

ROBERT PENN WARREN, THOMAS WOLFE, AND
THE PROBLEM OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Patricia L. Bradley

If Robert Penn Warren's career had ended when he was thirty-seven, as had Thomas Wolfe's with his death in 1938, our impressions of Warren and the canon we associate with him today would no doubt be very different. The works for which we remember Warren would have been limited to a biography of abolitionist John Brown (1929), "The Briar Patch," which was his essay contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), his *Thirty-Six Poems* (1935), *Understanding Poetry* (1938), which he co-edited with Cleanth Brooks, two novels, *Night Rider* (1939) and *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), his *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942), a smattering of short stories, a number of critical articles and reviews, and finally *Understanding Fiction* (1943), which he again co-edited with Cleanth Brooks. As even this necessarily brief listing indicates, by 1943 Warren had already written substantially across several genres: biography, essay, poetry, novel, and criticism. Still, if that body of work alone had defined our literary encounters with Warren, how understandably limited our present appreciation of him would be. Without the temperings of the mid- to late-life "revisions" of his canon permitted to the long-lived Warren, he would be ill-remembered by this present time of his centennial as an intransigent New Critic, as an avowed segregationist at best or at worst a likely racist, and as a youthful prodigy who joined the numerous ranks of poetic imitators of T. S. Eliot.

We can attribute some of the surface similarities between Kentuckian Robert Penn Warren and North Carolinian Thomas Wolfe to the universal experiences of youth and adolescence known to any young person of their day and time; other deeper similarities could speak to the special circumstances of artistic young men of the South in the early third of the twentieth century. Both were from small southern towns—not the deep South, but similarly along its fringe—towns with identities rendered slightly more cosmopolitan than most through their connections with railroads. As a boy, Warren was awed by the frequent evidences of places and ideas beyond Guthrie, Kentucky, brought his way by the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, a connection that had even supplied his hometown with its name (Millichap 62). As part of a thriving resort community, Wolfe also understood how the fortunes of its inhabitants were directly related to train access, though in Asheville's case, it was the Southern Railroad line that provided that crucial link to the outside world. In a way, as with Warren's Guthrie, the railroad helped to create Wolfe's childhood setting: Asheville quadrupled in size after the advent of the railroad in the 1880s.

The mature Warren would dismiss Guthrie as only "a place to be 'from'" (qtd in Blotner 26), but as a boy he was awed by evidences even in Guthrie of an intellectual world practically within his reach—publications such as the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, *Poetry*, and the *Dial*—all for sale at the hotel newsstand near the railroad station (*Then & Now* 32). To the novelist Wolfe, the far-off sound of the train's whistle would serve as a recurring symbol for the world beyond Asheville, North Carolina. Until he could leave

for that world on the train, it brought to his very doorstep hints of what he might find in it when he got there in the form of rich and elegant outsiders attracted to the recreational possibilities of the nearby Smoky Mountains, but also in the form of the grim and disparate “lungers” who populated his mother’s boarding house in their search for respite from tuberculosis in the clear mountain air.

Warren’s and Wolfe’s mutual desires to leave home at the earliest occasions possible were equally strong, although probably for different reasons. Both Warren, the oldest child in his family, and Wolfe, the youngest in his, were pampered as prodigies by parents who alternately hovered over and distanced themselves from their offspring. In Warren’s case, the hovering was primarily on his mother’s part while his father, whose loving paternal commitment Warren never doubted, nevertheless remained a “man of mystery” (*Portrait* 7) to his son before and long after the senior Warren’s death. In Wolfe’s case, both parents took turns smothering and ignoring their youngest son, swapping him about from one household to another, seeing in his love for reading more oddity than not, but willing in sometimes grudging and often self-serving ways to groom the Wolfe family’s one hope for intellectual distinction.

