human acts, in ethical terms. If culture and poetry as an element thereof are properly understood as ways "to learn, know, celebrate, and remember the truth" of the human place in a hierarchical metaphysics, a shirking of the responsibility to serve this purpose by removing poetry from any relationship to the world of action is indeed, in the truest sense of the word, *decadent*.

To more fully examine the assumptions behind Berry's distaste for the idea of "art for art's sake," and to begin to sketch his vision for what, specifically, a decorous, culturally edifying poetry looks lie, it will be instructive to turn briefly to the work of the Perennialist philosopher Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, a key influence on Berry's thought. In works like *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art* (published posthumously in 1956), Coomaraswamy purveys what he calls a "normal, traditional, and orthodox view of art," which he argues existed perennially in traditional, meaning religious and pre-industrial, societies as diverse as those of the Native Americans and Medieval Europe (61). Like Berry, Coomaraswamy

argues that the idea of autonomous art—art divorced from use—is false and dangerous: "[T]he whole doctrine of art for art's sake, and the whole business of 'collecting' and the 'love of art' are no more than a sentimental aberration and means of escape from the serious business of life" (94). It is important to recognize here that term "art" for Coomaraswamy (and, following his lead, for Berry as well) describes not a category of object but rather the means by which objects are properly made: "art is the making well, or properly arranging, of anything whatever that needs to be made or arranged, whether a statuette . . . or garden" (89). A central tenet of his philosophy, then, is that the distinction modern Western civilization makes between works of "fine art" and objects manufactured for use is not present in the traditional view. "In our traditional view of art," he says, "there is no essential distinction of a fine and useless art from a utilitarian craftsmanship. There is no distinction in principle of orator from carpenter, but only a distinction of things well and truly made from things not so made" (27). This dissolution of the divide between fine and useful art in Coomaraswamy's philosophy carries with it the corollary that every work of art, from seemingly mundane objects like furniture to seemingly "finer" works such as poems, both fulfills a utilitarian purpose and communicates meaning. "From the stone age onwards," Coomaraswamy argues regarding traditional cultures, "everything made by man, under whatever conditions of hardship or poverty, has been made by art to serve a double purpose, at once utilitarian and ideological" (92). This "ideological" function is to rehearse both the object's and its user's position—or, in Berry's terms, *place*—within the traditional society's metaphysics. "[T]he art of a traditional society expresses throughout its range the governing ideology of the group, " he says, noting that "[t]he transubstantiation of the artefact had its inevitable corollary in a transformation of the man himself." Thus, for

Coomaraswamy, the "sensitive worshiper" in a traditional Christian society does not see a crucifix simply as an object of beauty but instead "feels its power, and is actually moved to take up his own cross" (80-1).

Art, in Coomaraswamy's view, is necessarily *placed* within a metaphysics and involves not only helping humans make the things they need for subsistence but also helping them remember their place. Thus, it is no surprise that Berry adopts Coomaraswamy's view explicitly in "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" to help answer the question of how humans should use the things of creation to make the things that they need. Indeed, Berry amplifies Coomaraswamy's argument by saying that the way any society—traditional or industrial—uses the creation to make what it needs reflects its metaphysical vision, whether that vision true or false: "If we understand that no artist—no maker—can work except by reworking the works of Creation, then we see that by our work we reveal what we think of the works of God" (*Sex* 109). All work, in other words, has both a utilitarian and a metaphysical significance, and if it is to be harmonious work, the former must be subordinated to the latter. This means that, if humans keep both significances in mind in their work—if they in fact work by a healthy, traditional "art"—they will necessarily seek to honor both of them: "Traditionally, the arts have been ways of making that have placed a just value on their materials or subjects, on the uses and the users of the things made by art, and on the artists themselves. They have, that is, been ways of giving honor to the works of God." It follows that "the artistic traditions understood every art primarily as a skill or craft and ultimately as a service to fellow creatures and to God" (112). It matters immensely, then, that the artist perform his or her art—whether this be farming or poetry—well: "There is no material or subject in Creation that in using, we are

excused from using well; there is no work in which we are excused from being able and responsible artists" (113).

