

RECLAIMING THE MOTHER FIGURE: BIOGRAPHY,
PSYCHOANALYSIS, AND SUBJECTIVITY IN ROBERT PENN
WARREN'S POETRY

by

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To Michael, my partner in the poetry of each not-so-average day.

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ABSTRACT

Robert Penn Warren's poetry contains many significant mother figures; however, critics have largely overlooked these mothers, focusing instead on themes of fatherhood in Warren's poetry and on the manner in which Warren's relationship with his own father influenced his work. Though Warren's complex relationship with his father certainly impacted his poetry, his relationship with his mother Ruth Penn Warren was equally multifaceted, and parallels between the mothers of Warren's poetry and the life and character of Ruth Penn Warren are too marked to ignore. Reclaiming the mother figure in Warren's poetry and connecting these poetic mothers to Warren's personal experience can shed new critical light on entire collections such as *Tale of Time* (1966) and *Being Here* (1980). This study utilizes the works of Julia Kristeva, particularly *Powers of Horror* (1980) and *Tales of Love* (1983), as a critical and psychoanalytic framework from which to understand Warren's poetic preoccupation with motherhood. For Kristeva, the concept of motherhood is inherently tied to identity, subjectivity, and agency, themes to which Warren returns again and again throughout his poetry. This study demonstrates how Warren gains increased subjectivity as both a person and a poet through writing his mother into his poetry over the course of his career.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1927, Robert Penn Warren wrote his close friend Allen Tate, explaining the details of his recent engagement to Emma “Cinina” Brescia. After recounting the events that preceded this arrangement—Cinina’s prior engagement to Gordon McKenzie, McKenzie and Warren’s brief stint as roommates, Cinina’s ultimate break with McKenzie in favor of Warren—Warren earnestly wrote to Tate, “I believe you will like Cinina when you meet her, as I hope will be possible this summer. . . . He[r] father is a perfectly charming man, but her mother is a hellion, when she wants to be—which is also enough description. Incidentally, much to my surprise, they approve the business. But, God, imagine Mother” (Clark, *Selected Letters* 112). Ironically, Warren’s feelings about his fiancée’s parents seem to echo his feelings about his own. Warren’s father Robert, admired and respected by his son, resembled to him the “perfectly charming man” Warren describes in this letter, while Warren’s mother Ruth was headstrong, possessive, and at times quite difficult—“a hellion, when she want[ed] to be.” Though Warren took momentary comfort in the fact that his in-laws approved his and Cinina’s nuptial plans, he quickly imagined the difficulty he would face in delivering the news to his own mother: “But, God, imagine Mother.”

Warren’s relationship with Anna Ruth Penn Warren was notably complex and at times strained. Ruth often imposed her own ideas of right and wrong on her son, impositions that began early in Warren’s life. In his 1982 volume of biographical criticism, Floyd C. Watkins relates a story “Old timers” used to tell about Robert Penn Warren. In the early twentieth-century in Guthrie, Kentucky, carrying one’s books home

from school and thus exhibiting characteristics of a good student often incurred the ill will of other, rougher schoolboys. Warren's mother "ordered Robert Penn to bring his books home from school," thereby subjecting her son to the teasing and mild abuse of his peers as they kicked his books across the street. Warren later asserted that the story was not true, but regardless of its veracity, it seems that this story about Ruth Warren and her son was at one time remembered and repeated in the region (43).

This incident is not the only occasion on which Ruth Penn Warren's directive actions burdened Rob Penn. According to Joseph Blotner, author of *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (1997), one of Warren's childhood playmates said Warren's mother "was the most possessive mother I ever saw. . . . She just wanted everything for him. . . . This made a certain crowd dislike him" (qtd. in Blotner 25). Ruth Penn Warren had a nervous disposition, and her well-meaning efforts to help her son sometimes hindered more than anything else. While enrolled at the University of California Berkeley, a placement with multiple disadvantages as far as Warren was concerned, Warren received an invitation from Yale to attend classes during the second semester with a scholarship and stipend. Planning to abruptly abandon his position in California, Warren informed his mother of his good luck. She in turn reported his somewhat unethical intentions to the English departments at both schools, effectively robbing him of this opportunity (Blotner 61-64). Warren was crushed but generously related to his friend Allen Tate that he was the victim of "well meant but misdirected maternal interference" (Clark, *Selected Letters* 101).

This characteristic "maternal interference" haunted Warren throughout his youth and early manhood. Though prone to meddling in her son's affairs, Mrs. Warren avoided gossip, club meetings, and church events. She developed a distinct reputation around

town for the penetrating energy she seemed to concentrate almost solely on her children.

Watkins relates this story:

One school teacher who knew Mrs. Warren well says that “nobody disliked her intensely,” but that she was not by any means the most popular woman in town. And Warren says that she had no desire to be. She “choked her younguns” down peoples’ throats, the teacher says, and they made fun of her because she was so close, so stingy, and so careful with her money. A loving and proud mother can be irritating. (*Then & Now* 53)

Ruth Warren, certainly loving and proud, could also irritate her own children. During his university career at Vanderbilt, she sent Warren scores of letters, many of which would lie on his desk unopened for several weeks. After Warren married Cinina, Ruth began corresponding with her regularly, often checking on the health of the couple and asking if those who gave wedding gifts had been properly acknowledged. According to William Bedford Clark, “Ruth Warren was not without a literary flair of her own” (“Letters from Home” 396). He goes on to comment, “No synopsis can do justice to the steady stream of letters Ruth Warren wrote to her son and his wife during the last year of her life. They deserve publication in full and with proper annotation” (397). In fact, Warren’s earliest poem about his mother, “Letter of a Mother” (1928), memorializes Ruth’s penchant for the epistolary (*Collected Poems* 36-37). Ruth’s literary interests extended beyond elegantly composed personal letters, however, for as a former schoolteacher she was quite well read; Warren remembers, “The first Shakespeare I ever read was from her well-thumbed, multivolumed, green-backed set of Shakespeare (which I still have)” (*Portrait* 51).

Tragically, Ruth Penn Warren fell ill in 1931, when Warren was only twenty-six years old. Warren clearly loved her, for he wrote to Tate, “As you probably know, [Mother] has been pretty sick . . . and I’ve been on tenter hooks about her” (qtd. in Blotner 116). He later remembered that during this time he wrote “The Return: An Elegy” in an attempt to understand his relationship with Ruth, but this attempt was fumbling and in his mind unsuccessful. During her illness Ruth was treated for gallbladder disease, and an abscess as well as gallstones was found in her bowel. Warren drove from Nashville to Jenny Stuart Memorial Hospital in Hopkinsville to sit with his father, feeling guilty and perturbed. Ruth’s surgeries were quite brutal, and her husband Robert Franklin had little hope for her from the beginning of the ordeal. Ruth’s last words to her son before her death were, “Son . . . I like your new suit” (Blotner 121). She passed away soon after. It seems that Warren never truly came to terms with his mother’s life or her death. The two strong-willed individuals clashed with one another constantly, yet they loved each other deeply. Ruth’s untimely death prevented the maturing of a relationship fraught with tension and unanswered questions.

As Floyd Watkins notes, Warren speaks little of his mother in his letters, interviews, and prose (*Then & Now* 52). She does appear in his poetry, though references to her are at times oblique. In contrast, Warren writes much more about his father Robert Franklin Warren, of whom he seems to have felt more congenial. In 1988, Warren published *Portrait of a Father*, a short, rambling narrative that explains the history of Warren’s family, primarily focusing on Robert Franklin. In this volume, Warren writes admiringly of his father, “Even as I now think of him in his forties he was somewhat memorable, with the dignified calm of his face, the thrust of his Roman nose, and,

especially in the glint of artificial light, the bald head seeming to be carved from some stone, even marble” (11). At six feet tall, the proud and independent Robert Franklin must indeed have carried himself with the dignity of a Roman official (9).

Warren’s father, a failed poet himself, passed a love of poetry on to his son, a bond the two shared (Watkins, Hiers, and Weaks 150). According to Warren, his father “knew a great deal [of poetry] by heart, a fact I well remember from very early childhood. One of the first things I remember his reading to me was ‘Horatius at the Bridge.’ I made him read it over and over again, evening after evening” (*Portrait* 36). After Robert Franklin tired of reading “Horatius at the Bridge,” he made his son recite it to himself so that he might be spared the rereading. He later read Robert Penn “How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (*Portrait* 36-37), a poem that undoubtedly influenced Warren’s famous poem “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943). Warren’s love of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” extended into his professional career, when he wrote an essay entitled “A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading” (1946) to serve as an introduction to a new edition of Coleridge’s poem.

In spite of Robert Franklin’s involvement in his children’s lives—reading to them, taking them on picnics, and arranging art lessons for Warren—Warren felt even as a child that he did not truly know his father (Blotner 21-22). He continued to feel this way as an adult, for he opens *Portrait of a Father* by saying, “My father, as the years since his death pass, becomes to me more and more a man of mystery” (7). Robert Franklin’s aura of mystery resulted in part because he was not especially affectionate with his children, he refused to talk in detail about his past, and he avoided verbalizing his emotions (Blotner

21-22). According to Blotner, Warren later speculated that his father maintained this rather severe degree of reserve because he felt himself to be a failure: Robert Franklin had given up hopes of a promising career in order to marry Ruth more quickly, for he feared that his engagement to her had already stretched much too long (Blotner 7). He laid aside his plans of practicing law and writing and instead settled for a routine business career because he truly loved Ruth, and indeed their marriage was a happy and fulfilling one. However, it seems that Robert Franklin could never quite forget the business potential that he surrendered in favor of this marriage, and at his lowest point he was forced to declare bankruptcy. Did Warren resent his mother for robbing his father of a more material kind of success or of intellectual pursuits? Regardless of the answer to this question, Robert Penn became determined to be a success in his own right, compensating in part for the failure his father felt himself to be (Blotner 22).

Because of the publication of *Portrait of a Father*, Warren's relationship with Robert Franklin has been explored and cited by scholars as one of Warren's literary impetuses, and indeed his sheer prolificacy suggests a desire to be different than his father—to be a literary success. Many of Warren's major works, including *Night Rider* (1939), *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), *All the King's Men* (1946), "The Circus in the Attic" (1947), *Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices* (1953), "Mortmain" (1960), and countless shorter poems concern themselves with the idea of the father—either the biological, cultural, or literary father, or more often a combination. In many cases, the struggle with these fathers evokes Harold Bloom's theory of poetry established in his 1973 volume *The Anxiety of Influence*: in essence, a new poet must create original work in order to survive, but the influence of previous poets creates anxiety; this anxiety causes

all but the best poets to produce work that while unlike that of their forebears, is yet weak. In order to succeed, a new poet must, to some extent, kill his literary father. Many of Warren's male characters struggle to some degree with the idea of killing a father, quite notably Jack Burden in *All the King's Men*.

Because of the importance of father figures in Warren's work, scholars and critics have given the issue a good deal of attention. Works such as Randolph Runyon's "Willie's Wink and Other Doubtful Paternal Texts in the Novels of Robert Penn Warren" (1990), Lewis Simpson's "The Poet and the Father: Robert Penn Warren and Thomas Jefferson" (2000), William Bedford Clark's "Letters from Home: Filial Guilt in Robert Penn Warren" (2002), Joseph Millichap's "Robert Penn Warren's Classicism: Deciphering Dead Languages and Questioning Father Figures" (2004), and Lucinda MacKethan's "'Trying to Make Contact': 'Mortmain' as Pre-text for Robert Penn Warren's *Portrait of a Father*" (2005) address in detail Warren's treatment of fatherhood in his fiction and poetry. This critical focus on fatherhood is not at all out of place or surprising, particularly given Warren's personal struggle with the implications of his relationship with his own father.

This focus on fatherhood is appropriate for another reason: like many male modernist authors of his day, Warren primarily wrote about men. His most well-known and critically acclaimed works of fiction center on males and a traditional patriarchal social structure. For example, the novel *All the King's Men* chronicles the life of politically active father figure Governor Willie Stark, while female characters are secondary and, with perhaps one or two exceptions, underdeveloped. In *Robert Penn*

Warren's Circus Aesthetic and the Southern Renaissance, Patricia Bradley describes

Warren's treatment of males:

Warren's preoccupation with the sensibilities of the privileged white male and his conflicted depictions of the feminine and racial other are traits consistent with the high modernist tendencies of his early career. And yet, even as Warren clings to this modernist tunnel vision so consistent with his conservative southern upbringing, he is aware, as were other modernists, of the diminished stature of his men of privilege and the limited world in which they move. (xxi)

Indeed, Warren did recognize "the diminished stature" of many of his male characters, writing them not as invincible, but even in some cases as tragically flawed. These male characters are generally well developed, and readers are often privileged to their inner thoughts. In her 1997 volume *Sleeping with the Boss: Female Subjectivity and Narrative Pattern in Robert Penn Warren*, Lucy Ferriss notes of Warren's novels *All the King's Men* and *The Cave* that "insofar as these novels do focus on personal consciousness . . . it is that of the male characters. Where the inner thoughts of women are represented, it is not for their own sake . . . but in order to create a context or cause for action" (18). In the case of even prominent female characters in *All the King's Men* such as Anne Stanton and Sadie Burke, some of their most significant actions are never fully explained, yet are necessary for advancing the plot. Readers are never privileged to Anne's own perspective on the issue of her affair. Likewise, readers cannot completely comprehend Sadie's rather complex relationship with Willie because her story is told from a male point of view, with no mention of her personal thoughts or motivations.

There are exceptions to this somewhat one-sided approach, however; in several of Warren's works of fiction, including *Band of Angels* (1955) and *Meet Me in the Green Glen* (1971), he does highlight a female character's perspective. According to Ferriss, in both these works "Warren attempts to render a woman as subject, without cloaking her subjectivity behind a male narrator's voice or behind cryptic authorial narration" (113). *Band of Angels* is particularly significant in this regard because Warren chose to write of protagonist Amantha Starr in the first person. In attempting to render woman as subject and minimize the "cryptic authorial narration" Ferriss describes, Warren must appropriate the female voice, especially through the first person female perspective of *Band of Angels*. Warren's attempt to give voice to protagonist Amantha Starr in this manner has been met with mixed reviews by critics. For example, contemporary Harnett T. Kane described *Band of Angels* as "a work with faults" and "over-melodramatic," though in the same breath he pronounced it "one of the most deeply-felt works of fiction of the past few years" (122). Perhaps this mixed critical review resulted in part from the difficult, though not impossible, position in which Warren, a white male, placed himself by appropriating a female voice for his own purpose as author.