Each boy developed a love of poetry from his father. W. O. Wolfe, for example, could dramatically recite great hunks of poetry, especially Shakespeare, which his son later learned to read for himself. Robert Franklin Warren gave his son his first lesson in the art of poetry-writing and encouraged his passion for Milton when, in the completion of a high school literature assignment, the boy “simply fell in love” with the poem “Lycidas” and tried to learn everything he could about it (Blotner 27). The senior Warren and his wife Anna Ruth saw carefully to their son’s education, applauding his voracious home reading and facilitating his early graduation from the high school in Guthrie; correspondingly, Wolfe’s father paid for his card at the library that stood near his business, and young Tom used it assiduously. Still a year too young at fifteen to head off to college, Warren was enrolled by his parents for an extra year of high school in nearby Clarksville, Tennessee, where he boarded and lived away from home for the first time. Wolfe’s parents finally broke down and paid to send their son to the North State Fitting School, a private high school, overcoming their own parsimonious reluctance and accusations of favoritism from their other children (Donald 23).

Antithetical to the paternally-fostered love for poetry, however, was the fear of failure that Warren and Wolfe each derived from his father. Young Tom, conceived at a time when a forty-nine year old father was considered “old,” knew his primarily in terms of age, illness, and emasculating self-pity. Even though the initial portraits of W. O. Gant in *Look Homeward, Angel* are of a character larger than life, the repository of all that is vital and life-giving during Eugene Gant’s childhood, W. O. Wolfe’s failures prompted what Wolfe’s biographer identifies as the son’s “central theme”: “a man’s quest for his father” (Donald 15). Robert Franklin Warren’s failures were two-fold—intellectually he had been a failed poet and economically a bankrupt. These complementary lapses, the one creative and the other practical, resulted in his son’s distinctively bifurcated personality and may explain Warren’s success in more than one publication genre: short stories, novels, and pedagogical nonfiction, which “paid,” and his true love, poetry, which did not.

Perhaps their fears of following in their fathers’ failed footsteps explains why both Warren and Wolfe differed with their fathers on the crucial decision of where to study for

their undergraduate degrees. When Warren set his sights on Annapolis and chemical engineering, his father swallowed his disappointment—he having methodically but quietly steered his son for years toward Vanderbilt and a law degree—and helped him obtain the necessary paperwork to apply for a naval academy appointment. Warren’s future identity as one of the original Fugitive-Agrarians was assured, however, by an accident that cost him the use of one eye along with his Naval Academy prospects. Wolfe had held out for Princeton, and if not there, the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. Strange to think that Wolfe, known for his contrarities of literary philosophy with such Vanderbilt faculty and alumni as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and Warren, had, according to his biographer, once yearned toward UVA, “a dwelling place of culture, the last and greatest academy of the old aristocracy, an American Oxford” (qtd in Donald 30), and surely a corollary to Nashville’s Vanderbilt in Old South social conservatism.

Instead, of course, Wolfe ended up at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and in his turn part of a more casually realized band than the Fugitive-Agrarians, including progressives such as Jonathan Daniels, Paul Green, Frederick Koch, and Frank P. Graham. They, according to Floyd Watkins, “could have written a *Fugitive*” if they hadn’t been “fleeing the Old South” the Vanderbilt Fugitive-Agrarians were hoping to salvage (411). Watkins further notes that Wolfe’s visibility after his publications of *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *Of Time and the River* (1935), reinforced by his Chapel Hill connections, may have made him the perfect whipping boy for the Fugitive-Agrarians and their later new critical counterparts, most of whom “have at some time had something to say of Wolfe’s art and ideas” (“Thomas Wolfe” 411). Watkins numbers among Wolfe’s critics Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, John Peale Bishop, John Donald Wade, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren (412-13).