To be an able or responsible artist, Berry claims, is to be technically proficient at the specific art, preserved by traditional culture, by which one uses the things of creation to make things for human subsistence and edification. "An artist's first duty, according to this view," he says, "is technical" (112). Poetry, of course, is no exception. Berry makes this explicit in "Poetry and Place," remarking, "Poetry's artificiality, its technical and formal difficulty . . . will prevent us from presuming upon and abusing the source. The source of poetry, like the sources of all other domestic goods, is not our own. To draw upon it without falsifying or destroying it, we must become worthy of it" (*Standing* 192-3). This source, Berry argues by citing the tradition of invocations to the muse, is "inspiration," which is similar to what Warren, in "Knowledge and the Image of Man," calls "the deep engagement of the spirit of the world"—the as-yet unarticulated apprehension of the truth. And the technique of form, for Berry as for Warren, is what chastens and orders this apprehension, what makes the poet worthy of it.

Indeed, form for Berry is at least in part what differentiates poetry from other kinds of language. In "Poetry and Marriage," the essay that precedes "Poetry and Place" in *Standing by Words*, Berry compares the form of poetry to the "form" of marriage, pointing out that both forms necessarily involve limitation; just as a married couple limits their love to one another, renouncing the possibility and the freedom of sexual relationships with other people, the poet likewise commits him or herself to certain limits: "Poetry is made of words; it is expected to keep a certain fidelity to everyday speech and a certain fidelity to music; if it is unspeakable or unmusical, it is not poetry" (93). And yet these limits,

paradoxically, are what open poetry up to the possibility of inspiration. While Berry allows that a "set verse form can, of course, be used like a cookie cutter or a shovel, including and excluding arbitrarily by its own rule," he also argues that, used rightly, it "can be used also to summon into a poem . . . its unforeseen belongings and thus is not rigid but freeing—an invocation to unknown possibility" (96). Just as marriage, in the traditional and Christian sense, makes the couple worthy of sexuality and prepares them for the "unknown possibility" of a life together, poetic form prepares the way for a coherent vision of metaphysical truth.

Furthermore, form connects the poet to a vital and continuing tradition. "Part of the nature of a form seems to be that it is communal—that it can be bequeathed and inherited, that it can be taught, not as an instance (a relic), but as a way still usable," Berry argues, connecting poetic form to his idea of culture as the set of ways by which a community preserves "both itself and its natural place" (99, 100). When Spenser tells Chaucer that he intends to "follow here the footing of thy feete" in *The Faerie Queen*, Berry argues, he is acknowledging a "filial" relationship in a living tradition, following Chaucer's form not simply to "obey an arbitrarily imposed technical requirement" but to preserve "his place in his cultural lineage" (95). Berry certainly allows that forms must change to accommodate new situations and new subjects, so long as such change is "by necessity" or a kind of "adaptation" as opposed to "contrived change, or novelty" for its own sake (102). And he goes on to allow that new forms, such as Whitman's free verse, are perhaps necessary in order to grapple with new kinds of subjects (in Whitman's case, the newness of the American experience) (104). Still, form in Berry's view is a way a poem preserves a coherence with a cultural tradition, and, as in Warren's view, it connects both the poet and

the reader to the past. "Forms join the diverse things that they contain," he argues, "they join their contents and their context; they join us to themselves; they join us to each other; they join writers and readers; they join generations together, the young and the old, the living and the dead." For a poet, this means that "the mastery of poetic form" is "an entrance into a timeless community" (105).

And yet, there is another dimension of form in Berry's view that is perhaps even more important. At the end of "Poetry and Marriage," Berry argues that because different kinds of forms, such as poetry and marriage, share the purpose of "joining," they "tend to be analogues of each other and to resonate with one another" (105). Thus, poetic form resonates with the harmonious, hierarchical "system of systems" that comprises metaphysical reality, which is itself a form, albeit an inscrutable one. He writes in "The Responsibility of the Poet":

> By its formal integrity a poem reminds us of the formal integrity of other works, creatures, and structures of the world. The form of a good poem is, in a way perhaps not altogether explainable or demonstrable, an analogue of the forms of other things. By its form it alludes to other forms, evokes them, resonates with them, and so becomes a part of the system of analogies or harmonies by which we live. Thus the poet affirms and collaborates in the formality of Creation. (*What* 89)

This is, of course, remarkably similar to Warren's view of poetic form as a "myth of order"—a participation in and an elucidation of the metaphysical order that transcends and yet contains it.

