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## American Poetry at Mid-Century: Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell

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This dissertation explores the artistic and personal connections between three writers who helped change American poetry: Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell. All three poets maintained a close working relationship throughout their careers, particularly as they experimented with looser poetic forms and more personal poetry in the fifties and after. Various studies have explored their careers within sundry contexts, but no sustained examination of their relationships with one another exists.

In focusing on literary history and aesthetics, this study develops an historical narrative that includes close-readings of primary texts within a variety of contexts. Established views of formalism, high modernism, and the New Criticism are interwoven into the study as tools for examining poetic structure within selected poems. Contexts concerning current criticism on these authors are also interlaced throughout the study and discussed in relation to particular historical and aesthetic issues.

Having closely scrutinized the personal exchanges and creative output of all three poets, this study illuminates the significance of these writers' relationships to American poetry at mid-century and beyond. Though the more experimental schools of poetry would not reach their height until the 1950s, by the 1940s Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell were already searching for a new aesthetic. With friendships strong, correspondences frequent, and critical attention to one another's work constant throughout this decade, their poetry shifted in similar ways, both in content and style, by no coincidence. Ultimately, Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell purposely amended the formalist and high modernist aesthetics of their mentors in order to create poetry that

engaged in an authentic exploration of selfhood within the real-life contexts of the post-World War II era.

This project joins several recent critical works that fray the edges of hard-drawn boundaries that have become generally accepted truths about American literature. Despite the fact that these three artists enjoyed and benefited professionally from life-long, well-documented literary relationships with one another, previous histories have discouraged scholars from investigating these connections. As a case study, this dissertation points to a need to widen and reevaluate the current views of American poetry in the second half of the twentieth-century so that we may more fully grasp the complexities and origins of contemporary poetry and forge a better understanding of American verse traditions.

This dissertation by Joan Romano Shifflett fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in English Language and Literature approved by Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., as Director, and by Glen Johnson, Ph.D., and Charlotte Beck, Ph.D. as Readers.

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Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., Director

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*For Nathan A. Shifflett,  
a true Renaissance man*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Chapter One: The Early Years.....	1
Chapter Two: The Mid-Century Shift.....	50
Chapter Three: Robert Penn Warren.....	107
Chapter Four: Randall Jarrell.....	163
Chapter Five: Robert Lowell.....	207
Afterword.....	262
Appendix: Time Line.....	267
Bibliography.....	275

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## CHAPTER ONE: THE EARLY YEARS

*Chapter one establishes the three poets' early biographical connections, including the influence of their shared Fugitive mentors, Ransom and Tate. A comparative reading of their poetry (Warren's Thirty-Six Poems (1936) through Eleven Poems on the Same Theme (1942), Jarrell's The Rage for the Lost Penny (1940) through Little Friend, Little Friend (1945), and Lowell's Land of Unlikeness (1944) through Lord Weary's Castle (1946)) establishes the trends that dominate their early work, and foregrounds the significance of the artists' personal ties to one another.*

### **An Overview**

Within studies of twentieth-century American literature, there is a general awareness that Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989), Randall Jarrell (1914-1965), and Robert Lowell (1917-1977) knew one another well<sup>1</sup>; some critics have even studied them in tandem.<sup>2</sup> Though various works

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<sup>1</sup> William Bedford Clark states in his introduction to the first volume of Warren's letters that Warren "discovered and nurtured a new generation of major American authors that included.... Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell" (2). Similarly, in *Randall Jarrell and His Age*, Stephen Burt highlights the privileged role of these relationships by noting, Jarrell "seems to have been perpetually in need of close companionship and emotional alliance ... from friends like [Hannah] Arendt, Lowell, the Taylors [Peter and Eleanor], and Warren" (19). Also, Lowell's biographer Paul Mariani (1994) provides a comprehensive account of the Lowell/Jarrell connection, while also noting that Lowell was "particularly taken with Red [Robert Penn] Warren" (92).

<sup>2</sup> William Doeski brings Warren and Lowell into one another's circle in his detailed study of the relationship between Lowell and Tate (1990), though Lowell is more often associated with Jarrell in studies of post-World War II poetry. Book-length examples include Bawer (1986), Meyers (1987), Travisano (1999), Burt (2002), Ferguson (2003), and Kirsch (2005). Thomas Travisano, for example, illuminates the "underlying network of literary relations linking the quartet [of Bishop, Lowell, Jarrell, and Berryman]" which "grew, persisted, and thrived for forty years" (3). While Travisano's book, and others like it, are valuable for documenting the significant relationship between Lowell and Jarrell at mid-twentieth-century and beyond, they tend to ignore these authors' all-important roots; roots that were planted alongside Warren, who mentored and promoted Lowell and Jarrell's work.

have explored these writers' careers within sundry contexts, no sustained examination of their relationships with one another exists. In *The Fugitive Legacy*, Charlotte Beck names Jarrell and Lowell as part of the prominent "post-fugitive circle," writers who were influenced by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Warren.<sup>3</sup> Beck observes: "[they] were first bonded with and then broke away from their mentors; and [they] swerved in almost identical ways from their earliest modes of composition and from their Fugitive mentors as they evolved into the first important postmodern poets" (68). What Beck later identifies, and what serves as the motive for this study, is the fact that this observation also applies to Warren. The way Warren "swerved" with Jarrell and Lowell was not a coincidence; it was the result of artistic and personal connections among these three writers from their early days at Vanderbilt University, Kenyon College, and Louisiana State University through the rest of their careers. The following study will show that while Warren began as teacher/mentor for these slightly younger poets, the men of this trio quickly became equals, colleagues, confidants, and invaluable life-long critics of one another's work.