Not all they had to say was negative. Upon publication of *Of Time and the River*, Warren, for example, and John Donald Wade, a fellow Agrarian with whom Warren taught briefly at Vanderbilt, publicly recognized Wolfe’s writing talent, the former in a 1935 review for *American Review*, and the latter in an essay entitled “Prodigal” that appeared in the *Southern Review*, also in 1935. Notwithstanding, both essays proceeded as well to fault Wolfe for limiting himself to recording, in Wade’s words, merely “his own passage through the world” (194) and, in Warren’s words, writing autobiography so transparent as scarcely to maintain the “pretense of fiction” (206). Warren’s most famous line from his essay—“it may be well to recollect that Shakespeare merely wrote *Hamlet*; he was *not* *Hamlet*”—resounds with Fugitive-Agrarian, if not new critical, dismissiveness of Wolfe’s distinctive use of autobiographical materials. In fact, just the next spring Wade similarly invokes Shakespeare as literary exemplar in yet another review, adopting Warren’s earlier locution in the process. Writing of southern stereotypes such as “Jeeter Lester and his kind” in Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* Wade cautions: “Shakespeare . . . made his Caliban, but *The Tempest* is not filled with Calibans” (455).

Not unreasonably, we can assume that the shared critical recoil from barely fictionalized autobiography reflected in Warren’s and Wade’s commentaries on Wolfe may have had its source in the Fugitive-Agrarian culture that had been generally present at Vanderbilt for over a decade as well as in the earliest new critical views of John Crowe Ransom in particular. In 1933 Ransom would dismiss Milton’s “Lycidas,” for example—the work that had fired Warren’s schoolboy imagination and prompted his first yearnings toward

creating his own poetry, not to mention its having provided Thomas Wolfe with the title of his first autobiographical novel. Ransom's critique of Milton's elegiac poem contains, in part, one of the same critical principles mustered by his former student Warren and then colleague Wade in their readings of Wolfe: the author's too ready use of autobiographical references. As Thomas Underwood observes, in "A Poem Nearly Anonymous," Ransom's well-known commentary on "Lycidas," the critic delineates "the risks Milton had taken in allowing a portion of his personality to infiltrate and slightly alter the classical form of his poetry" (36). Ransom's stance on Milton's autobiographical tendencies in "Lycidas" may explain a subsequent critical jibe at Cleanth Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* in 1939. Reading into Brooks's new critical thesis the threatened loss of theretofore canonical texts, Stuart Gerry Brown observed for the *Sewanee Review* that "it is surely not a very penetrating criticism which would by implication exclude 'Lycidas'" (qtd in Winchell 171).

By 1939, however, Wolfe was lost to the world and Warren was left to realize for his own part the role autobiography could play in the creative process—i.e., the literary effects of the "Lycidas" factor, which was clearly a mere diminished thing in modernist poetics. Critically, he remained firm in his assertions that a too ready reliance upon autobiography weakened a text. We have no better examples of Warren's defense of a sound creative distance from the incursions of self and Wolfe's subsequent but reluctant acceptance of that artistic fact of life than juxtaposed passages from the writings of each author. The first comes from Warren's 1943 essay "Pure and Impure Poetry," a logical extension of his "Note on the Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe." In this essay, the critic warns of necessary presences such as his own ironic intertextual voice that would logically challenge an author's too willing inclusion of autobiography if that inclusion led to the author's claiming an "unearned vision that is tested by a more experientially minded readership" (Bradley 49). Once again, Warren cites Shakespeare, as he had in the earlier review of *Of Time and the River*, hearing the critic's ironic voice in Mercutio's outside the garden wall as Romeo rashly and unrealistically swears his undying love under Juliet's balcony. As with Romeo—as with Wolfe—:

Poetry wants to be pure, but poems do not. . . . They mar themselves with cacophonies, jagged rhythms, ugly words and ugly thoughts, colloquialisms, clichés, sterile technical terms, headwork and argument, self-contradictions, clevernesses, irony, realism—all things which call us back to the world of prose and imperfection.

Sometimes a poet will reflect on this state of affairs and grieve.