In spite of a comparative lack of critical attention, the women of Warren's fiction have begun to emerge from the background of his works and move forward into the critical consciousness, thanks in large part to Ferriss's groundbreaking study. However, Ferriss's study centers predominantly on fiction; Warren's poetry is also full of many significant female figures, specifically mother figures. Thus far, critics have overlooked these mother figures, focusing instead on themes of fatherhood in Warren's poetry. Though Warren's position as a modernist male poet and his relationship with his own

father certainly justify these studies, in several of Warren's collections of poetry the idea of motherhood or mothering serves as a primary theme that should inform a comprehensive reading of this poetry. Furthermore, Warren's biography may contain the key to more fully grasping the intricacies of motherhood in his poems. As previously described, Warren's relationship with his mother Ruth was deeply complex. If Warren's relationship with his father has informed many critical readings of his canon, could not his equally multifaceted relationship with his mother do the same? Reclaiming the mother figure in Warren's poetry and connecting these poetic mothers to Warren's personal experience sheds new critical light on entire collections such as *Tale of Time* (1966) and *Being Here* (1980). To correct this critical omission, I will argue that Warren's problematic relationship with his mother serves as catalyst for a considerable portion of his poetry, a catalyst that critics have long overlooked in studies that claim to closely and thoroughly analyze Warren's work. The implications of this present study are far-reaching, for it expands Lucy Ferriss's feminist criticism of Warren's fiction, bringing the mother characters in his poetry to the forefront of the critical consciousness as well.

Reclaiming the mother figure has increasingly become of interest in the field of literature in part because of the work and influence of Julia Kristeva. Though Kristeva examines the concept of motherhood throughout her entire canon, her early trilogy—*Powers of Horror* (1980), *Tales of Love* (1983), and *Black Sun* (1987)—focuses significantly on the relationship between motherhood and the formation of individual subjectivity. The first two volumes are particularly helpful by providing the lens of psychoanalysis to understand the relationship between motherhood and subjectivity in Warren's poetry. Kristeva's theories build on Lacanian theories concerning the

acquisition of language as a child's entry into subjectivity and the consequent separation from the mother figure that language acquisition necessitates. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva connects the mother to the idea of the abject, a concept defined by Kristeva scholar John Lechte as "the psychoanalytical elaboration of universal horror" (158). The abject is a place of no boundaries, the place between the united oneness of baby and mother and the place of individual subjectivity, in which the mother becomes an object (or other) and the child becomes a subject (or "I"). A corpse is an example of the abject, for a corpse is not fully human yet retains human form and features, inhabiting a cultural space where meaning begins to collapse and horror flourishes. Motherhood, the abject, and horror figure prominently in Warren's poem "The Return: An Elegy," and thus Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* offers a valuable framework from which readers can begin to better understand the horrific imagery Warren uses throughout the poem.

In *Tales of Love*, the second volume in Kristeva's trilogy, Kristeva discusses mother figures in terms of their necessarily close connection to their children, noting that in a baby's life "the first affections, the first imitations, and the first vocalizations as well are directed toward the mother" (27). As a result of this inherent connection, motherhood directly impacts, among other things, the formation of language, and language is necessary for a child to understand his selfhood. In order to further understand his selfhood, Kristeva posits, a child must learn through language acquisition (i.e., understanding himself to be an "I" and not a "you") to love himself, a process termed narcissism. When a mother begins to act possessively toward her child, smothering him in excessive amounts of love, this love may actually prevent a healthy realization of narcissism that then enables the child to love others in his own turn:

If love stems from narcissistic idealization, it has nothing to do with the protective wrapping over skin and sphincters that maternal care provides for the baby.

Worse yet, if that protection continues, if the mother “clings” to her offspring, laying on it the request that originates in her own request as confused neoteinic and hysteric in want of love, the chances are that neither love nor psychic life will ever hatch from such an egg. (34)

The possessive mother, in seeking an all-encompassing love from her child, ultimately renders it impossible for the child to love at all, thereby preventing the child from attaining subjectivity. These theories are particularly interesting in light of Ruth Warren’s possessive nature, a nature not extreme enough to prevent Warren from ultimately realizing his own subjectivity, but one that certainly played a major role in his journey toward self actualization, particularly in his poetry. In Warren’s poem “Tale of Time,” the speaker addresses the death of his mother from a place of increased subjectivity and self-actualization, suggesting that after his mother’s death the speaker has begun to develop a sense of self-love that then allows him to reconcile with the mother figure. For this reason, Kristeva’s *Tales of Love* serves as a useful context for understanding this poem.

My study is divided into three chapters that examine motherhood in Warren’s poetry throughout his career, primarily through the lens of biographical criticism. Kristeva’s extensive work on motherhood and poetic language also offers a valuable framework from which to approach this topic. The first chapter discusses the 1935 poem “The Return: An Elegy,” written by Warren immediately prior to his mother’s death. The bitter and discourteous tone of the poem is remarkable in light of the fact that the poem

concerns the death of the persona's mother, an event typically approached with at least a semblance of respect. The speaker, rather than mourning in a socially acceptable manner, refers to his mother in derogatory terms such as "the old bitch" and "the old fox," tropes that repeat like refrains throughout the poem. The second chapter examines Warren's 1960-1966 collection *Tale of Time*, poems pointedly different in tone from "The Return: An Elegy" yet similar in theme. One poem in this collection, also entitled "Tale of Time," is divided into six sections and contains biographic information specific to Ruth Penn Warren. Unlike the speaker in "The Return," the speaker in "Tale of Time" appears regretful, repentant, and sad when he considers his past relationship with and attitude towards his mother, a perspective seemingly gained in his older and wiser years. Finally, the third chapter concerns *Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980*, a collection in which the theme of motherhood is prominent. In this collection, the speaker, presumably Warren himself, reflects on his poetic and physical comings-of-age, processes he never truly finishes but continues to explore. The relationship with the mother is central to this process and therefore stands central to these poems, as Randolph Runyon observes of *Being Here*: "[I]f childhood is the setting for these poems, grief for the mother is what takes place in that setting, projected backward from adulthood" (137). The nature of Warren's grief for Ruth, ever present in his poetic canon, shifts from combined anger and horror toward her at her death to love and acceptance as the poet ages and comes to terms with their complex relationship.

Certainly, Warren's relationship with his mother was not wholly negative; in fact, according to Blotner, he was closer to Ruth than to his father before her death (120). However, some scholars tend to overlook the tensions present in their relationship.

According to Watkins, “When Ruth Warren appears directly in a poem or when she is a prototype of a character, she always is depicted with love and admiration” (52). Though Victor Strandberg finds more tension in Warren’s mother poetry than Watkins, he also seems somewhat hesitant to link Ruth Warren too closely with her son’s poetry. In his discussion of several poems including “The Return: An Elegy” and “Letter of a Mother,” Strandberg states, “In culling out these images of burning guilt, I of course do not mean to psychoanalyze the poet or to imply that his theme of psychic pollution derives mainly from this tormented mother-son relationship” (*Poetic Vision* 132). Admittedly, Watkins and Strandberg made these assertions before the publication of *Portrait of a Father*, a publication that made autobiographical readings of Warren’s work more viable. However, even since the publication of *Portrait of a Father*, Warren’s relationship with his mother Ruth has remained quite largely overlooked.

Though we should not be overly eager to read Warren’s poetry autobiographically, the links between Ruth Warren and the mothers described in these poems are too marked to ignore. Certainly, then, Warren’s mother served as a catalyst to creativity and poetic invention. The complexities of their relationship provided Warren with fuel for poetic meditation throughout his career. William Bedford Clark says it best: “Were ‘The Return: An Elegy’ an isolated instance, we might be justified in leaving things there. . . . Yet the theme of ‘The Return’—a wandering and errant child is called home—reasserts itself throughout the Warren canon” (“Letter from Home” 386). This study seeks to follow the themes, beginning with “The Return: An Elegy” and continuing to their conclusion later in Warren’s career, and in the process readers may better understand Warren’s overall poetic inspiration and impetus.

CHAPTER ONE

MOTHER AS OTHER: ABJECTION AND HORROR IN “THE
RETURN: AN ELEGY”

Robert Penn Warren had two primary poetic mentors during his time at Vanderbilt University: Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom. Tate and Ransom, affiliates of the Fugitive movement of the 1920s, were impacted both by modernists Eliot and Pound and also by the general revival of metaphysical poetry. As a protégé of Ransom and Tate, Warren began to produce poetry imitative of the metaphysical poets and also of T.S. Eliot, including poems such as “Bearded Oaks” and “Love’s Parable” (Justus 50). However, with the publication of “The Return: An Elegy” in 1930, Warren’s tone began to shift toward poetry that is distinctly Warrenesque. Though “The Return” maintains a dark tone with Eliotic characteristics similar to much of Warren’s previous work, it also signifies the beginning of his experimentation with poetic form and language. According to biographer Joseph Blotner, in “The Return” “[Warren’s] style, though still somewhat derivative, was more flexible and daring, and the emotion expressed was more sharp, direct, and personal” (118). This sharpness results in part from the poem’s subject matter. “The Return” conveys a deeply personal grappling with the death of a mother, a grappling that does not shy away from the irreverent or taboo. Throughout the poem, the dead mother is referred to as “the old bitch” or “the old fox,” and the speaker appears more angry, disoriented, and resentful than he appears mournful.

Warren claims to have written “The Return: An Elegy” before he discovered the severe illness of his mother Ruth Penn Warren, an illness that ultimately caused her death

in 1931. In his later years, Warren categorized the poem as an experiment in form and tone, and “not, apparently, so far as he said, any sort of psychological breakthrough in fathoming the complex relationship with his mother” (Blotner 118). However, when Warren first learned of his mother’s illness, he felt that “The Return” now “seemed a thing of ill omen, tangled with all sorts of emotions and crazily with some sense of nameless complicity and guilt” (*Thirtieth Year* 15). Warren’s sense of guilt stemmed from the idea that perhaps he had unknowingly written a wish fulfillment into “The Return,” essentially predicting and then writing his mother into an actual death that he neither intended nor suspected. Notably, Warren had written the following paraphrase of the poem’s content into an early draft: “The matter is, roughly, this: I have been summoned to the funeral of my mother (a fine woman if I do say so myself) and have departed, dutifully and at considerable expense, the eastern city” (qtd. in Blotner 117). Though Warren later denied any connection between the poem and his relationship with his own mother, his statement alone suggests that perhaps his denial was not entirely honest. In light of Warren’s complicated relationship with Ruth, a possessive and headstrong woman reluctant to acknowledge her adult son’s autonomy, the horrific imagery and echoes of anger and resentment in this poem seem, while admittedly intense, like a probable response to excessive parental governance.

Warren scholars and critics have historically approached “The Return: An Elegy” from a rather New Critical perspective, or at the very least, a perspective that heavily privileges close reading, and there are several good reasons for this. Because of his association with John Crowe Ransom and other prominent New Critics, Warren is often categorized as a New Critic himself, and his canon lends itself well to this kind of

analysis. Notably, according to Fred R. Thiemann, Warren's brand of New Criticism differs slightly from that of his New Critic colleagues, who unequivocally rejected the idea that considering external influences may be helpful in the interpretation of a text: "Warren . . . was never comfortable with the label 'New Critic'. . . . He considers extrinsic factors relevant only so far as they help reveal the meaning of words in the text" (538). James Justus further describes this unique brand of New Criticism in *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*:

He believes that content and form in poetry are inseparable, and he has insisted that poetry is separable from ethics (and from religion, politics, and science). The poem itself is both greater than and different from the materials that go into its making and the effects that it subsequently has on the reader; it is a made unity incorporating diverse and often contradictory impulses. (117-18)

Such contradictory impulses dominate "The Return: An Elegy," contradictions from which the "made unity" that Justus describes may be difficult for readers to determine. The sheer complexity of the poem—full of paradoxes, absurdities, and inconsistencies—easily allows for a close reading that seeks not to understand so much as to experience.

Consequently, though many Warren scholars and critics have adopted a somewhat New Critical approach to "The Return: An Elegy," none have yet attempted a detailed and in-depth study of the poem in its own right. Most critical analyses of "The Return" can be found tucked away in larger volumes examining great swaths of Warren's canon, and in many cases these short analyses of the poem are less than two or three pages in length. Throughout these brief studies, scholars are divided on the overall meaning,

significance, and merit of the poem. James Justus's primarily aesthetic analysis is less than complimentary:

“The Return” is a poem of fits and starts, whose fine moments are too often overshadowed by posturings. The brilliant passage,

turn backward turn backward O time in your flight

and make me a child again just for tonight

good lord he's wet the bed come bring a light . . . (SP 318)

is an affective conjunction of sentimental song and childhood trauma in a mature mind resisting both sentimentality and dependency, but it is also contextually obtrusive in its strengths and aggressively flashy in its effects. (52)

The same passage that prompts Justus's criticism evokes a different response from Floyd C. Watkins: “In ‘The Return: An Elegy’ the poet goes home in his imagination to his mother's funeral. In grief and confusion, he sentimentally wished for one moment from his childhood” (138). Watkins's interpretation is more sympathetic towards the speaker, whom he characterizes as grieving and confused. Interestingly, Watkins refers directly to the poet in his analysis, thereby drawing attention to the biographic elements of this poem. Like Watkins, James Grimshaw interprets the poem rather sympathetically:

“Warren's imagery is dark, and the persona's appeal is a desire to bring his mother comfort in her time of sorrow” (*Understanding RPW* 112). However, other scholars find little of comfort in the poem, instead observing a harsh insensitivity from which the speaker confronts the death of a mother. In *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren*, Victor Strandberg argues that this poem, among others, demonstrates “a tragic estrangement between mother and son that might later contribute to the theme of psychic

defilement” (131). This clear critical divide is understandable in light of the complexity of “The Return,” though perhaps the sheer complexity of the poem calls for a different kind of reading of the text rather than the traditionally employed New Critical approach. In assessing the poem’s theme as one of psychic defilement, Strandberg may touch upon a helpful framework from which to read “The Return”; analyzing “The Return” through psychoanalysis, specifically through the work of Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, can shed a new level of insight and understanding on this poem and on the mother-son relationship.

Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1980) opens, under the heading “Neither Subject Nor Object,” with an ominous statement: “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated” (1). What is this abjection? What causes the violent, dark revolts of being, and why does abjection reside outside of the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable? Abjection is, just as Kristeva’s heading states, neither subject nor object, though its most important identifying characteristic is its opposition to *I*, or the ego. As neither subject nor object, the abject is a place where boundaries collapse; it is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (*Powers* 4). In essence, the abject resists human attempts at categorization, therefore occupying the space where human meaning begins to disintegrate. Kristeva scholar John Lechte describes the abject as “the ambiguous, the in-between . . . a composite resistant to unity” (160). Kristeva offers several examples of the abject in *Powers of Horror*. A corpse is one such

example—not fully human, a corpse still retains the figure of a human and is therefore abject. A pus-filled wound is likewise abject, since it smells of death but “does not *signify* death” (*Powers* 3). These two examples—the corpse and a pus-filled wound—illustrate yet another characteristic of the abject, its tendency to produce feelings of horror.

