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“The Modifying Colours” of Robert Penn Warren’s Dreams

IN HIS LONG ESSAY ON SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE’S *THE RIME OF THE Ancient Mariner*, Robert Penn Warren discusses I. A. Richards’s thoughts on why poets consistently use particular imagery. Warren quotes Richards, “When a writer has found a theme or image which fixes a point of relative stability in the drift of experience, it is not to be expected that he will avoid it. Such themes are a means of orientation” (“A Poem” 366). Throughout his work, Warren found just such a means of orientation in the imagery of dreams. Several critics have recognized the prevalence and importance of dream imagery in Warren’s poetry. Victor Strandberg, for example, has said that “The motif of the dream . . . has probably been Warren’s most important new theme in poetry since *Brother to Dragons*” (217-18). Perhaps it is inevitable that this persistent focus on dreams has led some critics to interpret Warren’s poetry as especially indebted to Freud’s understanding of the unconscious. Most notable among these critics is Randolph Runyon, who has insisted that all of Warren’s poems “dream in a remarkably Freudian way” (10).

Warren was doubtlessly aware of Freud’s conception of dreams and surely would not have refrained from making use of anything that he deemed worthwhile, but he himself certainly would not have placed such importance on what he once described in a letter as the “dirty rumor” of Freud (*Selected Letters* 250). While Freud’s psychological theories may be analogous to some parts of Warren’s poetic process, ultimately it is an imperfect analogy, placing too much emphasis on the unconscious and ignoring what critic James H. Justus describes as the “curious interchange of the willed and the unconscious” in Warren’s poetic process (129). This combination of the will and the unconscious which Warren’s dream imagery symbolizes is more accurately prefigured in Coleridge’s theory of the imagination, which views poetry as the product of both the unconscious primary imagination and the willed meaningful utterances of the secondary imagination.

Warren was fascinated with both Coleridge’s poetic theories and images, and in “A Poem of Pure Imagination,” he directs considerable attention to the significance of Coleridge’s use of dream and other

nighttime imagery in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. According to Warren, Coleridge's understanding of dreams and the imagery of moonlight is related to his concept of the imagination. Although some early critics, such as E. E. Bostetter and William Empson, panned Warren's essay for its perhaps overly exact explication of Coleridge's symbolism, recent critics, such as Lesa Carnes Corrigan, have noted that Warren's work on the *Rime* has proven itself to be important for "the insight it affords into the development of Warren's poetic philosophy" (16). It is worth noting that this important essay was written during the ten years in which Warren was unable to finish a single short poem. We can be certain that his study of the Romantics, especially Coleridge, significantly influenced the widely celebrated poetry he wrote after this period.

One way in which the essay on Coleridge affected Warren's poetic development was by opening up a much deeper understanding of the Romantic aesthetic, particularly in regard to the imagination. Warren's discussion of Coleridge's concept of the imagination sheds light on certain themes that critics have previously attributed to Freud's influence. For example, Warren characterizes Coleridge's primary imagination as "creation at the unconscious and instinctive level" ("A Poem" 343). Such an interpretation of the poetic process is in keeping with Freud, yet neither Coleridge nor Warren is "content to leave the doctrine of the creativity of mind at the psychological level" (345). The unconscious creative energy of the mind is only half of the imagination as Warren and Coleridge understand it. The other half is what Coleridge refers to as the secondary imagination, which Warren describes as "coexisting with, and in terms of, the conscious will" (343). Warren quickly clarifies that by asserting the will's importance he is not dismissing poetry's need for inspiration, which comes from the unconscious primary imagination. Rather, by will, he and Coleridge are referring to that human faculty which is receptive to the inspirations of the unconscious in order that it might "fulfill itself in consciousness" (344). In other words, Warren, like Coleridge, understood poetry to be a process in which the inspirations of the unconscious primary imagination that may at first go unnoticed are in turn transformed by the secondary imagination into new, conscious, and meaningful utterances.

Warren opens his essay on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* with this concept of the imagination as a creator of meaning, arguing with the interpretations of earlier critics such as Earl Leslie Griggs and John

Livingston Lowes who read the work as "nothing more than a pleasant but meaningless dream" (340). Warren focuses on the idea of the poem as a dream and explains that "Coleridge presumably did connect his poem with dreams"; however, Coleridge's and, for that matter, Warren's understanding of dreams is contradictory to that of Griggs and Lowes. Like the secondary imagination which makes itself available to the impulses of the unconscious primary imagination, ultimately resulting in the utterance of the poem, dreams take the unnoticed events of the day belonging to the unconscious and combine them with the thoughts and concerns that have preoccupied the conscious mind so as to produce a meaningful and creative unity in the dream itself. Coleridge, notes Warren, references this creative process of dreams when he writes that "even in dreams nothing is fancied without an antecedent *quasi* cause" (340).¹ Both poetry and dreams, therefore, are rooted in the endeavor to unify the personal and conscious thoughts of the individual with the unnoticed influences of the world.