("Pure and Impure Poetry" 174)

Wolfe as author conceded this point in his fiction that followed *Of Time and the River* by effecting as deliberate and resolute a turn from autobiography as he was capable. His decision to do so is implicitly and more personally confirmed in a letter to his mother, the anguished tone of which echoes the certainty tinged with pathos of Warren's critical pronouncement: "[Y]ou can't go home again. . . . I found that out through exile, through storm and stress, perplexity and dark confusion. I found it out with blood and sweat and agony, and for a long time I grieved" (*Letters*).

The certainty of Warren the critic, however, often outstripped that of Warren the novelist. When Warren's novel *World Enough and Time* was published in 1950, John Crowe Ransom privately disparaged it to Allen Tate for its Wolfeian qualities of "phony style," "bad rhetoric," and "pseudo-philosophy" (qtd in Underwood 36). Some years afterward, Warren was in the position of having his own critical words used against him when interviewer Marshall Walker questioned whether the novels *Wilderness* (1961) and *Band of Angels* (1955) could each have benefited from his more effective use of the ironic "Mercutio in the underbrush" (160). To his credit, Warren accepts the criticism and offers the self-criticism that the central character of *Wilderness* and the narrator in *Band of Angels* were limited by his authorial failure to inject sufficient "richness and depth" into their fictive life experiences (Marshall 162).

More contemporary with his formulation of Shakespeare's Mercutio as critical metaphor, however, was Warren's publication of his second novel, *At Heaven's Gate*, in 1942. Its working title, *And Pastures New*, like the title of Thomas Wolfe's novice work, had been borrowed from Milton's "Lycidas." Its plot, similar to those of many of Warren's novels, follows the career of young Jerry Calhoun, who abandons the teachings of his own father to find success, betrayal, and harsh epiphany, all in short order, through the mentorship of a false father. Warren's theme of the search for the true father—a form of covert autobiography, I might add—becomes more and more overtly stated in his work as he begins to gain an appreciation for the value of the autobiographical impulse to his own art. This developing appreciation is inseparable from his growing regard for his own true father, the failed artist Robert Franklin Warren, whose initiatory lessons in writing poetry had encouraged his son to consider Milton's "Lycidas" a model for form (elegy) and substance (veiled autobiography), and located in the poem, through his promotion of it, qualities more artistically satisfying than the new critical fathers who had later displaced him would be willing to accept.



Warren scholars frequently debate the significance of the long poetic drought with which he was afflicted through most of the decade of the forties and into the early fifties. Some point to this decade as the period of the painful culmination of his difficult marriage to Emma Cinina Brescia, from whom Warren was finally divorced in 1951. Others point to his need for financial stability and the greater economic certainty to be had through writing fiction and co-editing textbooks; certainly, his subsequent marriage to Eleanor Clark and his becoming a father for the first time validate that argument. Still others recognize that when Warren did resume his love affair with lyric poetry in the late 1950s—some of which was inspired by that growing family—he was working his way toward writing poetry of a different sort than he had written before. These critics cite Warren's poetry from the mid-career *Brother to Dragons* (1953), in which Warren's own father and Warren himself as "R.P.W." make significant appearances, to the late-life poetry, often dubbed "confessional," and to which, in the collection of poems entitled *Being Here* (1980), Warren himself cautiously attributes a "shadowy autobiography" (*Collected Poems* 441).

In the same way that Warren began the process of poetic self-revision in the 1950s, and probably in a way integral to that process, he also began a period of critical self-revision during the late 1960s and early 1970s. These years in particular mark a period during which Warren, in collaboration with Cleanth Brooks and R.W.B. Lewis, was writing a series of introductions to authors and literary periods preparatory to publishing their massive, two-volume anthology entitled *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1973). And if, in the course of what collaborator Lewis called “Warren’s Long Visit to American Literature,” he didn’t revisit the work of Thomas Wolfe *per se* (Cleanth Brooks drew this assignment although Wolfe’s first two novels bear the co-editors’ imprimatur as works with which “the student should have more than a passing acquaintance” [Brooks, Warren, and Lewis xviii]), Warren did revisit both implicitly and explicitly some of his earlier critical pronouncements on the significant role played by autobiography in important American fiction. Indeed, as Lewis would later record in his reminiscence about this rich collaboration for the *Yale Review*, “Warren’s visit to American literature . . . was a visit to himself” (574). To put the case in more specific terms, several of Warren’s author introductions are very revealing in the extent to which they engage not only the plain biographical detail basic to an anthology introduction but also in the extent to which they function as a kind of veiled autobiography as Warren writes out some of his conclusions about his own life and work during this crucial period.