Liars and traitors as hypocrites are also abject; amorality and immorality are not in themselves abject, but Kristeva considers all guilty of hypocrisy, a place between boundaries, to be abject. For example, a judge who appears noble and publicly enforces the law but simultaneously performs unethical acts out of the public eye is abject, being neither truly noble nor entirely corrupt; this understanding of hypocritical politicians as abject is just one of the many social and political applications of this theory. For Kristeva, the Nazi crimes in death camps such as Auschwitz are the ultimate expressions of abjection, for “death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things” (*Powers* 4). The Nazis’ appropriation of the good and sacred—namely childhood and science—for their own evil ends render their actions abject.

Though the Nazi death camps serve as an example of abjection in the extreme, for Kristeva, abjection in even its milder forms always results in horror. Individuals feel this horror when they sense the disintegration of meaning that abjection signifies. Meaning has collapsed; the abject resists categories, leaving the onlooker aware of the abject’s otherness yet unable to categorize it. Kristeva provides this account of her awareness of the abject as “other”:

A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate,

loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. (*Powers 2*)

Humans encounter this crushing weight of meaningless when they encounter the abject. Because of this, Lechte describes the abject as “the psychoanalytical elaboration of universal horror” (158). The abject, then, is a universal experience, and the horror that results from the abject is likewise universal.

For Kristeva, the abject is strongly associated with, and even born out of, a universal relationship—motherhood (*Powers 13*). Building on Lacanian theories concerning language acquisition, Kristeva observes that in the pre-symbolic state of human existence (i.e., the state before language acquisition and a child’s awareness of his or her own subjectivity or ego) mother and child are one. The mother meets all the child’s needs, and the child is not aware of himself as an “I” or aware of the mother as a “you.” Kristeva essentially argues that in order for the child to break away from the mother and realize his own subjectivity, pre-symbolic drives must act to reject the mother—essentially abjecting her—not exactly as an other, for in the pre-symbolic state a mother still meets all of a child’s needs, but as something that is not “I”—something abject.

Several Kristeva scholars offer additional illuminating descriptions that can help clarify the complex concept of motherhood and the abject. Sara Beardsworth, author of *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (2004), describes the concept this way:

The psychoanalytic account of presymbolic subject formation illuminates this thought by presenting abjection as a structure that composes the *fearsome beginnings of otherness*, where there is as yet no other, and no space for the ego to

come into being. What abjection means here is the struggle to set up such a space, a struggle, precisely, with what is not parted from, and which threatens to collapse that space: paradigmatically, the mother's body. (83)

In Beardsworth's description, the abjection of the mother is a continual struggle born of fear; the mother's body is the most direct threat to the ego. In contrast, Lechte describes the mother as abject in this way: "Before the 'beginning' of the symbolic, there must have already been moves, by way of the drives, towards expelling/rejecting the mother. . . . With the various little rituals tied to cleanliness, toilet training, eating habits, etc., the 'mother' is gradually rejected through becoming, at the pre-symbolic level, the prototype of what the drives expel" (159). Therefore, according to Lechte, the process of abjection begins before the full acquisition of language, in the midst of the mundane activities of toddler life such as eating and toilet training. In sum, breaking away from and rejecting the mother figure is a crucial component of subjectivity formation, a component that of necessity renders the mother abject and begins before a child can eat, speak, or use the toilet on his own.

Though this process may be stated simply enough, its actual presentation in human life can be much more complex. Kristeva recognizes the difficulty of this process for both child and mother:

It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm . . . is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. The child can serve its mother as a token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason

for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn. (*Powers* 13)

This process, then, is problematic for the child because it necessitates the relinquishment of comfort and security, and it is simultaneously problematic for the mother, as she must let go of a child whose physical and emotional presence may have now become her primary source of authentication. A mother who cannot completely relinquish her child will instead stifle his growth, possessively denying him subjectivity.

This discussion raises the question of how the abject features in Warren's "The Return: An Elegy." How can Kristeva's theories enhance our understanding of this complex poem and its place in Warren's canon? By reading the "The Return" through the lens of psychoanalysis and by understanding the dead mother in this poem as abjected, passages that previously appeared baffling, horrific, and disjointed are now clear pieces of a unified whole. Furthermore, the poem can now be read as one of the initial steps in the poet's realization of his subjectivity, both as a human and as a writer, and the results of this step towards poetic self-actualization will be evident later in Warren's canon.

The poem, written in 1931, begins with a rather grim image of what appears to be a cemetery:

The east wind finds the gap bringing rain:

Rain in the pine wind shaking the stiff pine.

Beneath the wind the hollow gorges whine.

The pines decline. (1-4)

A bleak, windy, pine-filled landscape dominates the rest of the poem. Warren's tone in "The Return," like that of some of his earlier poetry, reminds one of T.S. Eliot's,

particularly in its “theme of anguished striving of spirit,” as Strandberg has noted (*A Colder Fire* 11). The next two lines of the poem are no more comforting than those opening lines: “Slow film of rain creeps down the loam again / Where the blind and nameless bones recline” (5-6). Though these “images of death—bones and blind eyes,” appear consistently throughout the poem, these lines are the reader’s first clue that death is indeed the subject of “The Return” (Blotner 117).

In stanza two, the speaker’s tone shifts. Like Warren’s imagery of death, these tonal shifts are also reminiscent of Eliot (Blotner 117). In this stanza, the reader becomes more deeply immersed into the despairing, grotesque horror that characterizes “The Return”: “all are conceded to the earth’s absolute chemistry / they burn like faggots in— of damp and dark—the monstrous bulging / flame” (7-9). Warren’s use of alliteration— damp and dark—combined with his choice of repulsive-sounding words such as “monstrous” and “bulging,” work to render the speaker’s feelings of horror palpable. Man—defined in this stanza as “calcium phosphate lust speculation faith treachery”—remains, like the pine trees, at the mercy of “earth’s absolute chemistry” (10). Though evergreens commonly serve as literary reminders of life, Strandberg asserts that in the opening of this poem they do just the opposite: “Intimations of immortality are not particularly encouraging upon a closer look at the evergreens which form the setting of this poem. Surrounding the graveyard beside which Warren had concocted his definition of man as ‘calcium phosphate lust faith treachery,’ these pines are dark, sleepy, submissive to wind and storm” (*A Colder Fire* 10). Indeed, the storm seems to bring with it nothing but destruction, and the speaker appears hopeless and alone.

Twice the speaker repeats, in what seems to be almost a whisper, the phrase “*tell me its name*,” begging the wind to give him a name—any name—that he might use to understand “it” (12, 19). But what is this “it”? Before readers can find out, the speaker abruptly follows his last entreaty of “*tell me its name*” with an expression of subjectivity combined with fear:

I have a name: I am not blind.

Eyes, not blind, press to the Pullman pane

Survey the driving dark and silver taunt of rain.

What will I find

What will I find beyond the snoring pine?

O eyes locked blind in death’s immaculate design

Shall fix their last distrust in mine. (20-26)

Unlike the nameless “it,” the speaker has a name and eyes to see and interpret the world—in other words, the speaker is aware of his own subjectivity, his status as an “I.” However, this awareness does not empower the speaker or give him an increased sense of confidence, as one might initially suppose; instead, the speaker’s awareness of his subjectivity simultaneously awakens him to the possibilities of a threat to that subjectivity, the possibilities of danger and horror, and he begins to feel afraid: “*What will I find / What will I find beyond the snoring pine?*” What the speaker specifically fears to find is a corpse (“O eyes locked blind in death’s immaculate design”), but not just any corpse: the speaker fears a corpse whose eyes will “fix their last distrust in mine.” “Fix” is an action verb signifying the corpse’s ability to act as if alive. What the speaker truly fears in this passage, therefore, is the abject, a dead body that even in death

exercises a kind of power over the speaker, rendering that body, as far as the speaker is concerned, neither completely dead nor completely alive. “Fix” also implies a static permanence, suggesting that the speaker fears the corpse’s ability to permanently exercise a kind of power over him; the ambiguity of this simple word increases the sense of horror in this stanza. The speaker, like Kristeva, recognizes the corpse as a prime example of the abject.

If the theory of the abject does indeed apply to “The Return,” then the speaker’s assertion of his subjectivity in this stanza, while appearing assured and definite, is likely only a cover for his greater uncertainty. Who is the speaker in opposition to the other forces in the poem, specifically in opposition to the nameless “it” that appears in lines twelve and nineteen? In stanza six, the speaker reveals an additional clue that begins to answer this question: “In gorges where the dead fox lies the fern / Will rankest loop the battened frond and fall” (32-33). This dead fox, then, must be connected in some manner to the corpse mentioned previously. Most important for readers to understand at this point in the poem is the speaker’s distance from corpse and dead fox alike; the fox in these lines remains undoubtedly “othered.”

In the next stanza, the speaker appears even more agitated:

the old bitch is dead

what have I said!

I have only said what the wind said[. . .] (37-39)

Directly after expressing this contempt, the speaker now definitively reveals the identity of these poetic characters—the fox, the corpse, and the old bitch—for just a few lines later, the speaker whispers, “*does my mother wake*” (46). The reader now has the final

clue, the last piece to this puzzle of horror, despair, loneliness, and anger—the mother is the abject, and the speaker in this poem rejects or expels her, just as in Kristeva’s theory a child must reject and abject the mother in order to achieve subjectivity. The mother is corpse, fox, bitch, and mother simultaneously. The speaker seems conflicted even as he speaks these alternate names for “mother”—his visceral reaction is to call her “the old bitch,” while a competing sensibility causes him to immediately react to his own designation: “what have I said!” In the above stanza, the wind serves as a sort of scapegoat for the speaker’s disrespect, absolving him of any responsibility for his chosen referent. Throughout the rest of the poem, the speaker continues to identify his mother as “the old fox,” a name that repeats like a refrain. The fox appellation seems strangely appropriate when connected with the bleak wilderness landscape, in part because the term connotes a harsh remoteness, as does the landscape itself. This term also conjures the image of a “lone fox,” an image that yet again emphasizes otherness and distance.

Warren scholars have often commented on these derisive names for “mother,” names that place the speaker in stark contrast to typical postures of mourning. Strandberg acknowledges this disparity, finding the names inconsistent with the speaker’s grief: “Literally a poem of passage in that it treats that awful rite of passage, the death of a parent, ‘The Return’ interrupts its outpouring of grief—‘the dark and swollen orchid of this sorrow’—with subterranean expressions that harshly contradict the youth’s surface mood of bereavement: ‘the old bitch is dead / what have I said!’” (*Poetic Vision* 131). Like Strandberg, Justus considers these names in juxtaposition to the rest of the poem, explaining the contrast between the names and the speaker’s supposed grief through naturalism: “In the early poem on the death of the mother, ‘The Return: An Elegy,’ we

also find two opposing registers: the conventionally elegiac is offset by the conventionally impious, and the mother becomes ‘the old fox’ and ‘the old bitch.’ In that poem both registers are variations harmonized by the poet’s unrelieved naturalistic vision” (79). While “The Return” may indeed contain echoes and brief moments of grief, grief and mourning do not seem to be the primary emotions evoked by the poem; rather, horror, fear, and uncertainty dominate “The Return” from the poem’s beginning. Strandberg’s and Justus’s readings of the poem, while certainly helpful, are predicated on the fact that the speaker is indeed in mourning, and the alternate names the speaker uses for the mother—specifically “the old fox” and “the old bitch”—are explained away by noting Warren’s preference for the naturalistic, or by remarking the speaker’s overall sense of guilt that colors his mourning process (Strandberg 131-32). While naturalistic imagery and a sense of guilt certainly color “The Return,” they do not fully account for these very specific terms, “the old fox” and “the old bitch,” terms that in combination connote an emotion even beyond bleak naturalism or guilt.

In order to read “The Return” as an expression of abjection, as I am advocating, the poem itself cannot be considered primarily an outpouring of grief, as many Warren scholars have previously considered it. When reading the poem through the framework of Kristevan psychoanalysis, these names for mother become an expression of emerging subjectivity, rather than an expression of youthful guilt or an attempt to deal with great trauma. These names represent the speaker’s active abjection of the mother, a normal and healthy process necessary for individual growth. In addition, these names no longer stand in opposition to the rest of the poem; instead, they are the natural outgrowth of the horror the speaker describes in the opening stanzas. Reading “The Return” as a poem of

mourning, while an understandable and seemingly logical interpretation, does not adequately explain many aspects of the poem, including these alternate names for mother.

Another oft-quoted and analyzed passage in “The Return” is stanza thirteen:

turn backward turn backward O time in your flight

and make me a child again just for tonight

good lord he’s wet the bed come bring a light[. . .] (77-79)

This passage demonstrates a distinct change in tone from the stanzas directly previous that focus on the bleak pines and the death of the old fox. For Strandberg, this passage represents the speaker’s Eliotic attempt at humor: “This is the only humor that Warren’s grimness of mood permits in this poem, and even this touch of humor is strictly functional: such an escapist view of time, Warren implies, is the intellectual equivalent to wetting the bed” (*A Colder Fire* 11). Wetting the bed, of course, demonstrates an overall lack of self-control and agency. Watkins observes that this passage is taken almost directly from a passage written by the popular poet Elizabeth Akers Allen. For Watkins, this passage is yet another expression of grief: “In grief and confusion, he sentimentally wished for one moment from his childhood. . . . The ironic recollection called up from the past and childhood is only one line long: ‘good lord he’s wet the bed come bring a light.’ The desire for innocence turns into an unpleasant episode of embarrassment and physical discomfort” (*Then & Now* 138). In both Strandberg’s and Watkins’s readings, the attempt to return to childhood is harmful—either intellectually childish and irresponsible, such as wetting the bed, or a reminder of embarrassing dependence. In a Kristevan reading, in order for the speaker to achieve subjectivity, the mother must be abandoned through abjection; the speaker cannot “turn backward turn backward O time” while

simultaneously embracing his autonomy. The effect of turning back is, as Watkins and Strandberg have noted, both irresponsible and humiliating.

Near the end of the poem, the poet seems to reconcile himself to the designation “old fox” in spite of his continuing, though perhaps more feeble, protestations to himself:

the old fox is dead
 what is said is said
 heaven rest the hoary head
 what have I said!
 . . . I have only said what the wind said
 honor thy father and mother in the days of thy youth
 for time uncoils like the cottonmouth[. . .] (88-94)

The speaker seems to wholly accept his mother, once a close and intimate figure, as the old fox, saying to himself, “what is said is said.” The mother is now abjected—this part of the process of acquiring subjectivity is complete. However, though the mother now remains entirely othered, the speaker still expresses some love for her: “heaven rest the hoary head.” The speaker then asserts the traditional biblical sentiment, “honor thy father and mother in the days of thy youth.” Why, according to the speaker, should one do this? Because “time uncoils like the cottonmouth”—children grow, become adults, and the time for separation from mother and father comes quickly. Honor your parents while you can, the speaker seems to say, because once they are abjected, you can honor them no more. Though later in Warren’s canon readers will see that this is not entirely the case—that abjection and honor for parents need not be mutually exclusive—at this point in the

process of acquiring poetic subjectivity, a complete break with the maternal figure appears necessary.