The desire expressed in dreams and poetry to unite the individual with the world is integrally related to Warren's understanding of the pursuit of knowledge. In "Knowledge and the Image of Man," Warren asserts that "knowledge gives [a person] his identity because it gives him the image of himself" (186). Warren does not mean that only knowledge of the self is significant, but rather that all knowledge—be it of fruit flies or physics—ultimately is self-knowledge. Warren's reason for identifying knowledge of the world with knowledge of the self is what he calls the "osmosis of being" (186). An individual, according to Warren, is not "a billiard ball placed on a table," but rather an entity who is "continual[ly] and intimate[ly] interpenetrate[d]" by the world he or she seeks to know (186). Knowledge then gives us the image of ourselves while at the same time affirming our intimate relationship with reality. After writing this essay, Warren became much more confident in what Anthony E. Szczesiul refers to as "poetry's therapeutic value," that is, poetry's ability to fully realize the "osmosis of being" (60). Warren's concept of the osmosis of being was most fully explored in his essay on knowledge, but the relationship that Szczesiul notes between Warren's

¹Again, it is interesting to note the similarities between Coleridge's theories and those of Freud. Coleridge's concept of the causation of dreams is echoed by the "physiological promptings" that Freud identified as the material out of which dreams are made (Runyon 42).

understanding of poetry and an ideal of unity is more apparent in his interpretation of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Therefore, when Warren asserts that the knowledge imparted by poems such as the *Rime* as well as by dreams is not on the level of “understanding” but rather of “imagination,” he is affirming the distinction between the rational, conscious mind and the imaginative, unconscious mind while simultaneously confirming that both play a role in achieving that unity which is the goal and purpose of both knowledge and poetry (“A Poem” 377).

Warren’s interest in the dichotomy between rational and imaginative knowledge significantly influenced his interpretation of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and he interprets the imagery of sunlight and moonlight in Coleridge’s poem as reflective of it. While his explication may be overly exact, Warren’s understanding of this pair of symbols makes its way into his own poetry and therefore is worth noting. In an effort to explain Coleridge’s understanding of his own light imagery, Warren quotes Coleridge’s account of a discussion that he had with Wordsworth in which the two observed the similarity between poetry and the varying shades of the coming evening:

our conversation turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of the imagination. The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sun-set, diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. (367)

Poetry, in other words, takes our conscious perceptions and transforms them so that, while still recognizable, the familiar becomes mysterious.² By investigating this mystery, the reader comes to recognize things about him- or herself and the world that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. Still another explanation is that poetry requires the insight of the unconscious so that the conscious may have meaning. Coleridge says that poetry, like moonlight, operates by making the familiar strange, and Warren certainly accepts this analogy, but while Coleridge concerns

²Coleridge’s thoughts on the transformative power of moonlight are similar to those expressed by Nathaniel Hawthorne, another author whose works Warren knew well. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne describes moonlight as the environment “where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (149).

himself with such imaginative transformations, Warren instead is more interested in the unification of the individual with the surrounding world—the fulfillment of the osmosis of being—which is the end of that transformation. So while moonlight is an appropriate symbol for Coleridge's transformative power of the imagination, it will not serve for Warren's subject of unification. For this theme he requires a new symbol, and he finds it in the dream.

In poems such as "Dream" and "Dream of a Dream," both written several decades after his essay on Coleridge, Warren interrogates his new symbol, investigating the nature of the relationship between the unconscious and conscious mind, the primary and secondary imagination, and the unifying knowledge at which they arrive (*Collected* 353-54). In the opening lines of "Dream," unity has been lost, as time is clearly out of joint in the first stanza. The poem begins "long after moonset," but the beech-leaf still "reflects a tiny refulgence of stars" (1, 4). The moon has set but left the stars behind, leaving the speaker to ask, "What can you dream to make Time real again?" (5). The reality of time disappears when the distinction between the world of sunlight and moonlight is lost. The individual suffers a loss of unity as the rational and imaginative powers, symbolized by sun and moonlight, become muddled and indistinct from one another. As Warren explains in "Knowledge and the Image of Man," unity is not the same as the loss of identity or the breakdown of real and necessary distinctions. Unity can only be achieved here in the poem if the worlds of sun and moon, that is, the worlds of the conscious and the unconscious, operate in conjunction with one another while simultaneously maintaining their individual sovereignty. In order to restore Time's unity, you must consider the loss of your own and "grapple your dream!" as the speaker commands (8). The unconscious primary imagination is necessary to the endeavor of the dream, but Warren makes it clear that it is the conscious mind which must be in control. In order to achieve victory it must remember how Odysseus "Bounced the head of the victim on hard ground" (12). Like the ponderous Ajax who is laid low by the cunning Odysseus, the unconscious inspirations of the primary imagination must be brought down to earth by the rational conscious mind. Warren depicts the struggle between the conscious and unconscious in a startlingly violent tone, in which teeth are "Jarred . . . from jawbone and blood filled / That mouth from its tongue" (13-14). Warren resolves this scene of Homeric violence in a concluding simile in which he compares the bloodied Ajax

to a “grape-cluster, crushed” (14). Just as the grape must be destroyed in order to yield its liquor, the inspiration of the unconscious only achieves the fullness of its potential when the conscious mind has seemingly destroyed it.