Lewis, like others who witnessed firsthand Warren’s incredible energy for throwing himself into a project, seems retrospectively stunned by “the sheer magnitude of these commentaries” (571) written for inclusion in the anthology. In fact, several of Warren’s author introductions for *The Makers and the Making* were substantial enough to merit individual publication elsewhere. Four of them in particular served the occasion not only for “Warren’s visit to American literature,” but also for his revisiting elements of his own autobiography as they were revealed through his affinities with the biographies, personal and artistic, of each of four figures: Herman Melville, John Greenleaf Whittier, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Theodore Dreiser.

Warren’s biographer Joseph Blotner also observes the general trend toward the critic’s interweaving of his own autobiographic consciousness into the introductions written for *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*. Thus, in a reading of Warren’s anthology introduction to Herman Melville, which had earlier been published in amplified form in the volume *Selected Poems of Herman Melville* (1970), Blotner indicates “some affinity of loss” between Warren and his subject—the two had been similarly aware of their fathers’ failures and would similarly find refuge in poetry when faced with a public unsympathetic with their efforts in fiction (390-91). Blotner finds additional affinities between author and subject in Warren’s *John Greenleaf Whittier’s Poetry* (1971), which again appears in a somewhat different form as one of the anthology’s author introductions. Of this analysis, Blotner observes how Warren, who often spoke of his closeness to his own parents and two siblings, is in this regard much like the self-described Whittier of “Snow-bound.” To Blotner, Whittier in his turn presents his “Snow-bound” family in “loving portraits, . . . in the context of one of Warren’s own obsessive subjects: time, especially loved ones perceived over time” (Blotner 392).

Blotner and Lewis are equally struck by Warren’s autobiographical affinities with the biographical details he attributes to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s life. Blotner comments,

“[o]nce again, [Warren’s] treatment of the writer’s background and subject matter, skills and obsessions, suggests his own” (393). In my own analysis of the Warren and Hawthorne affinity in the essay “Nathaniel Hawthorne in the Attic: Robert Penn Warren’s ‘The Circus in the Attic’ and Critical (Auto)Biography,” I approach another convoluted affinity that Warren shares with Hawthorne, and that is their equal reluctance to own and develop the autobiographical elements of their art. Ironically, for Warren, especially given his strongly stated views on the literary weaknesses that can result from such elements, his Hawthorne introduction becomes a cautionary tale in which the nineteenth-century master shrinks from the possibilities for self-knowledge that a less distanced perspective—an autobiographical perspective, for example—would permit. For Warren, Hawthorne’s evasive use of symbol and resolute literary focus on the safe expanse of history provide the ultimate insurance for his authorial comfort with himself and his materials. Hawthorne consistently turns from the self-awareness autobiographical elements in his fiction would confer; Warren, as critical observer of the phenomenon, seems poised to learn from the omissions of this literary father.

Warren’s Dreiser study was also “recycled,” a longer version having appeared in 1971 as *Homage to Theodore Dreiser* in recognition of the centennial of its subject’s birth. It came at a time when Dreiser’s literary reputation as a novelist was hardly on the upswing, a detail that, according to Blotner, posited still another affinity between Warren and his topic. Other affinities noted by Blotner include their shared balancing of lyricism and naturalism in their novels, their common experiences of “tremendous ambition and drive for success,” and similar identities as “yearners,” Dreiser for professional and intellectual status and Warren for some enriching force of life in which to place his faith (Blotner 401). Most telling for Blotner, however, is Warren’s recognition in *Homage* that “the secret drama of Dreiser’s [work] is the rejection of a father who, after failure, lived” (qtd in Blotner 401). This factor alone creates an intriguing triangularity among Warren, his current subject Dreiser, and his former subject Wolfe.