It may seem odd on the surface that William Carlos Williams, given his antipathy for traditional form, would gain such a high place in Berry's thought about the role of literature as to warrant the publication of 2011's *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford*, the only book he has devoted to a concerted study of a single writer. In this book, Berry finds himself forced to reconcile his reverence for Williams with his view of form as tying one to a vital cultural tradition. He does this in much the same way as he makes a place in his thought for Whitman. Williams, even more than Whitman, found himself in a place—the suburb of Rutherford, New Jersey, which was quickly being overtaken and urbanized by industrial New York—that had no vital cultural tradition and yet badly needed one. "If we bear in mind Williams' pressing need for a language and a poetry adequate to the 'mass of detail' that he faced daily in his chosen place, it is in no way surprising that he rejected the traditional prosody of English verse," Berry argues. Because "the traditional forms of lines and stanzas stood obstructively between him and the experience he was trying to get at," the experience of a "provincial" place being industrialized out of authentic existence, "[t]he adequate forms would have to be invented—a hardship that Williams conscientiously chose" (118). Thus, while Williams could not work with traditional English verse forms, he had to devote himself to fitting new forms to his place. His place, Berry argues, thus actually serves as a kind of form: "Williams' commitment to life and practice in his 'province' is formative and a kind of form" (130).

This is an extreme example of the need he allows in "Poetry and Marriage" for "adaptation" of form to new circumstances. And, indeed, Berry uses the word "adaptation" to describe Williams' work, and to demonstrate why it is so central to his own. Williams,

Berry argues, was concerned with "local adaptation," which he says is "an issue of history, culture, and geography to which poetry is subordinate though necessary" and "has everything to do with discovering where one is in relation to one's place (native or chosen), to its natural and human neighborhood, to its mystery and sanctity, and with discovering right ways of living and working there" (9). That Williams devoted his life not only to writing poetry but to a medical practice in the "provincial" community of Rutherford makes him a fitting patron saint for Berry, who likewise sees himself as a non-specialist writer and farmer in his provincial community of Port Royal, Kentucky. Furthermore, Berry's praise of Williams' work of local adaptation demonstrates how poetry relates to the geographical—and not just the hierarchical—aspect of Berry's concept of place.

Indeed, in his book on Williams Berry brings his concept of the teleological role of literature to completion. Williams' poetry, Berry argues, aims to fulfill the cultural role he describes elsewhere of enabling a community to preserve itself in its geographical place. It reaches that end, he says, by viewing the place through the *imagination*. Indeed, imagination is as important a term for Berry as it was for Williams. He describes it in this way in "It All Turns on Affection," his 2012 Jefferson Lecture: "To imagine is to see most clearly, familiarly, and understandingly with the eyes, but also to see inwardly, with 'the mind's eye.' It is to see, not passively, but with a force of vision and even with a visionary force. To take it seriously we must give up at once any notion that imagination is disconnected from reality or truth or knowledge." He goes on to argue that the imagination has everything to do with place:

> To have a place, to live and belong in a place, to live from a place without destroying it, we must imagine it. By imagination we see it illuminated by its

> own unique character and by our love for it. By imagination we recognize with sympathy the fellow members, human and nonhuman, with whom we share our place. . . . As imagination enables sympathy, sympathy enables affection. And in affection we find the possibility of a neighborly, kind, and conserving economy. (14)

It is this kind of imagination that Berry praises Williams for exhibiting in his poetry. While he acknowledges that Williams' concept of the imagination is part of a long lineage going back at least to Coleridge and Blake, he argues that Williams' poetry is distinctive because "[t]o Williams . . . the imagination was by definition embodied" (51). Berry latches onto Williams' "Say it! No ideas but in things," arguing that in this famous proclamation "Williams is speaking . . . of embodied ideas. He could have evoked John 1:14 ('and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . .')" (48).