As terrible as this violence may appear, Warren prefers it to an alternative scenario in which the dreamer neglects to make meaning of his unconscious inspirations. Such inaction returns us to the loss of unity with which the poem began. Again, time becomes disjointed as the unconscious inspiration—here characterized as a wandering ghost, a specter usually associated with the night—finds itself stranded in “A desert trackless in sun-glare” (18). The two worlds of imagination and reason are lost in a meaningless mixture in which the inspiration finds itself directionless, or “trackless.” But for those who struggle with their unconscious primary imaginations in an effort to find meaning, Warren assures them that, like Jacob who wrestled with his angel, they will be blessed. Warren, however, does not say that this blessing is earned or won, but rather “blackmailed,” implying that by wrestling with the dream the individual has gained some piece of information regarding it that can in turn be used against it (21). But any knowledge of the dream is at the same time self-knowledge, “For the dream is only a self of yourself” (19). Warren implies that through the process of unifying the conscious and unconscious minds which the dream symbolizes, we discover a kind of sensitive and perhaps painful awareness of ourselves. This self-knowledge is like the “pain of self-criticism” Warren describes (“Knowledge” 187), and it plays a necessary role in his understanding of the process of unification.

While “Dream” focuses on the results of unifying the primary and secondary imaginations, “Dream of a Dream” concentrates instead on the art of symbolism, the process by which this unification is achieved. Symbolism is one way the secondary imagination seeks to make the unconscious promptings of the primary imagination communicable. The poem opens with the song of the rocks, which is occasioned by the “Moonlight stumbl[ing] with bright heel / In the stream” (1-2). The symbols composing this scene are standard ones for Warren. As we have seen, Warren often identifies moonlight with the primary imagination. The stream is a traditional symbol for time, and song is synonymous with poetry. Thus when the imagination stumbles into time, poetry is produced. This poetic song is oddly absent of meaning for a poet who insisted that all poetry “embod[ies] a statement” (“A Poem” 338). The

rocks sing "nothing, nothing" (3); however, the song is not entirely empty of content as they also sing "the joy Time plies to feel / In fraternal flux and glimmer / With the stream" (4-6). The rocks, then, sing nothing but the joy of the symbolic relationship between Time and the stream. Notice that in the opening lines of the poem the stream is the only character of the three that Warren does not anthropomorphize: the moonlight stumbles, the rocks sing, but the stream is nothing but a stream. Time, on the other hand, a concept created by man, plies and feels as if it were a person. Warren's choice to portray the literal reality of the stream divested of any imaginative embellishments reflects his idea that a symbol "has to participate in the unity of which it is representative" ("A Poem" 353).³ In other words, Warren is emphasizing the fact that the literal thing perceived by the rational conscious mind in daylight is just as important to a successful symbol as the figurative meaning understood by the unconscious imagination at night. Warren extends his consideration of the balance between the artistry of the imagination and the literality of the rational mind even to the form of the poem. Providing a somewhat rare example of his capability with rhymed lines, Warren balances this explicit artistry by maintaining a natural and realistic tone through the use of slant rhymes and enjambment. The poem can only succeed by maintaining both the imaginative and the realistic, just as both the primary and the secondary imaginations must be united in their creation of the symbol for it to be a success.

When Warren describes the dream, these two modes of understanding combine as "Time and water interflow," resulting, as in the previous poem, in a new realization of self as "bubbles of consciousness glimmer" before the speaker ("Dream of a Dream" 9, 10). The speaker, after acknowledging the effects of the dream, then begins to question the source of its causes, for if the symbol is composed in part by the literal and unimaginative stream, then where can one find "That stream that sings its un-Timed song" which becomes the material for this symbol (12)? It quickly becomes apparent that there is no stream that is divorced from its imaginative meaning. The identification of the stream or any other moving body of water with time is what Warren would

³Warren may have been influenced here by John Crowe Ransom's earlier poem "Persistent Explorer," which tells of a traveler who hears the sound of falling water with his "literal ears" and finds that it is "Only that water and nothing but water" (1, 26).

have called a “symbol of necessity,” a symbol that comes almost naturally to us and needs little effort in order to be convincing (“A Poem” 353). Even if the speaker could find the “un-Timed” stream, he would experience its symbolic meaning as he listened to it in time, or as the speaker says, “nightlong” (13). If, then, our rational daytime experience is just as symbolic as our nighttime imaginings, our lives must be a series of dreams awakening into other dreams as the speaker says in the first line of the last stanza. “Dream of a Dream,” therefore, asserts that the exterior world of rationality and the interior realm of our imaginations are not only inextricable from one another but they are also equally necessary. The daytime world is no longer something to be discarded in the search for imaginative truth as the early critics of Coleridge assumed. Instead, it is the realm that provides the unconscious primary imagination with its material which is then taken up by the secondary imagination and returned to the light of the conscious world in the form of meaningful poetry.