Finally, however, *Homage to Theodore Dreiser* is the study wherein we see most clearly how Warren’s “long visit to American literature” was also his opportunity to revisit some of the critical pronouncements he had made in such essays as “The Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe” and “Pure and Impure Poetry.” In this book-length essay we see him struggling to come to terms with Dreiser’s dependence upon autobiography as a foundation for what Warren asserts as “art”; thus, it is not entirely coincidental, perhaps, that this defense and promotion of the Dreiserian canon implicitly and explicitly identifies the many biographical details and artistic methods shared by Dreiser and Thomas Wolfe.

For example, Warren’s citation of Dreiser’s mantra, “No common man am I” (14), his focus on Dreiser’s “yearnings for wealth, display, . . . power,” and his recognition of his “deep social resentments” (16) are replicated in Wolfe’s well-documented narcissism. Wolfe, as his biographer states, was absorbed with “grandiose fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, and endless love” (Donald 15). Indeed, some of the coarse biographical details Warren includes about Dreiser are as integral to the formation of his literary character as they are to Wolfe’s. Warren quotes Dreiser’s description of himself as “blazing with sex” and records that he was “a ferocious masturbator” (16), descriptions that match the commentary on Wolfe’s sexual proclivities in David Donald’s biography. Even Dreiser’s predisposition for voicing the most personal details of his life to others has

a counterpart in Wolfe's social behavior. Warren observes:

[t]he same kind of compulsive veracity (so strangely mixed with his compulsive lying) that made [Dreiser] record such details of his own life as masturbation . . . , made him struggle to convert into fiction the substances of experience at both the personal and social levels. (34)

"Compulsive veracity" is an equally fitting term for the quality Wolfe exhibited in the company of Warren and several others of the Fugitive-Agrarians to whom he affirmed the inauthenticity of the brothel in which portions of Faulkner's *Sanctuary* are set. Wolfe attributed this knowledge to his having "intimate acquaintance with whore houses in many places" (qtd in Donald 361). "Compulsive veracity" is also a term appropriate to the types of revelations that appear in as personal a novel as *Look Homeward, Angel*, as well as, Warren argues, to the entire scope of Dreiser's canon. It is possible that even Wolfe himself intuited his personal and literary affinities with Dreiser when he recognized him as a "gigantically thorough realist" (qtd in Donald 145).

From these psychic and grossly physical similarities, however, we turn to the matter of fiction intermingled with autobiography, the topic on which Warren expends a great deal of critical energy over his lengthy career, first as a youthful reader and writer in "A Note on the Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe" and finally as a seasoned critic and novelist in *Homage to Theodore Dreiser*. Where the younger Warren reveals himself as a wary reader of Thomas Wolfe's two most autobiographical works, *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River*, in the passage of thirty years and with his rereading of Theodore Dreiser's canon, Warren writes in qualified validation of his autobiographical impulses, in 1969 even claiming Dreiser as "second to none" among his literary preferences (qtd in Blotner 399).

Significantly in his *Homage*, the Dreiser novel with which Warren finds least critically satisfying is the one with the most superficial links to Wolfe's first two novels: *The 'Genius'* (1915). Warren speaks positively of Dreiser's theme; because he wrote about "the self-consciousness of the artist in the modern world," Warren places him in the ranks of such authors as "Flaubert and Melville . . . Proust, Mann, Hemingway, Wolfe, and Camus" (53). Warren adds that "Thomas Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* is in many ways similar to *The 'Genius,'* even in the name of the hero" (148), Eugene Witla, whose first name means "the 'wellborn'" (*Homage* 53), a fact about Eugene Gant that Thomas Wolfe also shares with his reader in *Look Homeward, Angel*, although he makes the important distinction between "wellborn" and "well bred." In a negative vein, Warren's comment that "*The 'Genius'* was a thinly disguised version of Dreiser's ambitious career, his marriage, his promiscuous love affairs" (49) would seem to echo his earlier estimation of Wolfe's first two novels as making "thin and slovenly" gestures toward fiction, and his reference to the "appalling bulk of the manuscript," which Dreiser at the time regarded as "his finest novel" (51) hearkens to the many literary anecdotes recounting Thomas Wolfe's own authorial capacity for infinite self-expression and self-delusion.