Again, Eliot's definition of culture as the incarnation of religion looms large[11]. The "ideas" Berry sees embodied in Williams's poetry are certainly metaphysical. Berry praises Williams' claim in *Spring and All* that "[t]o refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination" (qtd. in Berry 138), saying, "Imagination is the power to see things in their 'eternal moment' in which, *only* in which, they are real and we are alive. It is this, the convergence of the eternal and

[11] Berry acknowledges, of course, Williams' long-standing disdain for Eliot's cosmopolitanism. Rather than echoing Williams' judgment, however, Berry argues that Eliot and Williams did not differ ideologically as much as some might think. Their differences, he says, stem mainly from the fact that while Eliot "had clothed himself, so to speak, in the English cultural tradition, . . . Williams felt himself naked in New Jersey, confronting and unformed 'mass of detail' and 'the pure products of America [going] crazy'" (125).

the present, that is possible and that is real only in the imagination" (143). Through the imagination, poetry thus allows us to see things—concrete things and, more importantly, concrete places—in their "eternal moment," which includes not only what they presently are (though that as well) but also what they could be:

> Poetry, then, is the means of giving to realizations of the fleeting eternal moment a kind of permanent presence, so that amid the confusions of the ever-accumulating mass of details they can be returned to, not as ends in themselves, I assume, but as reminders of an indispensable possibility, a wakefulness, belonging to the highest definition of our humanity. (143)

As it is for Warren, poetry for Berry is thus a chastened and metaphysically informed vision of the real world. And this vision is indispensable:

> We do not necessarily contradict Blake, who thought that the arts were our way of conversing with Paradise, if we say that they can also be our way of conversing with our earthly places. Blake picked up one end of that string, Williams the other. It is most important, I think, to see that the two ends belong to the same string. What we know of Paradise we learn here, by looking, by vision, by imagination, and both Paradise and the ground underfoot are always beyond the perfect grasp of our arts, as of our sciences. (147)

The two ends of this string, of course, correspond with the two axes of Berry's concept of place. In Berry's view, the right kind of poetry can help the human imagine his or her place in the metaphysical hierarchy of creation, in the material locality of creation, and in the correspondence between the two. This imagination is central to the preservation of place

because it gives us a vision—an eschatological vision, even—of that place both as it is and also of the possibility of that place's improvement or even redemption.

This imaginative vision is also available, Berry argues, in fiction. I have been referring to his work on poetry thus far mainly because he has produced much more of it than he has on fiction, but also because, like Warren, he sees fiction as functioning in roughly the same way as poetry. Indeed, in "Imagination and Place" (2004), he speaks of his own fiction as a way for him to imagine his place, the small farming community of Port Royal, Kentucky, in terms, not only of "[h]ow things really are[12]" but also of "how things will be, how you want things to be, how things ought to be," (14). In other words, in fiction as in poetry the two ends of the imaginative string, Blake's Paradise and Williams' "ground underfoot," are rendered for the reader.

And, indeed, we see this borne out in Berry's fiction. Like Thomas Hardy and William Faulkner, both of whom Berry cites as influences, all of his fiction is set in an imagined place[13]—Port William, Kentucky, which is a thinly-veiled version of his real-life home, Port Royal. This has allowed him, he says in "Imagination in Place," to present a redemptive vision of his own place: "I have made the imagined town of Port William . . . in an attempt to honor the actual place where I have lived. By means of the imagined place, over the last fifty years, I have learned to see my native landscape and neighborhood as a place unique in the world, a work of God, possessed of an inherent sanctity that mocks any human valuation that can be put upon it" (15).

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[12] He makes this remark in reference to what he sees as the inadequacy of "the standard of realism."

[13] I take Berry's adoption of an imagined place, following Hardy's Wessex and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, as the setting for his entire fictional oeuvre to be analogous to his description of Spenser's adaptation of Chaucer's forms to preserve his place in an ongoing "cultural lineage" or poetic tradition.