Experienced readers of Warren will not be surprised to find that following a poem affirming the continuity of dreams, Warren inserts a contradictory poem, “First Dawn Light,” in which the unity created by dreams appears to be a much more fragile thing, capable of being lost. In fact, the poem begins in “the true emptiness of night” in which the “last dream” is long past (4, 3). In “Dream of a Dream,” the speaker asks where one can find a stream devoid of the symbolic meaning of time; here the speaker does not give us a stream but rather the night devoid of any meaning whatsoever. In “true emptiness,” the speaker is forced to confront himself without the aid of his imagination and meets only the frail sound of his “breath” (6). Confronted by the emptiness of night and the realization of his mortality, the speaker longs for meaning and consciously endeavors to will a dream as he “tr[ies] / To recall what the last dream was” (6-7). In both poems, Warren tends to privilege the work of the conscious secondary imagination in dreams, yet in “First Dawn Light” the power of the unconscious primary imagination asserts itself as it redirects the speaker from his escapism back to the confrontation he wishes to avoid. When the speaker tries to draw up a comforting dream willfully, he instead “think[s] how lonely / In sun-blaze you have seen the buzzard hang black in the sky” (7-8). Warren continues to link the rational, conscious mind with the imagery of sunlight in this willed dream, but the power of the unconscious primary imagination becomes

quite clear as it inspires the unsuspecting speaker to recall the buzzard, a natural symbol of the anxiety of death, which confronts him.

Just as it seems that the conscious, rational world of daylight has utterly failed the speaker, the emptiness of night is broken by the "mysterious mechanism" of the song of birds brought about by "temperature or by beam" (11, 12). The songs are a relief from the earlier anxieties, but the speaker recognizes that they are the product, not of his imagination, but of the literal world of the sun which includes both the songbirds and the buzzard. The literal world has become a source of ambivalence for the poet, providing nothing so certain as the natural symbolism of the stream in the previous poem. For this reason, Warren asserts that "You must wait to resume, in night's black hood, the reality of dream" (16). At first it may seem odd for Warren to advise seeking out the comfort of "the reality of dream" in a poem in which dreams have been so unsuccessful. In fact, little in the poem has been more real than the song of the birds, yet the ambiguous nature of this song's origin makes it clear that, as Charles Bohner claimed in an early review of the poem, "Reality is often less substantial than dream" (160). Perhaps one ought to say rather that dream often substantiates reality. The contradictory experience of the waking world requires the unifying experience of the imagination at work in dreams, an experience that is painfully absent for the speaker of this poem.

Although Warren employed the symbol of the dream in order to investigate the interactions of the primary and secondary imaginations throughout his career, the significance of the symbol is not strictly static. As Warren changed and developed as a poet, this important symbol changed and developed with him. For example, some early uses of dream imagery seriously call into question Warren's desire for a complete osmosis of being. Strandberg argues in his discussion of *Promises* (1957)—Warren's first book of poetry to appear after both "A Poem of Pure Imagination" and "Knowledge and the Image of Man"—that Warren's speaker longs for an osmotic moment, which oftentimes is identified with a dream. Strandberg calls this unifying power of the dream "the apex of Warren's mysticism" (217), a mysticism which asserts that "*all Time is a dream* and we're all one Flesh, at last" (Warren, "Go It Granny—Go It Hog!" 8; Strandberg's emphasis 218). This mystic desire for unification is apparent in the three later poems discussed above, yet in some of his earlier poetry, written shortly after what some have called

his “Romantic conversion,”⁴ Warren is more skeptical of a desire for unity between the individual and the world.

The poem from which Strandberg quotes, “Go It Granny—Go It Hog!” delivers an extremely ironic view of this unity. The poem has two speakers. One appears to be optimistic and joyfully voices his concept of the world as a unified “dream” and “one Flesh,” taking the relationship between the hogs and the one who feeds them as an example (8-9). The other voice, however, denies this unity while simultaneously taking a very literal view of it: “*Any hogs that I slopped are long years dead, / And eaten by somebody and evacuated*” (5-6). The only unity of flesh that this speaker believes in is that between the eater and the eaten, and even that unity does not last long. While the speaker who espouses a unity that extends beyond the merely physical elaborates on the events at the pig pen, an ironic tension grows as we hear that tonight Granny “is a little bit late” and reaches an unsettling climax when the speaker remarks “how loud she can scream with no shred of a tongue in her head” (10,15). Warren clearly implies that the Granny, whose relationship with the hogs suggests a timeless unity to the one speaker, may have succumbed to the more physical unity described by the other and is in fact the object of “*that horrible chomping*” out by the pen which begins the poem (1). If Warren did eventually leave his “penchant for naturalistic thinking” behind as Szczesiul (59) and other critics have said—although I have my doubts—it is clear that, at this early point in his conversion to Romanticism, much of the old Naturalism remains as he skeptically regards the efficacy of dreams.