Yet Warren's overall defense of Dreiser's autobiographical tendencies in his fiction is immediate and bluntly-spoken. More than once, Warren claims for himself the privilege "to turn autobiographical" in his critical viewpoints (72) and thus he first addresses his

personal temptation to downplay Dreiser's achievements, "to think of [Dreiser] as a kind of uninspired recorder blundering along in a dreary effort to transcribe actuality . . . [or] . . . to think that what is good is good by the accident of the actuality that he happened to live into—not by any power that he, as artist, might have achieved" (*Homage* 9). The critical view Warren thus owns sounds much like the Warren of thirty years earlier who denigrates *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River* as "essentially two parts of an autobiography" in which "the pretense of fiction is . . . thin and slovenly" ("The Hamlet" 206). True, Warren admits, "Dreiser did write voluminously in the form of straight biography about himself and his work"; equally true is that "these autobiographical writings are scarcely distinguishable from his fiction" (*Homage* 9). But Warren tempers these observations with a realization won from a lifetime of his own writing, both critical and creative: "What is wrong with this way of thinking is, of course, that it does not account for the fact that, in one sense, art is the artist's way of understanding—of creating even—the actuality that he lives" (*Homage* 9).

Or, in Warren's case, the artful rendering of autobiographical materials was his way of understanding—of creating even—the actuality that he had lived and sought at the end of his life to understand more fully. Warren's long visit to American literature for *The Makers and the Making*—Warren's long visit to himself that entailed visits to writers such as Theodore Dreiser—and Warren's long preoccupation with autobiography that had begun with his earliest critical pronouncements on Thomas Wolfe—all speak to a blending of autobiographical and creative impulses that will come to remarkable confluence in final works both personal and poetic. In Warren's *Portrait of a Father* (1988), ostensibly a reminiscence about Robert Franklin Warren, but in reality as close to straightforward autobiography as we have from the pen of Robert Penn Warren, the son lovingly acknowledges the father with whom and in whom he had studied Milton's "Lycidas" as elegy informed by autobiography. This prose work, however, is only the culmination of what is, according to Harold Bloom, the great and defining poetry of Warren's last major phase, that period after 1965, the year he turned sixty. Warren, granted by virtue of his long life a period of poetic self-revision, gave himself over then to "a great contest with time, with cultural and family history, and above all, with himself. . . . Warren wrestled with the angel of the poetic sublime and carried away the victory of a new name" (Bloom xxiii).

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JACK GRANATH

DREAM OF DEATH

I woke this morning from a dream of death
 A lot like all the other ones, except
 That I was happy. There I lay expiring,
 Looking at the ravages of life
 Behind me, faces twisting in the mist,
 Friends I wronged on purpose, enemies
 I dashed away from screaming like a child,
 Teachers disappointed, lawyers thrilled,
 A thousand strangers shouting in disgust,
 My parents with their puzzled looks, and all
 Those women who deserved a better lot
 Than choking on the poison of my lust—
 But I was happy, as I rarely am,
 Knowing I had somehow passed the test,
 Had made it through the sprawling wreck of years,
 The opportunities of each new dawn,
 Without—how lovely—killing anyone.¹

Note

¹ Not counting all the bombs my taxes drop,
 The coups, the criminals put down like dogs,
 Vast slicks of poison, cops that run amok,
 And children-killing sanctions in Iraq.
 (This thought came later. After I got up.)