For Kristeva, abjection is only the first step in the process of acquiring individual autonomy. Ultimately, this process reconciles child and separated mother, a resolution that is counterintuitively achieved by acknowledging the fear and horror of being human; this fear initially emerges when a child begins to separate from the mother figure and first recognizes the breakdown of once-firm boundaries—mother is neither “I” nor “other,” at least initially. According to Kristeva, this process is intricately tied to the nature of literature and writing:

If “something maternal” happens to bear upon the uncertainty that I call abjection, it illuminates the literary scription of the essential struggle that a writer (man or woman) has to engage in with what he calls demonic only to call attention to it as the inseparable obverse of his very being, of the other (sex) that torments and possesses him. Does one write under any other condition than being possessed by abjection, in an indefinite catharsis? (*Powers* 208)

Great literature, therefore, is in one way or another an expression of abjection, an expression of the horror which humanity must confront daily. In Warren’s “The Return: An Elegy,” this expression is clear. Like other great authors, Warren consistently re-engages with abjection throughout his canon, searching for a definitive sense of subjectivity and agency. Though definitive subjectivity may be impossible to achieve in its purest form, the “indefinite catharsis” of writing that Kristeva describes results, at least in Warren’s case, in a clearer sense of self.

Warren's own troubled relationship with his rather possessive mother Ruth certainly occasions a poem about subjectivity, but in another way, Warren may also have been distinguishing himself from some of his prior poetic influences, including Eliot. For Warren, "The Return" may be just as much of an expression of poetic autonomy as individual autonomy. Critics such as Grimshaw have noted elements in the poem that are evocative of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (112-13). Strandberg similarly observes that "The imagery, the rhythm, the Biblical allusion, and the theme of anguished striving of spirit in this passage are all obviously reminiscent of *The Waste Land*" (*A Colder Fire* 11). However, Strandberg steps beyond Grimshaw, acknowledging that though the "The Return" inarguably contains Eliotic influences, this poem simultaneously represents a distinct step away from Eliot and toward the kind of poetry that readers will recognize as distinctly Warrenesque:

The first poem of this volume, "The Return: An Elegy," makes the young poet's position on the final meaning of existence unmistakably clear. It is the naturalistic position, such as T.S. Eliot held until the writing of "The Hollow Men," but unlike Eliot, Warren dispenses with side issues like ethics and culture. No Prufrocks or Sweeneys or indiscreet typists can distract this speaker from the essential anguish of time and death. (*A Colder Fire* 9)

Indeed, in "The Return" Warren confronts this essential anguish head on; his style in this poem remains, as Blotner has noted, "sharp, direct, and personal" (118). Unlike Eliot, Warren confronts the horror of being in such a way as to make it universally applicable: as Strandberg has noted, no English tea parties or other such references muddy the issue at hand, namely the universal issue of subjectivity encountered through the speaker's

broken relationship with his mother. Warren himself did not consider “The Return” an Eliotic or even metaphysical poem, two styles trending among Fugitive poets in the 1920s and 1930s and two terms traditionally used to describe this poem. According to Warren, “‘The Return’ is one among many poems in which there is no relation to [metaphysical] poetry. It is a very ‘open’ poem, much more the kind of poetry I have been writing in the past twenty-five years” (*Thirtieth Year* 16). “The Return” does resemble Warren’s later poetry in its style (unlike some of Warren’s more imitative early poems), again demonstrating the importance of this groundbreaking work to the rest of Warren’s canon.

“The Return: An Elegy” ends rather grimly, for “it will be years before [Warren] will positively state that from evil can come the possibility of human good” (Strandberg, *A Colder Fire* 12). Though Warren’s tone will change as he develops individually and poetically, he will continue to return to the theme of subjectivity and the abject throughout his canon. In many ways, Warren will continue to move through the Kristevan process of subjectivity formation as he writes, progress we will see in later chapters of this study. Warren’s later poetry continues on the same trajectory originated in early poems including “The Return,” as Grimshaw has noted: “all of his poetry is a continuum, is part of a single overarching poem” (112-13). But why does Warren emphasize the abject, and why does he write a poem—“The Return”—so filled with difficult and revolting language and imagery? Kristeva critic John Lechte explains the presence of these elements best: “. . . precisely ‘what is the point of emphasizing the horror of being?’ The short answer is that the control exerted by horror—the abject—can only be the greater if it remains hidden, unknown—unanalyzed” (158). By choosing to

bring horror into his poetry, by analyzing and confronting the abject, Warren does the great work of the writer—to bring healing through the expression of human suffering.

CHAPTER TWO

“YOU MUST EAT THE DEAD”: RECONCILIATION TO THE
MOTHER FIGURE IN “TALE OF TIME”

Upon receiving drafts of several poems Robert Penn Warren had written for the volume *Tale of Time: Poems 1960-1966*, Katherine Anne Porter wrote back, “I love your poetry, I have every one you ever published, you have always been to me first of all a poet, best of all your work” (qt. in Blotner 365). Indeed, in the thirty years since the publication of “The Return: An Elegy” (1931), Warren’s poetry had continued to develop in its effect, technique, complexity, and spirit, arguably rendering him one of the greatest twentieth-century American poets by 1966. Interestingly, Warren devoted much of his time in the 1940s and 1950s to fiction, and though he had not produced as many poems during those thirty intervening years as he would later in life, the poetry he did produce, beginning with *Promises: Poems 1954-1956*, demonstrated a rare lyric ability combined with keen insight and the diligence to produce an extensive amount of writing.

Porter’s enthusiastic review of *Tale of Time: Poems 1960-1966* was not unfounded, for the volume exemplifies Warren’s best poetic qualities as seen in earlier poetry like “The Return” combined with a new willingness to approach the concepts of human subjectivity and human suffering from an autobiographical perspective. In *Tale of Time*, Warren built upon many of the same themes found in his earlier poetry. He continued to wrestle with the themes of motherhood and the death of a mother figure, particularly in the poetic sequence “Tale of Time,” a six-part poem from which the larger volume acquires its name. Victor Strandberg directly notes the connection of “Tale of

Time” to “The Return: An Elegy,” stating, “These six poems [that compose “Tale of Time”] recall some curiously personal early poems, similarly guilt-haunted and passionate, on the same theme—poems like ‘The Return: An Elegy’” (*Poetic Vision* 206). In “The Return,” one must deduce through careful reading that the speaker’s mother is dead. In contrast, in “Tale of Time” Warren writes in plain terms of both a mother’s death and more specifically of his own mother Ruth Penn Warren.

The similarities and differences between “The Return: An Elegy” and “Tale of Time” are significant for several reasons. Both poems serve as mile markers in Warren’s career, different points at which he began to experiment with and rethink poetry, all the while maintaining consistent Warrenesque poetic qualities. Furthermore, these poems demonstrate Warren’s intellectual and artistic engagement with the theme of motherhood and the death of his own mother over a thirty-year period. Even in 1966, Warren had not yet fully come to terms with all that Ruth Penn Warren’s life and death signified. Though in theme these two poems are markedly similar, the differences in the way Warren approaches these themes illustrate a change in the poet’s perspective on poetry in general, as Floyd C. Watkins notes:

The two poems about the death and burial of the same person . . . could almost have been written by two different poets. . . . The older poem is more general, less explicit about the image resulting from the experience, less respectful, more shocking, more full of details not obviously related to the death, perhaps more self-centered. The second is more personal, more openly dramatic and introspective, fuller of grief, more aware of religious and philosophical implications. . . . These two poems on the same subject by a young poet and the

same man years later suggest in many ways the maturing processes of both a man who loved and who wrote poetry. (*Then & Now* 147)

Understanding these maturing processes that Watkins describes can help readers understand Warren as a man and poet and subsequently the overarching trajectory of his canon. Watkins is right to account for the differences in “The Return: An Elegy” and “Tale of Time” by noting how Warren’s approach to poetry, and his life philosophy in general, transformed over time; however, I disagree with Watkins in one minor, yet important, point. Certainly, Watkins’s description of “The Return: An Elegy” as “more self-centered” than “Tale of Time” is in some respects valid. The speaker in “The Return” is clearly swept up in his own emotions to such an extent that little else matters. Nevertheless, in “The Return” the speaker’s emotional state and experience of horror and abjection can be described as universal, and the lack of specific, personal details in the poem provides an even more universal appeal. In contrast, “Tale of Time” contains many autobiographic details specific to Warren, and though there are undoubtedly universal aspects of the poem, “Tale of Time” is much more focused on Warren’s personal experience. In that sense therefore, “Tale of Time” is more self-centered than Warren’s previous poem on the death of his mother.

Because Warren’s subject matter in “Tale of Time” and in the larger volume *Tale of Time* is clear, Warren scholars are not divided on the meaning and significance of this poetry as they have historically been divided on “The Return.” In addition to the clarity of his themes, Warren’s poetic style also moves toward greater lucidity in *Tale of Time*. According to Blotner, “these poems demonstrate both technical range and continuing experimentation. The earlier style—often convoluted, sometimes densely metaphysical—

was giving way to a more nearly fluid clarity” (368). This fluid clarity is not the only marker of change in Warren’s tone. In its autobiographic details, *Tale of Time* also serves as a gateway to Warren’s later poetry, poetry that takes on a deeply personal note as the poet reaches old age.

Because of this change in tone combined with a new incorporation of autobiographic details, *Tale of Time* can be considered a turning point in Warren’s career, a point at which his poetry becomes less universal and more specific to himself (though Warren’s poetry never completely loses its universal application and certainly not its universal appeal). Grimshaw acknowledges this watershed moment, noting that *Tale of Time* “clearly marks a new voice emerging” (139). Joseph Millichap further notes the autobiographical aspects of *Tale of Time*, pointing out in his 2009 volume *Robert Penn Warren after Audubon*, “Warren’s title, *Tale of Time*, points his reader toward the emerging elements of autobiography. . . . Only in the autobiographical poems concerned with the loss of his mother in the powerful ‘Tale of Time’ is Warren engaged in age-work and life review” (16-17). Indeed, the process of Warren’s life review cannot be separated from his relationship with Ruth Penn Warren and her early death, a fact that becomes most apparent in the six poems of “Tale of Time.”

However, unlike the attitude of the speaker in “The Return,” for whom life reflection brings horror and despair, in “Tale of Time” this kind of reflection—or age-work and life review, as Millichap describes it—concerns the meaning of love. For James Grimshaw, love is the primary theme of the greater volume *Tale of Time* as a whole: “The volume implies that love has many different manifestations, ranging from the kind of love offered by a prostitute in Squigg-town to a mother’s love. Ultimately, the volume

is concerned with knowing how to love. It poses the question, what is love?" (139). If Grimshaw is indeed correct about the theme of *Tale of Time* (and consequently the theme of the sequence of poems with the same name), as I believe he is, then "The Return: An Elegy" and "Tale of Time" could not be more emotively opposed. The former poem evokes dread, fear, and horror, while the latter poems of the sequence, though not entirely lacking these emotions, take on a tone of loving mourning, kindness, and understanding. How could Warren write these two poems on the same subject, the death of his mother, while conveying two entirely different perspectives and emotional experiences? Though there may be many simple explanations for this—Warren's transition into old age, Warren's desire to experiment with the aesthetics of poetry, Warren's altered perspective on parenting after he became a parent himself—I propose yet another explanation, one for which Kristevan psychoanalysis will again prove useful: "Tale of Time" is yet another step in Warren's ultimate acquisition of poetic subjectivity, an acquisition which would be impossible without first reconciling himself to the mother figure.

In *Tales of Love*, the second volume in Julia Kristeva's early trilogy on the formation of individual subjectivity, Kristeva explores love, beginning with self-love or narcissism, as a necessary step in the development of the ego. Kristeva scholar John Lechte describes it this way: "Love is impossible without a separation from the mother. . . . Our separation from our mother enables us, as Kristeva will later say, to become narcissists, that is, to develop an identity, an ego. . . . [L]ove for another is, for the psychoanalyst, premised on the capacity for a certain self-love . . . in the sense of being at ease with a particular image or model of oneself: an ego ideal" (167-68). Separation from the mother, therefore, is a necessary step in subjectivity formation, but this separation—

resulting in the acquisition of an ego ideal—necessitates loss. A child must be separated from or lose the mother in order to learn to love. Separation and narcissism protect the child as subjectivity develops: “Narcissism protects emptiness, causes it to exist, and thus, as lining of that emptiness, insures an elementary separation. Without that solidarity between emptiness and narcissism, chaos would sweep away any possibility of distinction” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 24). Narcissism then is the necessary, if temporary, result of the recognition of “I” as an “I.” Stated another way, “If narcissism is a defense against the emptiness of separation, then the whole contrivance of imagery, representations, identifications, and projections that accompany it on the way toward strengthening the Ego and the Subject is a means of exorcising that emptiness. Separation is our opportunity to become narcissists or narcissistic, at any rate subjects of representation” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 42).

Kristeva’s theory of ego-formation builds heavily upon the work of Freud. In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva examines the history of subjectivity and the manner in which love and psychoanalysis interact. Throughout the volume, one point remains clear: self-love is not destructive but is rather the root of all love. Even Thomas Aquinas, early Christian theologian, considered self-love to be good, not sinful, for when Jesus commanded “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” he predicated love for others on the existence of self-love (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 139-69). Lechte explains self-love one step further, predicating unity with God on unity with self: “For his part, Aquinas shows that love is the tendency for the individual to become *united* with God, and at the same time is the striving by an irrevocably divided subject to become united with itself” (174). Self-love then is a gateway to subjectivity—a way to become united with oneself. I believe that in

“Tale of Time,” Warren expresses a stronger, more united sense of self than is expressed in “The Return.” His poetic voice becomes stronger and more personalized, and this personalization—possibly what Kristeva would consider narcissism—accounts in part for the increased power of his writing. In other words, in “Tale of Time,” readers can see a Warren more aware of his individual poetic subjectivity.

Many critics see Warren distancing himself from literary fathers throughout his canon in order to achieve subjectivity in his writing, a process Harold Bloom outlines in his groundbreaking study *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). However, in “Tale of Time,” Warren achieves a greater sense of subjectivity not through distancing from the father, but through distancing from and then reconciling with the mother. In Warren’s canon, the themes of self-discovery, self-understanding, and general subjectivity reign supreme; in various forms, he continually asks the question, who am I and what am I doing here? What does being “I” mean? In accordance with the theories of Kristeva and other psychoanalysts, Warren remains occupied with the concept of an “ego ideal” throughout his lifetime. In “Tale of Time,” he continues to search for this ego ideal by reexamining his relationship with Ruth Penn Warren. Floyd C. Watkins observes the searching tone of the poem, a tone that implies a speaker seeking to understand himself through his mother: “‘Tale of Time,’ Warren’s longest poem about his mother, is a mysterious recollection of bits and pieces of her life and of people around her. The attitude of the poem is much more questioning about her than Warren’s poems are about his father” (131). As Warren questioningly searches his past through poetry, he gains self-understanding, ever working toward the elusive ego ideal.