While the incredulity and irony of “Go It Granny—Go It Hog!” are certainly more characteristic of this period than of Warren’s later work, it would be incorrect to say that all of his early dream symbolism is equally bleak. For example, “Lullaby: Smile in Sleep” encourages the reader to dream just as the speaker encourages his son to. In this poem, dreams function as a kind of ideal to which we aspire, just as the high diver maintains “An image hung perfect as light in the mind’s eye” in order that he might execute his dive perfectly (26). “Dream of a Dream the Small Boy Had,” a poem written after *Promises*, also gives us a more optimistic, albeit more startling, characterization of dreams. Here the dream leaves the young boy bereft of all but his bones which “hang in

⁴Both Strandberg and Corrigan describe the change in Warren’s later poetry in terms of a conversion.

the tree," yet despite the gruesome image, the boy assures us that his heart sings in a language like "joy" (14, 26).

In each of these poems, dreams are depicted as desirable, but they also share a more important characteristic: for Warren, the dream symbolizes the process which unites not only the unconscious and the conscious mind, but also the world and the individual. In both poems, unity is paradoxically achieved by erasing the previous relationships that the speaker had with the world. This erasure is in keeping with Warren's early understanding of the osmosis of being, which he said was accomplished when one "disintegrates his primal instinctive sense of unity" and replaces it with "an ideal of excellence . . . [which] implies a de-personalized communion in that ideal" ("Knowledge" 187). The primal instinctive sense of unity arises out of the personal relationships formed by our familial and social encounters. This sense of unity seems natural and inevitable, but according to Warren, we cannot obtain the ideal until such relationships and the corresponding view of community are dissolved by a de-personalized sense of unity. Thus, as Strandberg observes, the small boy whose heart sings joy can do so only after "the conscious modes of identity are blown away during sleep," thereby removing all claims which others may have had to the boy (223). The son in "Lullaby: Smile in Sleep" is encouraged to "Dream perfection," but this ideal is concerned with the "world's abstract storm" and nothing nearly as particular as personal relationships (21, 48). The son and the young boy in the tree must risk losing the particularities of their individual relationships (or simply ignore them) in order to achieve the ideal of unity that Warren's dreams seek.

Warren's interest in the symbolism of dreams was steady throughout his career, but in his later poetry, especially in the collection *Now and Then* (1978), his interest becomes nearly obsessive. With titles such as "Dream," "Dream of a Dream," and "Rather Like a Dream," Warren's concern with this symbol is readily discernible. Apart from poems in which the theme of dreams is explicitly stated in the title, there are others in which dreams take place, such as "Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth," "The Mission," "When the Tooth Cracks—Zing!," "Waking to Tap of Hammer," "Little Black Heart of the Telephone," and "Identity and Argument for Prayer." The significance of the book's dream imagery led early reviewers Harold Bloom to characterize the work as "a book of American Romantic Poetry" (74) and James Finn Cotter to place its poems among those of the Romantics Keats, Shelley, and Yeats (120).

Dreams had always served Warren as a point of stability, a place to come to in order to make sense of the world. Yet the surge in his use of dream symbolism makes it clear that the stability of the symbol had been shaken. Warren was no longer using his preconceived ideas to evaluate the world. Instead, he was now using the world to reevaluate those ideas. The question naturally becomes, then, why did Warren suddenly feel the need to reevaluate a symbol which he had by that time steadily employed for over twenty years?

One possible reason may be that in the two years leading up to *Now and Then*, Warren was forced to confront death in a way that he had not had to since the death of his parents. This first confrontation led to poems such as "After Night Flight Son Reaches Bedside of Already Unconscious Father, Whose Right Hand Lifts in a Spasmodic Gesture, as Though Trying to Make Contact: 1955" (1955), written on the occasion of his father's death, and "Tale of Time" (1966), his poem on his mother's death written more than thirty years after the fact. In the years leading up to *Now and Then*, Warren experienced a second series of losses that brought two of his closest friends, Allen Tate and Katherine Anne Porter, to their deathbeds. Porter had suffered two strokes early in 1977 which eventually left her "tottering on the verge of madness," as Warren wrote in a letter to Tate (Blotner 439). Tate had battled with emphysema for years and was practically bedridden from 1976 until his death in 1979 (446). Eleanor Clark, Warren's wife, was not in danger of dying but did lose most of her eyesight, and by the end of 1976, she was reduced to writing with large felt tip pens on newspaper sheets which she then checked with the aid of high powered magnifiers (426). Warren himself had had a near brush with death earlier in 1972 when he was told by physicians that he was dying of a liver disease (407). He did not regain his health until the disease was later determined to be the result of an accidental but deadly combination of prescription drugs (409).