Nowhere is this more clear than in *Remembering*, a novel originally published in 1988 and then again in 2002 as part of the collection *Three Short Novels*. Indeed, this novel embodies Berry's dual concept of place by depicting protagonist Andy Catlett's struggle with the temptation to abandon his life as a farmer in Port William and its ultimate resolution into a redemptive imagination of his place. (Andy, a writer who moves back home to become a farmer, is Berry's most autobiographical character.) *Remembering* is anomalous in Berry's fiction because most of the story happens away from Port William, following Andy in his travels to present at academic agriculture conferences. In the very pit of his despair—due to a combination of self-pity over the loss of his hand in a farming accident, the resulting estrangement from his wife Flora, and frustration over the trials of being a small farmer in the age of agribusiness—he decides to walk the streets of San Francisco. On his walk, he begins to imagine leaving his wife, his family, and his farm in Port William forever:

> Andy is filled with a yearning toward this place. He imagines himself living here. . . . He would live alone, and slowly he would come to know a peacefulness and gentleness in his own character, having no one to quarrel with. He would have a job that he could walk to in the morning and walk home from in the evening. It would be a job that would pay him well and give him nothing to worry about before he went to it or after he left it. . . . In his travels he would meet beautiful, indolent, slow-speaking women as solitary and independent as himself, who would not wish to know him well. (157)

What Andy is imagining here, of course, is autonomy. By yearning to reject his place in Port William and within his marriage, Andy's mind yearns to be its own place. His imagination, unlike Williams', loses touch with the "ground underfoot."

But after a flood of memories of his ancestors in Port William, he ultimately decides to return. When he does, he finds that his family has gone to visit a nearby neighbor and decides to take a walk in the woods surrounding his farm. On the walk, he lays down, falls asleep, and dreams a much different vision: A "man, dark as shadow" leads him to the top of a hill where he sees "Port William and its countryside as he never saw or dreamed them" in that "[o]ver town and fields one great song sings, and is answered everywhere; every leaf and flower and grass blade sings" (221). Furthermore, he sees the people of the town: "He sees that they are dead, and they are alive. He sees that he lives in eternity as he lives in time, and nothing is lost. Among the people of that town, he sees men and women he remembers, and men and women remembered in memories he remembers, and they do not look as he ever saw or imagined them" (221).

Andy's dream is a Dante-inspired eschatological imagination of the eternal Port William, a Port William alive in connection with its past and with its potential future, if only its members will remain in it and devoted to the preserving work of culture their ancestors have passed to them. This is no pastoral escape, and it is not nostalgia—it is a respect and a love for a place and its possibilities that calls Andy to action in the present: "He would go to them, but another movement of his guide's hand shows him that he must not. He must go no closer. He is not to stay. Grieved as he may be to leave them, he must leave. He *wants* to leave. He must go back with his help, such as it is, and offer it" (221).

We see here that Andy's imagination ties him to his place, as we can assume Berry's does to his, and the enacting of it gives the reader a vision of the possibility of imagining one's place and devoting oneself to it. It is significant, I think, that Andy returns not only to his place but to his marriage. That is, he returns back to an acceptance of limits, to *forms* Berry speaks of elsewhere as analogous to literary form. Before the moment of his decision to return to Port William, he realizes that his first vision—where he imagines leaving the forms of marriage and place as freedom—is empty because it is an abstraction: "All distance is around him, and he wants nothing that he has. All choice is around him, and he knows nothing that he wants" (161). By choosing to return to the forms of his life in Port William, he is able to have the vision on the hilltop, the vision of the possibilities those forms open to him and for which they prepare him.

And his vision, again, shows him that "he lives in eternity as he lives in time"—that he is, in fact, part of the eternal "song" of Port William that connects him to the work of his forebears and the possibility of the future. As John Leax has remarked, "Andy's memory is fruitful, able to shape his return and his future, because it is not merely a personal memory; it is a memory participating in a communal memory that contains him quite apart from his actions. It is always there. His task is to choose it" (70). Andy's choice is to take part in the cultural work of Port William, and the novel's purpose is to help the reader imagine that possibility.

It is this same imagining, and even in some of the same terms, that we find in *The Wheel*, a collection of poems published in 1982. In "The Law That Marries All Things," Berry writes, "In law is rest / if you love the law, / if you enter singing, into it / as the water in its descent." And then:

Or song is truest law,

and you must enter singing;

it has no other entrance.

It is the great chorus

of parts. The only outlawry

is in division. (*New Collected* 284)

This is the same song Andy Catlett sees in his imaginative vision of Port William—the eternal song of creation that joins the dead to the living, the song the living "sing" by taking up the work of the dead in their place. The way to join this song is to work by the art of the dead, to carry on their preserving culture, which allows for a propriety of place.