Closely reading several sections of “Tale of Time,” a sequence rich in beauty, metaphor, and complexity, proves useful in establishing this sequence as an initial step toward reconciliation with the mother figure. Part one of “Tale of Time,” entitled “What Happened,” begins with a succinct factual description:

It was October. It was the Depression. Money
 Was tight. Hoover was not a bad
 Man, and my mother
 Died, and God
 Kept on, and keeps on,
 Trying to tie things together. . . . (1-6)

Immediately, readers sense a tone much different from that of “The Return: An Elegy.” Warren’s use of a series of simple sentences lends a matter-of-fact air to heavy subject matter—namely the Great Depression and the death of the speaker’s mother, two unrelated but devastating events the speaker links in this opening stanza. As Watkins has noted, both the speaker and society at large are suffering, and no one, neither the President of the United States nor God himself, can do anything to rectify this (145). Like “The Return,” “Tale of Time” opens grimly, though the grimness in the latter poem lacks the outright horror expressed in the former.

In stanza four, the speaker describes how it feels to fully realize—again—that his mother is dead. This moment causes the speaker confusion, and he speaks in second person as if to distance himself from the experience:

You stare at your face in the mirror, wondering
 Why now no tears come, for

You had been proud of your tears, and so
 You think of copulation, of
 Fluid ejected, of
 Water deeper than daylight, of
 The sun-dappled dark of deep woods and
 Blood on green fern frond, of
 The shedding of blood, and you will doubt
 The significance of your own experience. (22-31)

In this stanza, the speaker struggles to know how he should react to the loss of his mother. He no longer feels like crying, and this new phenomenon surprises him; rather than remaining connected to his mother through active mourning, the speaker is beginning to feel a growing separation. The sense of this separation in the poem, particularly in part one, is significant. This separation pushes the speaker toward the father figure, the same movement Kristeva considers necessary for the development of the ego, for a child must be drawn away from the mother and toward an imaginary father in this phase of separation and narcissism (*Tales of Love* 41). The speaker is linked with the father as he “think[s] of copulation, of / Fluid ejected” (25-26). Moving away from the feminine and towards the linear and masculine in these lines, the speaker is, in a Freudian sense, approaching a more free state of individual subjectivity.

To a twenty-first century feminist, this movement toward the father may initially seem to equate masculinity and subjectivity in a manner that leaves no room for the feminine. Reading this stanza through this aspect of Kristevan psychoanalysis renders the mother figure abject, someone who should be avoided in favor of the more knowable

father. However, it is important to remember that for Kristeva, the ultimate result of the development of the ego is the reconciliation between child and mother figure, between masculine and feminine. Perhaps even more importantly, this stanza contains in microcosm the crux of Warren's canon, for the speaker states that because of his distance from the mother, illustrated in this stanza by the speaker's inability to mourn for her as he feels he should, he begins to experience doubt, stating, "you will doubt / The significance of your own experience" (30-31). Here, readers can sense the speaker's search for subjectivity as well as his lingering questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? Does my life matter? These questions, as well as the overall theme of subjectivity, figure prominently in almost all of Warren's poems, but particularly throughout "Tale of Time."

The speaker continues, commenting that he would like to grieve for his mother but finds it difficult. However, the speaker believes that his current state and feelings are temporary, for in the last two lines of part one of the poem he says, "But all this will come later. / There will also be the dream of the eating of human flesh" (39-40). As this first section of "Tale of Time" ends, readers can sense hope as well as the possibility of reconciliation with the mother figure. Watkins describes this reconciliation another way:

The poem has progressed from a look in the mirror to what seems to be cannibalism. But it is not that. Instead, it is a sort of mortal, earthly, and human Eucharist or communion. Literally, the metaphor suggests, over a long period of time the poet will absorb into himself his mother and her memories. . . . The first part of "Tale of Time" begins with the separation of the dead mother and the mourning son; it ends with the mother becoming more than ever before a part of the living son. (146-47)

The communion metaphor to which Watkins refers appears more than once in “Tale of Time.” In the first section of this poem, the speaker has moved toward the father (“think of copulation, of / Fluid ejected”) and then again back toward the mother and communion (“There will also be the dream of the eating of human flesh”), though this movement toward and attitude concerning the mother is much different than what we see in “The Return: An Elegy” or even in earlier stanzas of “Tale of Time.” By eating human flesh, presumably the flesh of the mother, child and mother will again become one, just as child and mother are one in the presymbolic state. However, unlike the dependent infant, the speaker in this poem moves toward the mother by choice—he is choosing communion with her, reconciliation with her—and in so doing, demonstrates a confident sense of individual subjectivity.

The second part of “Tale of Time,” “The Mad Druggist,” begins as the speaker returns to the town where his mother lived:

I come back to try to remember the faces she saw every day.

.....

They are all gone now, and have left me in the lurch.

I am in the lurch because they were part of her. (1, 4-5)

In a position quite different from that of the speaker in “The Return: An Elegy,” this speaker feels a loss—is “in the lurch”—because he cannot understand or know his mother as he might wish. Here, readers can see the early beginnings of the speaker’s reconciliation with the mother figure, beginning with his desire to know her. He seeks an

understanding of her in the faces of the people she knew. In lieu of her physical presence, the speaker seeks knowledge about his mother through her acquaintances.

The speaker then remembers his previous feelings toward the people he now seeks: “. . . if I do remember, / I remember the lineaments only beyond the ice-blur and soot-smutch / Of boyhood contempt . . .” (7-9). In a regretful, perhaps wistful manner, the speaker acknowledges a shift in his perception of the people he once judged. As Blotner notes, “The poet’s contempt for the people [the mother] knew seems to have extended in some fashion to her too, and so he must deal with guilt as well as grief” (367). This is a guilt not born of action, but rather of a past attitude and perception now believed to be in some way wrong.

The speaker next recalls an interesting town character, a mad druggist who always appreciated Ruth. According to Watkins, this section of the poem is based upon real events. The town druggist in Guthrie, Kentucky, was an exceptionally smart but somewhat unbalanced individual who kept a running list of those in town whom he planned (though without any indication of actual execution) on poisoning (*Then & Now* 94). This “mad druggist” liked Ruth Penn Warren and in this stanza shows her his list:

“Here they are, Miss Ruth, the folks that wouldn’t be missed,

“Or this God-durn town would be lucky to miss,

If when I fixed a prescription I just happened to pour

Something in by way of improvement.” Then leaned in that gray way of his:

“But you—you always say something nice when you come in my store.” (24-28)

The mad druggist appreciates Ruth in a way that the speaker did not when she was living. An insane elderly man is capable of an empathy and understanding of which the speaker is incapable in the brilliant and passionate days of his youth. Finally, the poem concludes with the speaker's ultimate revelation:

. . . that list-maker . . .

Had the wit to see that she was too precious to die:

A fact some in the street had not grasped—nor the attending physician, nor
 God, nor I. (31-34)

The speaker's feelings toward his mother have transformed from horror to confusion and now, ultimately, to love. Because of an increased ability for self-love that ultimately leads to subjectivity, the speaker can now love his deceased mother. This proclivity for self-love can be seen throughout the poem in the manner in which the speaker discusses his personal experiences, treasuring them in a way the speaker of "The Return" did not.

The next part of "Tale of Time," entitled "III. Answer Yes or No," is only four lines long:

Death is only a technical correction of the market.

Death is only the transfer of energy to a new form.

Death is only the fulfillment of a wish.

Whose wish? (1-4)

The speaker offers three statements with the implied directive for readers to answer "yes" or "no"—in other words, "agree" or "disagree"—to each of them. As in the opening of the first section of "Tale of Time," "I. What Happened," the speaker matter-of-factly discusses death, not as an emotional topic, but as a scientific one. Justus observes the

tendency to minimize the sentimental that can be seen throughout “Tale of Time”: “The desperation of the speaker, the frustration that is at bottom selfish, is articulated in language that reflects the frustration rather than the customary homage. The emotional register of loss and grief is frequently juxtaposed against a verbal register of material calculation, of commercial profit and loss” (79). In this section of the poem, readers can sense a tone of profit and loss, of nature reclaiming and correcting through death. In this most impersonal and universal section of “Tale of Time,” the speaker implies that perhaps he wished his mother into an early death. If death is indeed a fulfillment of a wish, and if the speaker once regarded his mother as abject and horrific, then did the speaker’s wish for her death come true? Though the speaker’s answer seems at first to be a simple “yes,” Warren’s repeated use of the word “only” in three separate but equally valid statements suggests that no event can “only” be the result of one cause—life events are complex, and even in his guilt, the speaker recognizes this truth. However, the speaker still feels remorse and guilt for any responsibility he may have in wishing this death into being. This speculation assumes that Warren and the speaker are similar, if not the same, entities, but as I have previously demonstrated, this poem is clearly based on Warren’s life. Therefore, in this section of “Tale of Time,” readers glimpse Warren’s sense of guilt and complicity for the manner in which he previously viewed and treated his mother.

The next section of “Tale of Time,” “IV. The Interim,” takes place after the burial of the mother, but before the speaker has time for “[t]he private realization” that would aid him in understanding his mother’s death (4). “The Interim” is a sequence of eight parts. Part one occurs after the funeral of the speaker’s mother, as the family—speaker,

father, sister, and brother—travels to Squiggstown, the Negro district, to visit the black nanny who cared for the children when they were young and who knew the mother well. The speaker reveals that they take this trip to “learn / The nature of being, in order / In the end, to *be*,” hoping that perhaps this old impoverished woman, dying herself, will somehow be able to help them cope with the loss of their mother (7-9). Watkins notes that this occurrence actually happened after Ruth Penn Warren’s death, and that Warren and his family remained close to their nurse Cecilia even after she no longer worked for the family (148). The speaker asks, “What is love?” again reminding readers that, as Grimshaw has noted, this poem primarily concerns itself with the understanding, meaning, and attainability of love (Warren 26, Grimshaw 139). Ultimately, in the eighth and last section, the speaker identifies a solution to the question of the nature of love, particularly love in its relation to the dead, that hearkens back to earlier communion imagery:

But the solution: You

Must eat the dead.

You must eat them completely, bone, blood, flesh, gristle, even

Such hair as can be forced. You

Must undertake this in the dark of the moon, but

At your plenilune of anguish.

Immortality is not impossible,

Even joy. (1-8)

This communion imagery strikes the reader as gory and revolting, even as Christ's admonition to his followers to eat his flesh and drink his blood must have seemed similarly revolting. The speaker emphasizes eating the worst parts of the body, the "bone, blood, flesh, gristle, even / Such hair as can be forced" (3-4). Only through this eating, undertaken at the plenilune or full moon of anguish and grief, can joy come from grief and unity from separation. As Watkins observes, "If there is communion or union at all, it must be overcome in a ritual uniting all. . . . Part 8 of Section IV, 'The Interim,' prepares for conclusion and knowledge, even hope" (149). Through this communing process, the speaker makes his peace with the dead, and out of that peace comes a new hope. Joy is no longer impossible, though Warren's wording suggests that it remains difficult to achieve; joy still appears more elusive than the immortality that results from eating the dead, absorbing them and thereby giving them a new life, as the speaker gives life to his mother throughout this poem.

The next section of "Tale of Time" marks a transition point in the text, for according to Watkins, "Once hope and joy are attained, the poet can return to the beautiful memories of his mother and her childhood, Section V, 'What Were You Thinking, Dear Mother?'" (149-50). This section of the poem is addressed directly to the speaker's mother:

What were you thinking, a child, when you lay,
 At the whippoorwill hour, lost in the long grass,
 As sun, beyond the dark cedars, sank? (1-3)

The tone of this section of "Tale of Time" is arguably more empathetic and kind than the speaker's previous musings and wonderings. Even in the title readers can sense a

difference in the speaker's approach, for he calls his mother "Dear Mother," quite unlike the speaker of "The Return: An Elegy," who primarily refers to his mother as "the old fox" and "the old bitch." In "What Were You Thinking, Dear Mother?" readers can see the speaker trying to communicate with the mother even across the barrier of death. According to Noreen O'Connor in her essay "The An-Arche of Psychotherapy," communication of some kind is the key to the speaker's present happiness: "A central assumption of psychoanalysis is that present happiness, suffering, occurs because of failure of communication with others, primarily parents, in the past—the child speaks and is not heard. Psychoanalysis then is communication about communication" (45). The speaker continues to seek communication with the mother, asking even more questions as the poem progresses. Ultimately, these questions seemed geared towards finding common ground with the mother, so that both mother and child might finally understand one another—in other words, the speaker seeks to correct the failure of communication that O'Connor describes.

This section ends with an assertion of the speaker's commonality with the mother: "once I, / A child, in the grass of that same spot, lay, / And the whippoorwill called, beyond the dark cedars" (18-20). Even though the speaker has found a level of oneness with the mother, there yet remains a feeling of mystery surrounding her: "The images here point to sharings between mother and son; across many years and yet at the same ages of their lives they shared the same place—the home of the ancestral Penn, a place of beauty, search, and questions. . . . The childhoods of the two parents exist in visions simple and wondrous of a past far beyond the realities and the ken of the poet" (Watkins 132). The fact stands that death has severed the physical link between speaker and

mother, leaving the speaker to imagine her through poetry and thereby to create an avenue for communication and reconciliation.

Part VI of “Tale of Time,” “Insomnia,” presents a speaker who asks many questions. As Watkins notes, “If Warren is an unbeliever and a yearner, he spends a great number of lines on the questions forever in the minds of believers and doubters” (150). These questions are primarily concerned with understanding the nature of death and the relationship between the dead and the living, as we see in Part 1 of “Insomnia”:

. . . What age has the soul, what
Face does it wear, or would
I meet that face that last I saw on the pillow, pale?

I recall each item with remarkable precision.

Would the sweat now be dried on the temples? (23-27)

The speaker wonders about the nature of the soul—is the mother’s soul a preserved version of her dying self, pale face and with dried sweat upon her temples? In other words, is the dead mother at all knowable to the speaker, knowable in the manner in which the dying mother was at least physically knowable and comprehensible, or is she now a mystery, forever separated from her son by death? As the speaker questions and wonders, he does not appear to receive concrete answers. Perhaps, ultimately, the answers to the questions spurred by the speaker’s grief and feelings of loss can be found in the questions themselves, in the questioning process. Lacking knowable answers, the

speaker cares enough to wonder and to search, revealing a desire to reconnect with his mother even after her death.