In the poems written before these events, Warren used dreams to emphasize the unification of the individual and the world by way of separating the individual from his previous relationships, but after his own health and the health of those for whom he cared most began to fail, Warren became increasingly uncomfortable with his early idealization of lost relationships in the name of unity. Never one to ignore the very thing that was bothering him, Warren turned his attention away from his more passionate poetry, which at times manifested itself in the erotic, and chose to take on the more solemn

question of unity in the face of death. Biographer Joseph Blotner notes this change in his reading of *Now and Then*: "It is as if the presence of time and death had left no room for Eros. . . . And it was death as much as love that he thought of now when he thought of Allen Tate and Katherine Anne Porter" (444). Although unwilling to persist in his earlier notions of unification, Warren did not turn his back on the project of dreams entirely. Rather, he reinterpreted the manner by which unification is achieved. The individual and conscious mind, the willful secondary imagination, and personal relationships—all things which up until this point had played supporting roles—became the primary means by which Warren sought to accomplish his goal of unification. The unconscious, the world, and the primary imagination were still necessary and vital to this endeavor, but they were no longer privileged in later dream poetry. Joseph R. Millichap offers a fitting summation of these observations when he notes that the dream poems of *Now and Then* appear to be engaged in "the most difficult age-work—the realization of selfhood in the face of decline and death" (76).

The clearest example of Warren's revision of his earlier use of dreams is in his poem "Ah Anima!" The dramatic situation of "Ah, Anima!" in which the speaker and the trees around him are lashed by a violent wind, is very similar to that of "Dream of a Dream the Small Boy Had." As we have already seen, Warren uses that poem to demonstrate a dream's ability to strip away the parts of the individual so that he may enjoy a unity of being with the world, but the tone of "Ah, Anima!" is far from the expectant, joyful tone of the earlier poem. Fear pursues the speaker, as the wind which previously had brought unity now offers obliteration. As a man who found himself and his friends confronted by death during the time of this poem's composition, Warren identifies with the "non-coniferous" trees of this forest (7). Here and elsewhere, Warren finds the evergreens, which maintain the color of spring throughout, a cruel lie. Much closer to the truth are the deciduous trees. Both the poet and the trees are facing death, but he clings to life as just as they cling to their leaves. Nevertheless, what leaves they do have are windblown, exposing their otherwise hidden "gray underside" (6). As dangerous as the outside world is with its forest of old age in which death blows like a wind, the speaker admits that the inner world of the mind is no safer, asserting that "meanwhile, sleep / Is a disaster area, too" (17-18). Warren's use of enjambment holds out sleep as a place of refuge and

means of recovery, like the emergency rations mentioned in the same line, but the following line reveals that sleep is just as dangerous to our personal safety. In sleep, we find a dream of “the un-roar of the wind of being” (19). The wind’s “un-roar” suggests that it destroys by way of negation, like that wind in the earlier poem which stripped the small boy of his flesh and identity, leaving only his bones in the tree. Despite this destructive wind of old age, the speaker admits that the earlier fascination with the loss of self is not entirely gone:

You may wish that you, even in the wrack and pelt of gray light,

Had run forth, screaming as wind snatched your breath away
Until you were nameless—oh, anima!—and only

Your mouth, rounded, is there, the utterance gone. Perhaps
That is the only purity . . . (22-26)

The collective unconscious of the anima tempts the speaker with its prospect of unity. Warren’s description of unity as “the only purity” resembles his earlier description of the de-personalized communion he discusses in “Knowledge and the Image of Man,” yet in this poem the process of de-personalization seems much more violent as the speaker imagines running out into the annihilating wind only to commit a kind of suicide in which the conscious mind—symbolized by the uttering voice—is erased. Warren is clearly still intrigued by the idea of unity achieved through loss of self, but the violent tone and the enjambed “Perhaps” imply that he no longer regards the loss of self uncritically.

Warren continues his theme of the elderly dreamer in the woods in “Rather Like a Dream.” Again the familiar setting is accompanied by a discussion of identity. The speaker feels the impulse to “confirm / His own reality” (2-3) by “reach[ing] out / To touch stone or tree” (1-2). The speaker wants to confirm the reality of the interconnectedness between the world and himself. In fact, he already senses a sympathetic bond with these trees whose fallen leaves accumulate around their trunks in the same way that “years, / . . . are gathered / In their brooding darkness beneath” himself (13, 14-15). It is this similarity that encourages the speaker to affirm “His own reality,” but as the poem progresses, he becomes less interested in his relationship with the forest and more concerned with his relationship with time, particularly with his own personal history.