Berry is speaking of the work of his farming community here, and he is also speaking of the continued cycle of birth and death. "But if a man's life / continue in another man, / then the flesh will rhyme / its part in the immortal song," he writes in "Rising" (277). And in "Letter," he makes this claim of himself: "I pass the thread of my song again / and again through the web of my life / and the lives of the dead before me, / the old resounding in the new" (288). What we come to see here and increasingly throughout *The Wheel* is that by choosing "song" as his governing metaphor for the intersection of eternity with the present, he is not only talking about birth balancing death and the communal memory of agricultural practices but also about poetry.

Indeed, throughout *The Wheel*, we hear "the old resounding in the new" as we catch noticeable glimpses of his participation in the "song" that is the poetic tradition he honors in his nonfiction. Even more so than in *Remembering*, Dante looms large in "Elegy," the

longest poem in the collection and part of a cycle dedicated to the memory of his friend Owen Flood. The poem gives us an imaginative meditation wherein Berry visits a Paradise in which he finds Owen along with other members of his community who have passed away: "Those were my teachers. And there were more, / beloved of face and name, who once bore / the substance of our common ground. / Their eyes, having grieved all grief, were clear" (270). One also hears echoes of Milton's Raphael, explaining the Creation to Adam, as Owen says:

> The Creator is divided in Creation
> for the joys of recognition. We knew
> that Spirit in each other once;
> it brings us here. By its divisions
> and returns, the world lives.
> Both mind and earth are made
> Of what its light gives and uses up. (275)

And, n the end, Berry, like Andy, is moved from his vision of eternity to return to and take up his place in the present: "He raised his hand, turned me to my way. / And I, inheritor of what I mourned, / went back toward the light of day" (276).

In the collection's later poems, Berry adds the metaphor of a communal dance to his unifying trope of the eternal song of creation. The collection's titular poem, "The Wheel," begins at a country dance to the "strokes of the fiddle bow," but quickly becomes a metaphor for the harmonious community "as couples join, / and couples join couples, their movement lightening their feet" (298). This is, of course, strongly reminiscent of the couples dancing to "the music / Of the weak pipe and the little drum" and "Lifting heavy

feet in clumsy shoes, / Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth / Mirth of those long since under earth, Nourishing the corn" in Eliot's *East Coker* (*Four* 24). Indeed, like Eliot's dancers, Berry's are connected with their ancestors, for "the dead return" and "step into the steps of the living / and turn with them in the dance" (*New Collected* 298).

"The Wheel," however, is dedicated not to Eliot, but to Robert Penn Warren. And it contains a paradox worthy of him:

> . . . Soon
> They are one—rapt in a single
> rapture, so that even the night
> has its clarity, and time
> is the wheel that brings it round.
> In this rapture the dead return.
> Sorrow is gone from them.
> They are light. They step
> into the steps of the living
> and turn with them in the dance
> in the sweet enclosure
> of the song, and timeless
> is the wheel that brings it round. (298)

The wheel of the dance, which corresponds with the "Wheel of Life" of "eastern religion" which Sir Albert Howard cites in the collection's epigraph, is both *time*—in the succession of generations that necessarily involves a connection between the self and the past—and *timeless* in the eternal, metaphysical reality that comprehends history.

Thus, we see in *The Wheel* Berry's metaphysical vision, as well as his vision for literature, embodied. The entire collection involves the imagination of his place and his community in its eternal sense, the sense that gives a vision of its true value and possibility—the sense in which one can begin to think about acting with propriety. But the eternal "song" of which living and the dead are a part carries a teleological weight. The song, after all, is "The Law That Marries All Things," which the living must choose to "enter singing," for "it has no other entrance." Thus, *The Wheel* likewise gives us the deeper foundation for propriety that is a vision of hierarchical place, a place in the eternal order of creation in which the "Creator is divided." And Berry's deliberate inclusion of the voices of his poetic tradition—Dante, Milton, Eliot, and Warren—serves not only to place him in a strong "cultural lineage" but also to demonstrate that poetry itself participates in the human contribution to the eternal song of creation. Indeed, as for Warren poetry helps make sense of the world which is itself is a self-referential metaphor, for Berry the song of poetry can exist because creation itself is a song.