And indeed, this questioning process does transform the speaker, for Section VI of “Tale of Time,” the final section of the sequence, ends quite unlike the way the sequence begins:

Truth, in the end, can never be spoken aloud,
 For the future is always unpredictable.
 But so is the past, therefore

At wood’s edge I stand, and,
 Over the black horizon, heat lightning
 Ripples the black sky. After
 The lightning, as the eye
 Adjusts to the new dark,
 The stars are, again, born.

They are born one by one. (12-21)

“Tale of Time” ends with an image of birth, the primary link between mother and child.

The poem begins with separation and ends with an image of ultimate unity as the stars are birthed one by one, just as speaker and mother were once united in birth. As Justus observes, this stanza is replete with hope:

Child is bound to parent and parent to child, but both are bound to Time; and even when the great corridor is breached by imagination, the linkage that would reveal

all, reconcile all, is frail and tenuous. But if “Hope dances on the razor edge,” even those tentative, temporary connections are to be cherished. In “Tale of Time” the symbol of that hope is in the son’s experience after the vision, when the stars are reborn. (80)

In “The Return: An Elegy,” the pain caused by the “tentative, temporary connections” that Justus describes outweighs all benefits; in “Tale of Time,” the speaker makes his peace with these faulty, human connections and chooses love—first for himself, despite the faults of his youth, and then for his mother, despite her possessive nature—and in so doing can embrace hope, and even joy. The trajectory of Warren’s canon, exemplified by the fragmentation of “The Return” and the reconciliation of “Tale of Time,” shows a man who struggled with the idea of subjectivity, ultimately finding its true roots in love, in the fragile connections with ourselves and with others that characterize human existence. What better avenue than poetry to explore the meaning and significance of self? In this respect, Warren and Kristeva are in agreement, for as Sara Beardsworth has noted, “In brief, with Kristeva, our most powerful discourses of love appear in works of art” (74). “Tale of Time” is both a work of art and a discourse on love. Perhaps most importantly, for Warren, “Tale of Time” is his true memoir of Ruth Penn Warren herself, for as he wrote in 1980, “More than thirty years [after publishing “The Return: An Elegy], I succeeded in writing a group of poems, really a longish poem, about her death, under the title ‘Tale of Time.’ It is not fiction” (*Thirtieth Year* 15).

CHAPTER THREE

“SHE GAILY SANG”: REFLECTION AND REVELATION IN *BEING**HERE: POETRY 1977-1980*

Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980 was published around the time of Robert Penn Warren's seventy-fifth birthday, marking yet another development in Warren's poetry as his personal life simultaneously transitioned. Warren's son Gabriel was now grown and had recently married a bright, educated young woman, and Warren's daughter Rosanna was fast becoming an accomplished poet in her own right. Warren, now an empty nester and father to two grown children, spent many of his days at home with his wife Eleanor, arguing over politics and writing, writing, writing. Warren's poetry output had increased over the past decade, and *Being Here* ultimately served as the final volume of a trilogy, the first two volumes of which are entitled *Or Else: Poem/Poems 1968-1974* and *Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978* (Blotner 452-53). In many respects, *Being Here* had what Blotner describes as “the appearance of a summation, and [Warren] had labored over it as if it was one” (453). Though still in good health, Warren was fast approaching old age, and as many scholars have pointed out, *Being Here* conveys a tone of life review.

In a surprising and atypical move, Warren included an “Afterthought” to this collection that cryptically nods towards the autobiographical elements of *Being Here*. Although throughout his career Warren had avoided linking his personal life to his writing (and more generally had avoided detailed discussions of any aspect of his writing process), in *Being Here* he momentarily breaks this comparative silence, offering very brief explanations of selected poems. In the opening paragraph to this “Afterthought,”

Warren writes, “The less a poet says about his poems, perhaps the better, but I hazard an afterthought. Upon finishing this book, a reader may feel that a few poems are, in both feeling and style, off the main impulse—accidents, sports, irrelevances; but they are not accidents or sports, and I hope not, in the last analysis, irrelevances” (107). Warren goes on to explain the structure and placement of several of the poems in the volume, mentioning that the poems were not published in the order of their composition. The “Afterthought” has a tone of patient explanation tinged with a hope that this volume may not be misunderstood.

Warren’s concluding paragraph offers what is perhaps some of the most direct insight he ever gives into his work:

Here, as in life, meaning is, I should say, often more fruitfully found in the question asked than in any answer given. The thematic order—or better, structure—is played against, or with, a shadowy narrative, a shadowy autobiography, if you will. But this is an autobiography which represents a fusion of fiction and fact in varying degrees and perspectives. As with question and answer, fiction may often be more deeply significant than fact. Indeed, it may be said that our lives are our own supreme fiction. (107-08)

In this declaration, that “our lives are our own supreme fiction,” Warren links his canon for readers and reveals what he has come to believe about poetry through many, many years of both loving and writing it—that taken as a whole, his canon represents in part the fiction of his life, his story as told from his perspective and with his individual biases. This fiction does contain fact, though for Warren the cold bare facts are not as important as the experience of fact, the fiction we daily create when confronted with fact. This

“Afterthought,” tucked away in the back of *Being Here*, sheds new light on earlier poems including those previously explored in this study, for truly poems such as “The Return: An Elegy” and “Tale of Time” are significant not in their representations of the cold facts, but in the speaker’s interpretation of the facts, and even more specifically in his interpretation of his relationship with his mother.

The critical reception of *Being Here* has been primarily positive. However, Warren was unable to satisfy some of his contemporary critics including Sandra Prewitt Edelman, who in a 1981 critique for the *Southwest Review* called this collection failed poetry with an “unending reliance on hyphenation” (216). Like Edelman, Robert Shaw disparaged Warren’s “overblown philosophical pronouncements” (477). Nevertheless, not every critic in the early 1980s felt that this volume was ineffective; in his 1981 critique for the *Southern Review*, James Grimshaw praised Warren’s poetic effectiveness that stems “from his ability to make us sense directly both our inner selves and our selves in a historical context” (“Supreme Fiction” 449). Warren scholars and critics since the 1980s tend to agree with Grimshaw, most considering this volume one of the crowning glories of Warren’s poetic achievement. Paul Mariani describes this perspective best in an essay appearing in *Robert Penn Warren*, a collection of essays edited by Harold Bloom:

Warren is one of those poets whose late poems are not a falling off or even a stasis, but rather an extraordinary late flowering. In this Warren joins that select group of poets who continued to write and write well right up to the last: Stevens, Williams, Yeats, and Hardy. That is heady company for any poet to be classed

with, but I believe that in the final assessment Warren must be numbered among these voices. (222)

In counting Warren among these acclaimed poets who flourished artistically well into old age, I believe Mariani is correct. Though Warren began writing when he was young, and with great success, his most poignant poetry came out of this late period; the fact that this period was also one in which he most directly wrote about his own life seems not at all coincidental. As Justus astutely observes, “*Being Here* is decidedly the product of personal need. The voice we hear of the speaker who refers to himself as both *I* and *you* is Warren’s voice speaking of and for himself, not the expression of a dramatized persona” (104-05). The absence of this dramatized persona contributes in large part to the reader’s experience of these poems as simultaneously authentic and familiar.

More than any of his previous volumes of poetry, *Being Here* reads like a reflection, rather than a declaration or even an exploration. Joseph Millichap, author of *Robert Penn Warren after Audubon: The Work of Aging and the Quest for Transcendence in His Later Poetry* (2009), considers *Being Here* an autobiographical process of coming to terms with old age. Millichap interprets this volume through its “Afterthought,” tracing what he calls “the structural tensions between the poet’s autobiographical life review and his philosophical age-work” (88). Ultimately, Millichap believes that Warren’s poetry should alert readers to their own impending age-work (115). Like Millichap, Randolph Runyon devotes a chapter of his book *The Braided Dream* (1990) to *Being Here*, closely reading the text to reveal a unified volume of poetry throughout which Warren carefully weaves recurring images, themes, and words (128-

73). Runyon analyzes these individual poems chronologically, noting that Warren struggles with the idea of fatherhood throughout this collection.

Though the theme of fatherhood does run throughout *Being Here*, perhaps even more prominent and significant is the theme of motherhood in this volume. As Patricia Bradley observes, “In many ways *Being Here* could be described as Warren’s ‘portrait of a mother,’ especially in those parts of the text that examine the intersections of self and death-bound idealism” (10). In this statement, Bradley links *Being Here* to Warren’s later publication *Portrait of a Father*, a memoir about Robert Franklin Warren that spurred much critical interest in the influence that Warren’s relationship with his father had upon his writing. Though *Being Here* has never spurred a similar critical interest in Warren’s relationship with his mother, Bradley is correct in asserting Ruth Penn Warren’s central role in the volume. This central role demonstrates, yet again, Warren’s consistent engagement with both the general theme of motherhood and with his relationship to his own mother, an engagement that becomes the center of what is arguably some of Warren’s best poetry.

The manner in which Warren writes about the mother figure in *Being Here* is just as significant as the fact that the mother figure stands central to this volume, and Kristevan psychoanalysis provides a helpful critical lens through which to read and understand these poems. Early in Warren’s canon, the mother figure appears abjected, as exemplified in “The Return: An Elegy” (1930). The youthful speaker of “The Return” seeks subjectivity and therefore must break connections with the mother figure in order to establish his individuality. Because of the nature of pregnancy combined with the total dependency of a newborn infant, mother and child are intimately united during the early

stages of life; this unity creates a deep psychological connection, for as Julia Kristeva observes in her 1987 volume *Tales of Love*, “It is obvious from the behavior of young children that the first love object of boys and girls is the mother” (34). Though close connection to the mother allows an infant to survive, this connection, if not severed at the appropriate time, can ultimately hinder a child’s ability to recognize himself as an “I” and the mother as an “Other.” The process of recognizing the mother as an other is painful, ambiguous, and horror inducing—in other words, it is a process of abjection. Just as “The Return: An Elegy” illustrates the abject in Warren’s canon, Warren’s later poem “Tale of Time” reveals a second step in subjectivity formation, namely the ability to love oneself. In this poem, readers discover a speaker who is much kinder to himself than the speaker of “The Return” and is subsequently more aware of his own desires, disappointments, and hopes. This new self-love enables the speaker to better love his deceased mother, even across the barrier of death. However, it is not until the publication of *Being Here* that the process of subjectivity acquisition as revealed in Warren’s canon becomes complete. The tone of *Being Here* conveys a new sense of reflection, reconciliation, and revelation that cannot be found in earlier poems concerning the mother figure.

According to Kristeva scholar John Lechte, the ultimate result of subjectivity acquisition is the reconciliation between subject and other. Once an individual stands secure in his own subjectivity, the other no longer threatens him. Traumatic events, such as a child’s initial recognition of the abject, can serve as a catalyst to this process of reconciliation:

[W]hen a perturbation is absorbed by the psychic system and does not remain a threatening trauma, the psyche becomes increasingly more complex. The more

complex and more supple it becomes, the more adept it is at coping with difference—with the other as difference. Now, the other ceases to be a threat and becomes, in his or her very individuality, a participant in my identity. (Lechte 184)

In *Being Here*, readers can observe a Warren who has grappled with the difficulties, traumas, and abject elements of his life, ultimately becoming more open-minded and flexible as a result. His ability to cope with difference—specifically the differences between himself and his mother—appears greatly increased, and the mother figure is portrayed sympathetically and lovingly throughout this volume in spite of her many apparent flaws. In addition to this loving poetic portrayal, the mother figure now becomes an active participant in shaping the speaker's identity, helping the speaker to learn about himself as he remembers her. As Kristeva states, "The subject exists because it belongs to the Other, and it is in proceeding from that symbolic belonging that causes him to be subject to love and death that he will be able to set up for himself imaginary objects of desire" (*Tales of Love* 36). In other words, a subject can only be subject because it is not an other; the other is necessary for the subject to exist, a concept that Warren seems to grasp best in *Being Here*. The mother is no longer portrayed as an enemy of subjectivity and agency, but rather as necessary to the development of both. Because the speaker understands the "symbolic belonging" Kristeva describes, he is better able to articulate and achieve his desires through poetry.

The fact that Warren returns to childhood memories of his mother as he nears the end of an illustrious career once again proves the immense influence she exerted over his canon as a whole. Ruth Penn Warren served as a catalyst for much of Warren's poetry,

and by closely reading *Being Here* from this perspective, readers can reclaim a mother figure who has previously remained underexplored. Though scholars and critics have noted the importance of motherhood in this volume, few have attempted in-depth close readings of these poignant poems. For the purposes of this study, I will examine two poems from this volume, “October Picnic Long Ago” and “The Only Poem,” both of which can be found in section one of *Being Here*, a section Grimshaw has termed “youth” because of its focus on the childhood of Warren contextualized in personal memory (“Supreme Fiction” 445).

Throughout *Being Here*, Warren grapples with the pain, guilt, and grief he feels in this relationship, seeking to understand himself and his mother. As Runyon observes, “if childhood is the setting for these poems, grief for the mother is what takes place in that setting, projected backward from adulthood” (137). The first poem in *Being Here*, “October Picnic Long Ago,” conveys a tone of longing and nostalgia concerning the mother figure. This poem, appearing in italics before section one of the volume, functions as what Warren describes in his “Afterthought” as “a preliminary poem . . . to serve as a base for the book” (107). In choosing “October Picnic Long Ago” as the base for *Being Here*, Warren clearly delineates the importance of the mother figure to the volume as a whole, as the poem centers around specific memories of the mother. The use of italics may indicate what Grimshaw describes as “the poet’s internal thoughts” (162). By framing *Being Here* with these internal thoughts—that is, by beginning with the reflective poem “October Picnic Long Ago” and ending with the “Afterthought”—Warren sets the stage for readers to understand the remaining poems through parts of his own autobiography.

“October Picnic Long Ago” begins with an idyllic and pastoral picture of the speaker’s family departing on a picnic during the golden days of October. The speaker remembers details of a time long past—a black servant who helps the family to prepare for the picnic, a horse-drawn carriage, his parents’ outdated clothing. As Millichap notes, the poem “becomes a picture of a more innocent age in national terms as well, like a photograph in a faded album with its period details” (88-89). Particularly in its use of language, the poem expresses the magical, unique wonder that only a child can truly experience during a routine, weekly outing such as this:

Out of town, clop-clop, till we found a side-lane that led

Into woods, where gold leaves flicked a fairy shadow and light

That changed the known shape of a nose or face or head

Till we looked like a passel of circus freaks crammed tight

On four wheels, while the flickering nag was steered by a witch’s sleight. (6-10)

The speaker remembers this outing as a magical event, complete with “fairy shadow,” “circus freaks,” and a “witch’s sleight.” Warren’s use of end rhymes in these stanzas (ABABB) conveys a certain lilting lightness not unlike a nursery rhyme, though certainly more complex. Even magic and fairy tales have a dark side, and consequently this passage also has an ambiguous undertone. The connotations of words such as “freaks,” “nag,” and “witch” suggest a darkness to this otherwise light summer picnic.