The discussion of time begins with the mention of a dream. After describing the autumn leaves of the forest, the speaker notes, "the promise / Of another summer is already a dream" (12-13). The ability of the dream to unify experience is figured here in the ambiguity regarding the other summer. The dream may refer to a memory of the summer now past or to the expectation of the one to come. Whichever meaning the speaker intends, it is clear that in his next reference to the dream of summer he means the summer which is just past and has joined his other memories: "Another summer is now truly a dream / To join those moments, and hours, of joy" (16-17). This recent summer has entered into the speaker's memory and, as a result, his unconscious as well and is thus "truly a dream." The reminiscences of the aged speaker are, as the title says, rather like a dream because they are composed of both the actions of the conscious mind ("I stand on stone and am thinking / Of what is no more" [21-22]) and the unconscious ("But shade hardens, and years / Are darkening under each leaf" [23-24]). The dreamy recollections of the speaker create a kind of unity between him and "his own reality" which was otherwise lacking. Recollections composed of "old love, old folly, / Old evil and anguish" (24-25) would certainly have been blown away like the individuality of the small boy in Warren's earlier poem, yet here they are worth guarding and cherishing even as the darkening of the unconscious makes the once familiar memories strange. Of course, this darkening allows for the combination of familiarity and strangeness which is the very process by which the imagination arrives at the unifying knowledge that Warren seeks and is what makes the knowledge "rather like a dream." It is not until such dreams take place that the speaker realizes the "happiness!—often / Unrecognized" (22-23). But as the previous forest poem asserted, the revelatory power of the unconscious can overwhelm the individual just as "darkness grows like a sky overall" (27). The boyish, Wordsworthian impulse to reach out and unite himself with nature has become considerably more threatening as the unconscious, like the darkness in the poem, "draws tighter" (26) around the speaker, and Warren leaves him tempted to reach out yet standing stock-still, "hands at sides, and wonder[ing], / Wonder[ing] if I should put out a hand to touch / Tree or stone" (29-31).

While Warren's forest poems consistently focus on the question of identity and unity, no poem is more concerned with this theme than "Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth." As many critics have recognized,

the poem is especially dependent upon Coleridge. Dave Smith, who refers to it as Warren's "mini Mariner," aptly describes it as a "prayer for definition and responsibility" (6). The quest for self-definition reveals the protagonist availing himself of the rational conscious mode of understanding as well as of the unconscious imaginative mode, a combination Warren associated with Coleridge and located in the symbol of the dream. These two modes of understanding are again identified with sunlight and moonlight, which is why at the start of the poem we find the young speaker clambering over the mountain in the middle of the sun-bright day. The speaker, whose face is "sun-peeled" (1), has had too much of the sun and, as he will demonstrate, of rational methods of inquiry, for the entire adventure of the boy's hunt is one motivated by the desire for knowledge. He seeks to learn something of the hawk, and at the moment that this knowledge is consummated, the moment when he "knew the name" (22), he shoots it. This knowledge achieved through the hunt is the kind of unifying knowledge that the poet desires, and is far different from that knowledge which the boy tries to gain through practicing his taxidermy on the bird. John Burt explains that the boy sins, not by shooting the hawk, but by "attempting to fix it [the moment of the shot] and keep it, stuffing the bird and making of it a kind of parody of what it was at the sublime moment" (305). Notice that at the sublime moment of the shot the boy knows the hawk's name but does not utter it. Only after the bird has been stuffed, when it is least like the thing it was, can the boy presumptuously and ironically declare "at last a red-tail" (54). In "Ah, Anima!" Warren was loath to relinquish his ability to make utterances, but here it is clear that the knowledge which is his goal surpasses the willful and overly rational utterance of the young speaker at this moment in the poem. The young boy continues in his super-rational evaluations of the hawk, describing how he scraped out the hawk's skull and dried it with arsenic (58, 59). Even during those times in which his imagination begins to take over, and he describes the hawk as being "molded as though for that moment to take to air" (64), he still must admit the hard reality that "In God's truth, the chunk of poor wingless red meat / . . . lay now / Forever earthbound" (65-67).

Later amidst the "modifying colours" of night, the now-grown boy thinks of the bird, and his imagination begins to work on it, describing how the hawk "stared as I slept" (73). The hawk begins to take on life again, but this time the speaker does not desire his life and that of the hawk to be unified as it was during the sublime moment of the boy's

miraculous shot. Calvin Bedient is somewhat right to disagree with Smith when he says that the young boy "does not want the slain bird's blood washed away" (186), but it is clear that, while unrepentant, the boy certainly does not desire to go through a similar experience of unification now that it has become possible. Rather than engage the bird again in the strife of the hunt, the young speaker hides the hawk and runs from unity. It is both of these mistaken actions—the unreasonable faith in reason and the unwillingness to submit to imagination—that the grown speaker ultimately repudiates through the bird's immolation.

The speaker makes it clear that what brings the bird to memory again for him is time: "Time I lay . . . / . . . / and with / Eyes closed I knew / That yellow eyes somewhere, unblinking, in vengeance stared" (78-82). The years affect the speaker "like a dream, are a dream" (75). If we had not already observed the important work that dreams do in other poems, we may have been tempted to interpret this line as saying that the years were ephemeral and inconsequential, but we know instead that Warren, by identifying time as a dream, is asserting its potential unifying power through its operation on the conscious and unconscious mind. Time has operated on the speaker in much the same way that it was operating on the poet at the time of the poem's composition. Just as Warren was coping with the death of one friend and the worsening condition of another, the speaker is forced to confront the misfortune of his bankrupt father and the loss of his dead mother. At first he responds to these difficulties by resorting to drink, but finding this insufficient, he then returns to the quest for unity and knowledge by reclaiming an old relationship that he had put aside, so he seeks out the hawk.