Conclusion

I have, of course, yet to acknowledge the irony of casting Berry's work as literary criticism given his disdain for the level of specialization within the contemporary academy, which he holds results from universities' blind following of industrial logic. Indeed, Berry would not likely accept the title of "literary critic" willingly, insofar as such a term designates one who specializes in academic literary scholarship. In the preface to his essay collection *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, he satirically renders what he takes to be an assumption of the contemporary university regarding the humanities: "The so-called humanities probably do not exist. But if they do, they are useless. But whether they exist

or not or are useful or not, they can sometimes be made to support a career" (xiii). And in "Notes: Unspecializing Poetry," he writes, less snidely but no less critically, "In the present organization of intelligence—based on the 'university' of departmented or encapsulated specialties—the literary understanding elaborates itself within itself, becoming necessarily more and more abstruse," arguing that "[t]he only way for this—or any—discipline to advance without becoming more ingrown and purposeless is to take up the question of its relation to other disciplines" (*Standing* 83). Much of the recent push for "interdisciplinarity" is unsatisfying in Berry's view. He argues in *Life is a Miracle* that many such pushes, like Edward O. Wilson's *Consilience*, insist on seeing "all the disciplines linked or unified . . . strictly on the basis of science," a motive which Berry denounces as imperialistic (31).

What he has in mind instead is an academy of disciplines that see themselves as "subjects of one conversation" which has its main reference to the reality outside the walls of the university:

> The correct response [to the problem of meaningless specialization], I think, is to ask if science and art are inherently at odds with one another. It seems obvious that they are not. To see that they are not may require extracurricular thought, but once we have cracked the crust of academic convention we can see that 'science' means knowing and that 'art' means doing, and that one is meaningless without the other. Out of school, the two are commonly inter-involved and naturally cooperative in the same person—a farmer, say, or a woodworker—who knows and does both at the same time. (124).

Berry's equation of "art" with "doing" here is obviously Coomaraswamy's, which means that we might include the poet as one for whom knowing and doing are necessarily at work at the same time. Furthermore, we hear echoed here his assertions that the kind of knowing that literature gives to the reader, whether in or out of school, ought not be separated from the reader's actions. Contrary to what Auden may have thought, Berry argues that literature can and does make things happen. It can either assist in the preserving knowledge of place that leads to propriety, or it can tear down that knowledge, leading to ostensibly autonomous but necessarily destructive action.

This eminently practical strain of Berry's thought on literature is what I believe recommends it to the general reading public and, therefore, the academy. Despite Berry's harsh criticism of academic literary studies (which I will acknowledge is certainly not universally applicable), he never says that literary scholarship is unnecessary. Indeed, he argues that it may be necessary, but it can only be so if it acknowledges literature's efficacy outside of the academy, among the general reading public: "That [literature's] real habitat is the household and the community—that it can and does affect, even in practical ways, the life of a place—may not be recognized by most theorists and critics for a while yet. But they will finally come to it, because finally they will have to. And when they do, they will renew the study of literature and restore it to importance" (*What* 84). And, as I have shown, one cannot come to an account of literature's practical role in human places without a metaphysical account of those places.

Coda

My project has been to explore the ways in which Robert Penn Warren's and Wendell Berry's approaches to the study of literature are of practical use both to literary scholars and the general reading public because they are grounded in metaphysical thought. As I have said, my assumption is that the general reading public sees literature as more or less helpful to them, or else they would likely not read it. It follows that if we think literature is or can be edifying, an account of what literature is for, the specific ways in which it is edifying, is desirable for any literary scholarship that aims to be of use to the general reading public. And the question of literature's function, leading as it does to the question of the telos of the human, must ultimately base itself on a metaphysics, which I have defined, following John Gardner, as "*a coherent, convincing, necessary system of general ideas and feelings in terms of which every element of our experience is illuminated*" (171).

Both Warren and Berry give coherent accounts of their views of metaphysical truth, which enable them to work out literature's role in making that truth immediate to its readers. As I have shown, there are many similarities between their views of literature. Both of them reject the division made by Auden and others between literature and human action. Both of them see literary form as having specific practical implications. And both of them see literature as a way for the individual to negotiate a healthy relationship with a community and with the past.