The family eats their picnic lunch, the baby sleeps, the children play, and father and mother leave, “*hand in hand, / Heads together as though in one long conversation / That even now I can’t think has had an end*” (22-24). These lines are taken directly from Warren’s memory, for he writes in *Portrait of a Father*, “After the picnic fire had caught,

and the picnic had been eaten, [my parents] might wander off. . . . Casually, the two would walk away, side by side, perhaps holding hands, their heads slightly bowed in conversation as they disappeared into the woods” (55-56). In “October Picnic Long Ago,” a young Warren watches them together, and now reflects that this conversation may be continuing in spite of his parents’ deaths, “*Perhaps in some high, cloud-floating, and sunlit land*” (25). Even now as an old man, the speaker stills feels some of the magic of this long-ago picnic, a magic that leads him to believe, or hope, that death has not ended the sacred communication between mother and father.

But sadly, all good things do eventually end, and weekly Sunday picnics during the golden days of October are no different. In addition to motherhood, the theme of Time runs heavily throughout *Being Here*, a theme to which the speaker alludes as he reflects on the termination of these once regular picnics:

But picnics have ends, and just as the sun set,

My mother cried out, “Could a place so beautiful be!”

And my father said, “My ship will come in yet,

And you’ll see all the beautiful world there is to see.”

“What more would I want,” she now cried, “when I love everything I now see?”

(26-30)

In this stanza, readers can see clear references to Robert Franklin and Ruth Penn Warren, a couple whose relationship Warren describes as a “love-match” (*Portrait* 55). Robert Franklin wanted to give Ruth all of her heart’s desires, but he struggled financially for much of his life, always hoping that his next business endeavor would prove successful: “*My ship will come in yet.*” Ruth’s response to Robert’s promise in this stanza (“*And*

you'll see all the beautiful world there is to see") may surprise readers who have become accustomed to reading of her more difficult, possessive, and headstrong qualities (29). In this stanza, Ruth appears not only self-contented but also overjoyed by her life and surroundings. She wants for nothing, and this portrayal of her is noticeably more empathetic and flattering than any previous portrayal of her in Warren's poetic canon, including "The Return: An Elegy" and "Tale of Time."

The final stanza of "October Picnic Long Ago" emphasizes again what I consider the two major themes of *Being Here*, motherhood and Time:

*So she swung the baby against the rose-tinted sky,
And a bird-note burst from her throat, and she gaily sang
As we clop-clopped homeward while the shadows, sly,
Leashed the Future up, like a hound with a slavering fang.
But sleepy, I didn't know what a Future was, as she sang.*

And she sang. (31-36)

This hauntingly gorgeous ending showcases Warren's poetic skill at its best. The final line—"And she sang"—precedes section one of *Being Here*, the first section of what can be considered a portrait of a mother. The image of Ruth singing gaily like a bird is meant to frame the reader's understanding of the poems that follow, poems largely based on Warren's childhood memories (particularly in section one). This imagery stands in stark opposition to images of the mother figure in Warren's earlier work, countering, for example, his own repeated descriptions of her in "The Return: An Elegy" as "the old bitch" and "the old fox."

According to Mariani, the themes of motherhood and Time in this final stanza are inherently connected: “[The speaker’s mother] knows that if she is to have happiness, it will have to be in the present, in what she now possesses. Even then, of course, this time-obsessed poet knows, the future was lying in wait, for the moment only chained up like some mad dog, while the mother—happy in the October day and in her family—sang” (224). It seems as though the mother’s singing is, in some sense, the very power that keeps the future leashed up, as if by sheer force of will she might forever prolong this priceless moment. The mother cannot struggle against it forever, and ultimately the onslaught of the future will be to her emotional detriment. However, the mother’s tendency to embrace the present with disregard for the future is not portrayed in “October Picnic Long Ago” as entirely negative. In fact, as compared to the speaker’s father, who wishes primarily for some future ship to come in, the mother is, of all the characters in this poem, most able to be truly alive in the present. This poem functions as an admiring, if honest, portrait of a mother whose fierce love of life and children was both strength and weakness. After her death, her son will be left to ponder the meaning and implications of passing time and changing relationships, as Warren does in this poem and throughout *Being Here*. Unlike some of Warren’s earlier poems, “October Picnic Long Ago” reveals a past that does not harrow the speaker, for “Warren has come to understand that the past need not be only a burden, for it too . . . can sometimes redeem the present emptiness” (Mariani 224).

Seven poems further into the volume, Warren again directly addresses his memories of his mother Ruth in “The Only Poem.” The speaker begins this poem with the following haunting lines:

The only poem to write I now have in mind
 May not be written because of memory, or eyes.

The scene is too vivid, so tears, not words, I may find. (1-3)

As Millichap notes, the inspiration for this poem is one of the speaker's recurring dreams; partially because of its recurrent nature, the scene remains vivid and painful in the speaker's mind, engendering tears in place of words (92). This stanza ends with the line, "If perhaps I forget, it might catch me by surprise," insinuating the speaker's awareness that this event cannot be disregarded, for even if he forgets it for a time, it will ultimately reassert itself in his psyche (4). Warren seems to be alerting readers to the significance of this event, which stands as a benchmark in the speaker's life, though the significance of that benchmark remains a mystery.

The next stanza begins with a somewhat ironic declaration of the inconsequential nature of the event that sparked the speaker's dream: "The facts lie long back, and surely are trivial" (5). However, these trivial facts awaken the speaker in the night, "as though at a voice at my ear"; they are elements of a "dying dream" that causes him to "haul / Up a sheet-edge to angrily wipe at an angry tear" (6-8). Here the reader can begin to understand the emotion, which the speaker calls "anger," associated with this "trivial" event. This is the last purely self-reflexive moment in the poem, and the only direct glimpse Warren gives the reader into the speaker's inner life; the rest of the speaker's thoughts and feelings must be inferred from the seemingly objective events the speaker describes in the following stanzas.

In the third stanza, the speaker introduces readers to his mother, a middle-aged woman who has "retained / Only sweetness of face, not the beauty my father, years later,

/ Near death, would try to describe, but the words blurring, refrained” (10-11). Here, the speaker reveals his perception of his parents’ relationship: the speaker’s father still chooses to see his mother through the lens of her former beauty, though she has passed away and he himself is not far from joining her in death. The speaker cannot view his mother through that same lens; though she is still sweet-faced, she does not hold the same beauty for him that she holds for his father. Because of this, the speaker is distanced from both father and mother as one who does not share the same perspective.

The speaker then relates what he calls “the facts,” a day when his mother took him to see the new baby of a couple Runyon identifies as Mr. and Mrs. Allen Tate (12, 135). This event actually occurred sometime in late 1925 or early 1926, when Warren was twenty years old (Blotner 77). The Tates had dropped off their baby with her grandmother, and the speaker tells us that “for friendship I warily handled the sweet-smelling squaw-fruit,” signifying both his natural distaste for this outing and his discomfort with handling the child (14). He goes on to say that he “kissed the fingers, blew in the ears. / Then suddenly was at a loss. So my mother seized it” (15-16). Again readers can sense the distancing from his mother that the speaker continues to experience; where he feels incompetent, she is ready to assume complete charge, creating a striking dissimilarity between them. Yet another dissimilarity is these individuals’ manners of expression. For the speaker’s mother, expressing love and joy come easily; for the speaker, and for Warren, expressing love, particularly to his mother, remains difficult.

In the next stanza, readers can see glimpses of the possessive nature of the speaker’s mother in her interactions with the Tate baby:

And I knew, all at once, that she would have waited all day,

Sitting there on the floor, with her feet drawn up like a girl,
 Till half-laughing, half-crying, arms stretched, she could swing up her prey
 That shrieked with joy at the giddy swoop and swirl. (20-24)

The mother's joy is clearly apparent, for she would have waited all day just to hold the child—holding this child is, in fact, her purpose in “being here.” Notably, she herself becomes like a child, “with her feet drawn up like a girl,” almost one with the baby the speaker calls her “prey.” However, this joy is seemingly accompanied by grief, for she swoops up the baby “half-laughing, half-crying,” half-aware that these stolen moments are indeed just that—stolen. This is not her child, and she cannot truly hold or possess her for long. Remarkably, the baby seems neither stifled nor repulsed by the speaker's mother; she too “shrieked with joy.” This stanza serves as a mirror to Warren's relationship with his mother: she longs to hold him indefinitely for he brings her great joy, yet her longing transforms her into a hunter searching for prey. Warren, though subconsciously aware even as a child that he is being stifled, like the Tate baby still finds, at some points, a kind of joy in this relationship with his mother.

In stanza six, the speaker and his mother say their goodbyes and wander down the street. The mother walks “With her hands both clutching my arm till I thought it would swell,” demonstrating that like the baby, the speaker is still his mother's prey (23). However, the speaker is no longer a child, and this yet again distances him from the mother who seems to regret the natural progression of aging, for as they return home, she says “‘Shucks! Time gets away’” (24). When they enter, the speaker's mother lays out his supper as she has done thousands of times before. The speaker tells us, “My train left at eight / To go back to the world where all is always the same” (25-26). “All is always the

same” for Warren, even this relationship, which seems static yet dynamic as times and people change. Perhaps Warren feels guilt and a sense of responsibility for his inability to alleviate the brokenness of this relationship, for he ends the poem with the lines “Success or failure—what can alleviate / The pang of unworthiness built into Time’s own name?” (27-28).

As Millichap eloquently notes of these final lines, “His mother’s joy in that baby and her sorrow at his departure embarrass him then and now” (92). Runyon offers yet another interpretation of these lines: “[Warren] didn’t know it then, but she was to die not long after; this was nearly his last chance to express the love whose expression came so easily to her” (136). Apparently, Warren never fully expressed his love for his mother to her before her death, but this could be in part because he did not realize until much later in life how he truly felt about her. Her overly possessive nature no doubt contributed to his confusion. Searching for subjectivity, Warren and the speakers in his many poems concerning family life seek to break away from family, only to return to it in the end. William Bedford Clark best describes this cycle of breaking away and then returning:

The insistent tug of the parent’s solicitous love is somehow threatening, posing as it does potential restrictions on the child’s quest for the fullest possible individuation, and is therefore to be resisted. But the call of the parent will not be denied and cannot be evaded. Indeed, in the final analysis, the questing self wanders in the broad world in search of glory (a poor surrogate for love) only to arrive once more at home, bearing a goodly measure of prodigal guilt. (“Filial Guilt” 387)

Ultimately, Warren does find this call of the parent compelling and unavoidable. The sense of guilt and complicity that Clark describes reveals itself subtly in many of Warren's poems about his parents, and those in *Being Here* are no different. The desire for human connection, rather than the isolation in which the speaker of "The Return" revels, will prove a greater pull and a greater poetic inspiration.

If the speaker of "The Return" and to some extent the speaker of "Tale of Time" seeks individuation and subjectivity through separation from the parents, the speakers of "October Picnic Long Ago" and "The Only Poem" seek the opposite. Warren's primary poetic concern throughout his many volumes of poetry was the development of an authentic selfhood, and these two poems are no different than earlier poetry in this aspect. What is different is the manner in which the speaker pursues this development. "October Picnic Long Ago" and "The Only Poem" illustrate the final phase of Kristevan subjectivity formation: reconciliation with the mother and father figures. These comparatively final poems speak to the wisdom and peace that comes not from the rebellious break from the mother figure (which of course is necessary at some point for subjectivity formation), but from the new knowledge that authentic selfhood grows out of an understanding and acceptance of family origins. New self-revelations grow out of familial reconciliation.

In "October Picnic Long Ago" and "The Only Poem," Warren returns to his family, and specifically his mother, and because of that returning journey is able to reclaim part of himself—not by blaming or sanctifying his mother, but by remembering her for who she was, and by remembering himself for who he was at that time. It is here that we come to the crux of this project: in order to reclaim parts of ourselves through

literature, just as Warren does in *Being Here*, we must time and again return to the family, and perhaps even more importantly return not only to the dominant father but also to the oft-ignored mother, for it is only through this latter action that authentic selfhood may be achieved. Perhaps even more importantly, authentic selfhood cannot survive without love. As Kristeva eloquently observes, “Love is a death sentence that causes me to be” (36). To love is to sacrifice, yet without this sacrifice the subject will never distinguish itself from the object. Love is impossible without subjectivity, and therefore the evidence of love in these poems suggests that Warren has come into his own, both as a poet and as a man. According to Lechte, “When love is not possible, we lose part of ourselves; we begin to die and perhaps then realize that love is life. Such would be our distillation of Kristeva’s message” (Lechte 184). Such also would be our distillation of Warren’s message, as expressed throughout his canon in regards to a difficult, headstrong, and possessive mother. Love, born of our ability to accept difference, leads us into subjectivity, and vice versa; love is, as Lechte has said, life itself.

CONCLUSION

In *Then & Now* (1982), a blended volume of biography and criticism, Floyd Watkins writes this of Robert Penn Warren:

Warren did not write so much about his mother as his father. One reason may be that she died in 1931, when Warren was only twenty-six, and twenty to twenty-five years before he began to write lyric poetry about family characters. Years later as he wrote, he knew the presence of his father as well as the memory. But there are several strong and loving mothers in Warren's fiction. (52)

Indeed, there certainly are strong mothers in Warren's fiction, and likewise there are many strong mothers in his poetry. Watkins's statement, though correct in many aspects, highlights a more general critical attitude toward Warren's work with which I disagree: namely, that while Warren's relationship with his father greatly impacted his writing, his relationship with his mother proved of more minor consequence. Furthermore, just as Watkins mentions only the mothers of Warren's fiction, many critics have overlooked the mothers of Warren's poetry entirely. References to, images of, and metaphors about mothers appear frequently throughout Warren's poetic canon, yet no in-depth study has thus far brought these mothers to the forefront of the critical consciousness. Reclaiming these mother figures and examining the manner in which Warren discusses motherhood and mothering throughout his poetry not only provides valuable insight into complex poems such as "The Return: An Elegy" and "Tale of Time," but also sheds new light on the greater trajectory of Warren's canon as a whole.