By choosing to burn the hawk, it may at first appear that the speaker has regressed to Warren's earlier conception of unification, in which old ties must be severed, but by building the pyre, the speaker, like Warren faced with the death of his friends, merely recognizes the separation that cannot be denied. He no longer seeks to recreate the sublime moment of unification which took place at the moment of his shot by simply copying it. Instead, the speaker recognizes the reality of the loss of life and unity while simultaneously reliving the moment of unification in his dreams. In his dream he wants "to bind [himself and the hawk] in air-blood and earth-blood together / In our commensurate fate," but in order to do so he must learn the name of that fate, which is "a name beyond joy" (112-113, 114). Notice that the significance of the name has changed since the beginning of the poem. It is no longer absent as it first

was when the hawk appeared as a dot, “nameless” (19). Neither is it the overly exact name of the bird proclaimed by the young taxidermist: “red-tail” (54). Instead, it is a combination of the unknowable unconscious and the rational conscious mind. It is, in other words, a dream. This dream relies on the particularities of life that in earlier poems would have been done away with, but at the same time, it recognizes that the osmosis of being requires us to acknowledge that those particularities contain an unutterable significance that surpasses the perceptions of our conscious minds. It is therefore fitting that the speaker awaits the “last dream” wherein “the truth in blood-marriage of earth and air” will take place (115, 120).

In the final poem of *Now and Then*, “Heart of Autumn,” the themes traced thus far in Warren’s poetry converge in what is perhaps his single most successful treatment of them. The poem does not mention dreams outright, but we should remember that it was first published along with “Dream” and “Ah, Anima!” as “Three Poems in Time.” We can be certain then that Warren, who took great care in the sequencing of his poems, believed “Heart of Autumn” to be essentially related to these two other poems in which dreams feature prominently. In several ways, it begins like Warren’s other forest poems. The speaker finds himself among the trees during autumn and is confronted with the prospect of death as he imagines “the *boom*, the lead pellet” that brings some of the migrating geese to the ground (4). The prospect of death, however, is not enough to disrupt the geese’s understanding of “the season’s logic” (8), which tells them in some unknown way when and where to go. The speaker desires for himself the same kind of unity that the goose shares with the world so that he might know the fulfillment of his own individual nature, yet he comes to realize that this fulfillment is a “path of pathlessness” (14) in which both the “Path of logic, path of folly, [are] all / The same” (17-18). This combination of logic and folly is the same combination of the conscious and unconscious mind that takes place in the dream. Once the speaker comes to this realization, the unification that he desires with nature then comes to completion. “Hearing the high beat” (19) overhead, he is motivated to stretch out his arms, much like the poet whose conscious secondary imagination is receptive to the subtle promptings of the primary imagination. The unification of the conscious and the unconscious mind along with the primary and secondary imagination begins the speaker’s transformation into one of the geese that he so envies. Just as the speaker of “Red-Tail Hawk and

Pyre of Youth" seeks to name the ineffable after his dream has fully unified his conscious and unconscious minds, the speaker here is confronted "with a fierce impulse / To unwordable utterance" (22-23).

The agency of this transformation is also worth noting. In "Reincarnation (II)," a very similar poem written before "Heart of Autumn," Warren's friend James Dickey also wrote of a man who finds himself transformed into some kind of waterfowl. As the title implies, his transformation comes as a result of death, which "Waits to change / Him again" (258). Warren certainly knew this poem and chose to write one of his own with an almost identical theme. But Warren diverges from Dickey by making the point that death changes very little. It is incapable of deterring the geese from making their migration, and it plays no part in the speaker's transformation. As he has done throughout *Now and Then*, Warren locates the principle of unification in the individual imagination, which maintains the personal relationships of the past even in the face of such disruptions to unity as death.

If Warren intended these poems to preserve the unity between him and his terminally ill friends, he did not delude himself by denying the fact that separation is inevitable, that death is inevitable. The unification of the individual with the world which Warren hoped his poems could achieve is much like the unwordable utterance and the unnameable name of his greatest poems in *Now and Then*. It is paradoxically obtainable and elusive, but rather than being an obstacle or a disappointment, this paradox served as an inspiration. Warren recognized the significance of our desire for a unity that was at once both universal to all people and yet absent from all experience. He found in the imagery of dreams a natural symbolism for this longing. Along with Coleridge, he understood that as the product of our primary and secondary imaginations, the dream modifies our perceptions of the familiar, leaving us with a strange, lingering hope. While Warren realized that we may never fully achieve the unity that we long for, he nevertheless encouraged his readers to recognize its fleeting presence in both our dreams and his poetry.

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