Furthermore, both Warren and Berry avoid following Matthew Arnold into the trap of seeing literature as a surrogate metaphysics by following Eliot's lead in seeing it as a helpful imaginative embodiment of metaphysical truth. They do, of course, have different

accounts of what that truth includes. Warren's metaphysics, like John Gardner's, include "humanity grandiosely conceived" (24), a concept of human truth based on an understanding of history and the vision of the interconnectedness of human action we find there. Berry's include a hierarchical teleology based on a belief in God.

It would be too easy, I think, to conclude from these differences that Warren's view is primarily of value to the nonreligious or that Berry's view is primarily of value to the religious. While it may certainly be true that some people will be disposed to agree more or less with either one of them, they both offer unique perspectives that may nevertheless have wide appeal and that have nothing to do with whether or not their metaphysical positions are theistic. For instance, Warren's account of the importance of historical study and its efficacy in specifically literary study, albeit for reasons differ in important ways from those of the New Historicists, affirm what is best about the contemporary focus on historical context in literary criticism. And while Warren certainly escaped the worst excesses of the New Criticism, Berry's constant insistence on the necessity of a connection between the scholarship of the university and the work done outside of it gives a fuller picture of a literary criticism that vehemently opposes escapist aestheticism while vehemently guarding the practical importance of aesthetic concerns.

Nevertheless, it may be the case that Warren's view, because it limits itself to a humanist metaphysics, is more likely to have broad appeal within the academy. While, as a Christian in the twenty-first century I cannot accept Gary Davenport's position that Berry's theism is irrelevant in the postmodern world (113), I certainly understand that there are numerous scholars and readers who do not accept a theistic metaphysics and who would therefore disagree with Berry on numerous points. But while Warren's view may be more

immediately appealing, the question of whether Berry's view of literature could be valuable even to those who do not accept a theistic metaphysics remains open. Perhaps one place to start is to say that while Berry certainly has his critics, some literary scholars nevertheless have found his thought useful regardless or in spite of his religious views. His ecological thought and cultural criticism, for instance, has certainly been influential in the field of ecocriticism[14]. And critics like Katey Castellano, despite her uneasiness with Berry's "unapologetic Christian views," nevertheless finds value in Berry's thought because his "conservative, conservationist vision" is, "however counterintuitively, a radical resistance to capitalism" (86-7). This, of course, may not be all that counterintuitive if we realize that in reference to Berry the term "conservative" should not in any way align him with versions of contemporary political conservatism that support global industrial capitalism, of which he is vocally critical, but instead marks a thoughtful belief that some things—such as community, religion, and traditionally coherent culture—are worth conserving. Nevertheless, Castellano's remark highlights the fact that Berry shares much common ground even with leftist literary critics.

More importantly, to say that Berry's thought on literature is of limited use on the grounds that it is based on a theistic, hierarchical metaphysics is to deny that religious and nonreligious people can have meaningful, productive conversations on things of importance. As Warren's work shows, it is certainly possible for someone who doubts or denies the existence of God to find common ground with those who assert it. And it is certainly plausible that someone who does not see nature as divinely ordered could nevertheless, on ecological and humanistic terms, agree that human action should be

[14] See, for instance, Dana Phillips's "Is Nature Necessary?" in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (U of Georgia P, 1996).

placed within the hierarchies of ecological health and human ethical truth. Along these lines, Berry's writing has a sense of ethical urgency, at least in part due to the increased ecological concern of a good part of the population in the years since Warren's work, that may recommend itself to literary scholars of all stripes who see literature as relevant to the particular problems of our time.

Regardless, my main point still stands: if it is to be useful, literary scholarship must forthrightly concern itself with questions of metaphysics. It is certainly true that disagreement as to the truth among literary scholars and among readers is unavoidable (and perhaps not altogether undesirable), but it does not follow that literary criticism should avoid talking in metaphysical terms. The examples of Warren and Berry show that critics have much to gain by talking in good faith about their views of the truth and the implications those views have on the purposes they see literature serving. It may be that if conversation occurs along these lines, we will find much common ground. And this, in Berry's words, will surely "renew the study of literature and restore it to importance."

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Vita

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