Admittedly, this prior lack of critical attention stems in part from Warren's own attitudes and statements. Warren rejected connections between his mother and his poetry

while simultaneously claiming his father as a poetic inspiration. In 1980, Warren denied that his early poem “The Return: An Elegy” (1930) was inspired when he first learned of his mother’s serious illness in a letter from his father: “I suppose that the suggestion of the situation of the poem may have, unconsciously, come from my father’s first letter. But I took him at his word that there was no reason for apprehension. The poem is pure fiction” (*Thirtieth Year* 14). Though the poem may be partially “pure fiction,” links between the poem and Warren’s relationship with his mother Ruth Penn Warren seemed too marked to ignore. However, even in his old age Warren minimized and sometimes denied these links. In contrast, Warren both directly and indirectly claims his father as an influence upon his writing. In *Portrait of a Father* (1988), Warren’s memoir about his father Robert Franklin, Warren recalls this interaction between himself and his father:

My father had known what it was to sweat over poems. . . . I had begun to publish what I hoped were poems, the first in the fall or winter of 1922. A few others came along; one of them, in some sort of reflex against the triple names of many nineteenth-century authors, was signed “Penn Warren.” My father had read the poem and made a friendly but critical remark. Then . . . he asked me whether I did not like the name “Robert.” With an instant of shame—it must have been shame—I remembered that he had once signed his full name. (62-63)

Robert Franklin Warren had dabbled in writing poetry when he was young, an interest he might have pursued more strongly if financial and practical considerations had not prevented him. Warren knew his father’s history of writing and reading poetry (“My father had known what it was to sweat over poems”), and this knowledge caused him to connect with his father through poetry in a way that he never did with his mother, in spite

of the fact that Ruth Penn Warren was herself a woman of letters (“Letters from Home” 396). In this remembered episode, Warren’s use of two names in his signature rather than his given three illustrates his desire as a young poet to differentiate himself from the poets before him (an attempt to kill his literary fathers, as Harold Bloom discusses in *The Anxiety of Influence* [1973]). Though Warren apparently felt comfortable distinguishing himself from his literary fathers by altering his name and thereby proclaiming his poetic subjectivity, his comfort level in his relationship with his biological father proved another story. He felt shame when reminded that he shared a name with Robert Franklin Warren, a name he had intentionally chosen to omit from his signature. Even though Robert Franklin Warren can be described as a failed poet, his son seems, at least in this moment, to desire to live up to his father’s poetic legacy, specifically by living up to the name that also belongs to his father. Notably, after this interaction, Warren began to sign his full name to his poems.

Clearly, Warren’s relationship with his father was important to his formation as a poet; however, this importance does not negate the significance of his relationship with his mother, especially as it bore upon his subjectivity formation. According to Kristeva scholar Katherine Goodnow, the very nature of motherhood (and pregnancy, a time when definite lines between “I” and “Other” become blurred) causes discussions of mothering and identity to quickly become complex, with few easily answerable questions. This inherent complexity, combined with the patriarchy’s attempts to control the reproductive power of women, results in a dearth of constructive cultural stories of motherhood (9). Therefore, the lack of critical attention paid to the mothers of Warren’s poetry, and even the lack of attention that Warren appears to have given the mother figures in his own

work, seems symptomatic of a greater cultural oversight. Goodnow describes the kind of motherhood stories that have the potential to be culturally transformative:

[These stories] would also begin to bring out the possibilities of pleasure as well as pain within mothering, of combining motherhood with sexuality, of investment in mother-daughter as well as mother-son relationships, combined possibly with representations of the way motherhood both restores one's childhood and its pleasure and revives the relationship to one's own mother. (9-10)

Arguably, in Warren's poetry readers can already find many such stories about motherhood—motherhood as source of both pleasure and pain, the significance of the mother-son relationship, and the restorative power of returning to childhood memories to reflect on the mother. The poems discussed in this project—"The Return: An Elegy," "Tale of Time," "October Picnic Long Ago," and "The Only Poem"—allow readers to experience motherhood in a fresh way, potentially connecting them to the stories of their own mothers, biological and otherwise. Perhaps, then, the solution to the cultural ambiguity and repression surrounding motherhood is not to write new narratives, but to identify and consider the mothers already present in our stories and poems. Warren, knowingly or not, provides his readers with an opportunity to do just that.

This study, though certainly significant in the realm of Warren scholarship, may have implications for southern literature as a whole. Warren is not the only southern poet to discuss the mother frequently throughout his canon; in fact, other poets, including the 2012-2014 United States Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey, write consistently about mother figures. Trethewey is a particularly useful example of such a poet for two reasons: first, Trethewey is a contemporary poet, and therefore her work illustrates how mother

poetry has grown and evolved in southern literature; secondly, Trethewey's mother is a black woman, and therefore doubly othered; and finally, Trethewey claims Warren as a literary father. In an interview with Emily Wagster Pettus, Trethewey states, "Robert Penn Warren—his work has meant a great deal to me. I'd like to think I'm in conversation and kind of extending a conversation with Warren" ("Cheerleader' for Poetry"). In yet another interview, in answer to the question, "What Southern writers inspire you?" Trethewey replies, "Robert Penn Warren means a lot to me because of his dynamic relationship with his South and his place in it. I admire the transformation he undergoes. I hope I am becoming more sophisticated over time" (Glock). Trethewey recognizes the transformation that characterizes Warren's canon, a transformation that I believe would be impossible to fully realize without Warren's willingness to write about the mother figure.

Like Warren, Trethewey's biography informs her writing in a unique way. Raised in the South, Trethewey is the daughter of an African American mother, Gwendolyn Ann Turnbough, and a Canadian father, Eric Trethewey. When her parents learned of her mother's pregnancy, they traveled to Ohio so they could be legally married, as biracial marriages were prohibited in the South. Natasha was born in Gulfport, Mississippi, where the family lived with Gwendolyn's mother. Later the Tretheweys moved into their own apartment, and Trethewey's father Eric supported the family by unloading ships at the docks, a difficult job that Trethewey explores in her poem from *Domestic Work* (2000) entitled "At the Owl Club, North Gulfport, Mississippi, 1950." Eric eventually quit this job to pursue a doctorate degree at Tulane, living near campus and traveling home on the weekends to see his family (McHaney103-05).

Trethewey's parents separated around the time she entered elementary school. Gwendolyn raised her daughter in Decatur, Georgia, though Trethewey also spent time during her childhood in New Orleans with Eric and in Gulfport with her grandmother ("Trethewey, Natasha"). Partly because of her parents' separation and her subsequent move, Trethewey found herself part of two communities: the black community of her mother and grandmother, and the white community of her father. She felt that she could not entirely identify with either community because of her mixed race and heritage, and therefore she constantly occupied a liminal space. The theme of liminality appears frequently throughout Trethewey's canon, for she is unafraid to write her own biography into her poetry.

Like Warren, Trethewey seems to have inherited her poetic sensibilities from her father. After earning his college degree, Eric Trethewey "built a career as a poet that included appearances in *Poetry* and *Atlantic Monthly* magazines and five published poetry collections" (Allen). In 1984, Eric moved to Virginia to become a professor at Hollins University, where he taught until his death in 2014. During his tenure at Hollins, Eric's poetry classes inspired eager young students and jail inmates alike. He also inspired his daughter Natasha, whom he encouraged to write poetry during long car rides (Allen). Natasha demonstrated from an early age both a knack for and an interest in poetry that impressed Eric. She began writing poems in earnest in third grade, and the school librarian was pleased enough with them to have her poems bound in cardboard and placed in the library. In the eighth grade, she confided to her best friend that she would one day become a poet (McKee 152). Though connected to her father through poetry, Natasha always remained connected to her mother through race, a bond that

ultimately distanced her from Eric; Eric was never able to grant Natasha or her mother true subject status (for example, Eric Trethewey's poem "My Biracial Daughter" is predicated on Natasha's status as other).

Trethewey's freshmen year of college was a defining moment for her, both poetically and personally. Tragically, Trethewey's stepfather shot and killed her mother. In her grief over her mother's death, Trethewey turned to poetry, writing what she later called "really bad poems, horrible poems" in an attempt to deal with this loss (McKee 152). After these initial attempts, Trethewey abandoned poetry for a time; the gut-wrenching effects of her mother's death had begun to show themselves in multiple areas of her life: "I took a break from a lot of things. It was a really traumatic time for me. I made bad grades, I couldn't concentrate . . . it took me years to even be the student I had been before that happened" (McHaney 152). Trethewey was close to Gwendolyn before her death; as a result, losing her mother prompted her to rethink her identity. Herein lies yet another parallel between Trethewey and Warren: both poets lost their mother at an early age, and this loss helped spur a life-long search for subjectivity.

In spite of the emotional challenges she faced, Trethewey graduated with a B.A. in English and then received her M.A. in English and Creative Writing from Hollins University. Trethewey's decision to pursue poetry professionally was sudden and unexpected. She had always loved fiction and planned to write short stories in graduate school. Trethewey remembers, "Poems just somehow did not speak to me. And then, all of a sudden, they did" (McKee 152). For Trethewey, poems became "elegant envelopes of form. . . . Because of [their] music and lyricism and density and compression, poems can be memorable in a way that a long piece of fiction isn't. Not that the language of the

novel or story isn't memorable, but the ease with which we might memorize a poem and carry it with us in our heads is appealing to me" (McHaney 108). After earning her M.A., Trethewey enrolled at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst where she received an M.F.A. in poetry ("Trethewey, Natasha"). Thus began the start of a brilliantly successful career, ultimately earning Trethewey the title of United States Poet Laureate in 2012.

Trethewey's poetry is replete with images of and references to her mother, specifically images and references in relation to her mother's untimely death. Many of these poems echo Warren's mother poetry in their content. "Early Evening, Frankfort, Kentucky" is one such poem from Trethewey's first volume of poetry, *Domestic Work* (2000). This poem undoubtedly resembles Warren's "October Picnic Long Ago." The poem begins as Trethewey's pregnant mother walks through town with her father, enjoying a moment of sweetness just as Warren's parents enjoyed such moments during their weekly Sunday picnics:

The stacks at the distillery exhale,
and my parents breathe evening air

heady and sweet as Kentucky bourbon.

They are young and full of laughter,
the sounds in my mother's throat

rippling down into my blood.

My mother, who will not reach
forty-one, steps into the middle

of a field, lies down among clover
 and sweet grass, right here, right now—
 dead center of her life. (11-21)

This poem highlights the mother figure, whose laughter ripples into her child's blood much as the speaker's mother in "October Picnic Long Ago" sings to the sky while swinging her baby: "*And a bird-note burst from her throat, and she gaily sang*" (32). The mother's joy in this moment, joy found in the simplicity of sweet grass and fields of clover, is all the more poignant in light of her early death, for the speaker tells us that she "will not reach / forty-one" (17-18). For this evening, however, the "dead center of her life," the future is distant and unthreatening (21). The mother remains fully present in this moment, again like the speaker's mother in "October Picnic": "*What more would I want, ' she now cried, 'when I love everything I now see?'*" (30). Like "October Picnic," "Early Evening, Frankfort, Kentucky" celebrates the mother figure, a mother able to embrace the present with love and joy despite an unknowable and uncertain future.

Not all of Trethewey's mother poems are joyous and celebratory; in *Native Guard* (2006), a volume dedicated to the memory of her mother, Trethewey writes of more difficult memories and experiences. In "After Your Death," the speaker recalls her first actions upon learning of her mother's passing:

First, I emptied the closets of your clothes,
 threw out the bowl of fruit, bruised
 from your touch, left empty the jars

you bought for preserves. The next morning,
 birds rustled the fruit trees, and later
 when I twisted a ripe fig loose from its stem,

I found it half eaten, the other side
 Already rotting, or—like another I plucked
 and split open—being taken from the inside:

a swarm of insects hollowing it. I'm too late,
 again, another space emptied by loss.

Tomorrow, the bowl I have yet to fill. (1-12)

The tone of this poem is very different from that of “Early Evening, Frankfort, Kentucky.” Unlike that earlier poem, “After Your Death” conveys a sense of the ominous and the ambiguous, not unlike “The Return: An Elegy.” The language of the poem communicates undertones of sexual violence; phrases such as “bruised / from your touch,” “twisted a ripe fig,” and “like another I plucked / and split open—being taken from the inside” convey a sense of helplessness against the violence of life, as if the mother’s murder at the hands of her boyfriend is analogous to rape. The fig, a femininely shaped fruit, acts as a metaphor for Trethewey’s mother Gwendolyn, who is othered by her gender and race and then violated. Therefore, like the mother of “The Return,” the mother in “After Your Death” appears abjected. The speaker, like the speaker of “The Return,” understands this as a watershed moment: “I’m too late, / again, another space emptied by loss. / Tomorrow, the bowl I have yet to fill” (10-12). The speaker

understands that beginning tomorrow, a new identity and a new purpose must be found in the wake of this loss.

These two Trethewey poems demonstrate the presence of the mother figure in contemporary southern poetry, a presence that remains both significant and powerful. Trethewey continually revisits themes of motherhood in poems such as “Expectant,” “Family Portrait,” “The Southern Crescent,” “Letter,” and “My Mother Dreams Another Country” in *Domestic Work* and *Native Guard*. Further study is necessary to fully explore the mothers in Trethewey’s canon and the manner in which her relationship with her own mother informs her writing. Likewise, further study is necessary for fully understanding the mothers in Warren’s poetry and how his relationship with Ruth Penn Warren altered the arc of his canon. Equally noteworthy would be a discussion of the connections between Warren’s and Trethewey’s poetic treatments of mothers; such a study could help reveal how motherhood as a concept may function in southern poetry.

Warren wrote about mothers in many poems not considered in this project, including “Letter of a Mother,” “Mother Makes the Biscuits,” “Revelation,” and “To a Little Girl, One Year Old, in a Ruined Fortress” (*Collected Poems*). In true New Critical fashion, Warren’s references to mothers in these poems are at times oblique and often ambiguous. However, the sheer prevalence, beauty, and power of these references draw the reader into these poems, leading to questions about Warren’s mother as well as to revelations about one’s own. Though we can never fully know why Warren wrote so often and so pointedly of mothers, we do know that Ruth Penn Warren was a proud, loving, and possessive woman and that Warren cared for her very deeply. She loved life and had a colorful if demanding personality, as expressed in this letter to her son:

. . . The snow is fast disappearing today & it is much warmer and clear. . .
 . This country has seldom ever had such a spell of zero weather this time of year. I
 could do without any more snow forever.

I am getting rather impatient to hear from you but I know you are busy &
 have not looked for a letter till the exams are over, but don't wait long then,
 please. (qtd. in Clark, "Letters from Home" 391)

It seems that after her death Warren could never forget the woman who wrote this letter:
 she was well spoken, well meaning, and desirous of her son's attention. Her early passing
 prevented their relationship from realizing its full potential, and for Warren, the loss of a
 mother called into question issues of subjectivity and agency.

In an article exploring Warren's filial guilt, William Bedford Clark thoughtfully
 describes the relationship between parents and children: "We are mistaken if we think of
 ourselves as *having* children rather than *being* parents. By the same token we do not *have*
 parents; we *are* sons and daughters. The mysterious intersubjectivity inherent in family
 life is crucial to establishing and maintaining an authentic selfhood" ("Letters from
 Home" 404). Authentic selfhood, of course, was Warren's primary poetic concern, and
 his identity as his mother's son is inherently connected to the authentic self. By critically
 reclaiming the mother figure in Warren's poetry, we reclaim a new understanding of this
 brilliant man's art, and in so doing we might reclaim a new understanding of ourselves as
 well.

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