### ***Childhood Aspirations***

Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell came from strikingly different backgrounds, but were brought together by literary study. Warren was born on April 24, 1905 in Guthrie, Kentucky to

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<sup>3</sup> Many book-length works focus on the connections among Warren, Ransom, and Tate—Cowan (1959), Bradbury (1958), Moore, Jr. (1970), Justus (1981), Conkin (1988), Blotner (1997), Beck (2001), Grimshaw (2001), and Brinkmeyer (2009)—due to their common associations with Vanderbilt University, *The Fugitive* literary magazine (1922-1925), the controversial publication of *I'll Take My Stand* (1931), and the influential dissemination of the New Criticism.

Anna Ruth Penn and Robert Franklin Warren, a teacher and bank clerk, respectively.<sup>4</sup> Later, Warren would recall fond memories of Guthrie, with its “fine rolling farmland breaking here and there into barrens, but with nice woodlands and plenty of water, a country well adapted to the proper pursuits of boyhood” (“Self Interview” 2). In addition to recollections of target shooting and other childhood adventures with his friend Kent Greenfield, Warren also remembers “some very vile children” who bullied him for being “bookish.” It is no mystery why Warren would come to love books, with a father and grandfather (“Grandpa Penn”) who were passionate for poetry and a mother who taught school in their own home (Blotner 18, 24, 26).

Warren’s natural intelligence and love of learning, though instigation for neighborhood trouble-makers, allowed him to achieve academic success and ensure graduation from Guthrie High School by the spring of 1920. At this point, Warren had dreams of entering the naval academy, and took an extra year at Clarksville High School as a “special student” while biding his time to fulfill the sixteen-year-old age requirement for Annapolis. One year later, having passed all necessary written and physical exams for admission, Warren received his acceptance letter to the United States Naval Academy. To the detriment of Warren’s military aspirations—and the unforeseen good fortune of American letters—an accident changed Warren’s fate. While playing in the yard, his younger brother hurled a chunk of coal that landed on young Warren’s left eye. This incident would mar him, both physically and emotionally, for the rest of his life, and forced him to fall back on his alternative plan to enter Vanderbilt University in 1921 (Blotner 27-30).

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<sup>4</sup> The details of Warren’s life have been skillfully compiled in Joseph Blotner’s invaluable biography of Warren (1997).

Born on May 6, 1914, just nine years after Warren, Randall Jackson Jarrell took a markedly different path to Vanderbilt. Jarrell's biographer, William H. Pritchard, notes: "Jarrell's childhood, divided between Tennessee and California ... [is] an appropriately doubly rooted beginning for a person who throughout his life could never be identified with or understood in terms of a single locale" (11). In contrast to Warren's iconic Southern childhood among the rolling farmland of Kentucky, Jarrell was born in Nashville, Tennessee, but moved just one year later to Los Angeles, California with his parents, Owen and Anna Campbell Jarrell. Owen, son of a working class family from Shelbyville, Tennessee, earned modest wages in L.A. as a photographer's assistant. Anna, daughter of a wealthy Nashville family, was accustomed to a more lavish lifestyle. Though Owen later moved the family to Long Beach to start his own portrait studio, the marriage was already strained and a divorce was imminent.

In 1924, when Jarrell was only ten-years old, his parents separated and he returned to Nashville with his mother and younger brother. After two years, Jarrell returned to California in the summer of 1926 to live with his grandparents and great-grandmother in Hollywood. Once he finished school in June 1927, he was deeply saddened to return to his mother's home in Nashville, where he remained through high school and part of college. Like Warren, his literary interests developed early in high school; he was active in journalism, the drama club, and even the school's magazine. Despite his scholarly inclination, upon graduation his mother's prosperous brother, Uncle Howell Campbell, sent Jarrell to a commercial school in Nashville in hopes that he would eventually join his successful candy company. After one year replete with

illness and discontent, Jarrell persuaded his uncle to send him to Vanderbilt University in the fall of 1932, where Warren had recently accepted a position as assistant professor (Pritchard 19-23).<sup>5</sup>

Robert Trail Spence Lowell IV, born on March 1, 1917 in Boston, Massachusetts has the most sensational life story among this influential literary triangle. Part of New England aristocratic society, Lowell's mother Charlotte, a Boston Winslow, was in the direct line of the *Mayflower* Winslows; her father, Arthur Winslow, was a self-made millionaire. Lowell's father, a naval officer, was the progeny of the Somerset "Lowles," who arrived in the United States in 1639, making the list of Massachusetts' first families. In addition to this prominent heritage, Lowell also had two poets in the family, James Russell and Amy Lowell. Though Robert did not think very highly of this family legacy, naming James Russell "a poet pedestalled for oblivion" and Amy "big and a scandal," he later learned that these names could open doors for him ("Conversation with Hamilton" 276).

Because of his father's career as a naval commander, the Lowells moved several times during his early years. Throughout these relocations, Lowell's grammar school attendance, though always at fine private schools, was interrupted; he jumped from the Brimmer School in Boston, to the Potomac School in Washington, D.C., back to the Brimmer School, and then to The Rivers School in Boston for three years. In 1930, a thirteen-year-old-Lowell began his studies at St. Mark's in Southborough, a prestigious boarding school that his father and great-grandfather had attended. Lowell's nickname "Cal," bestowed upon him by his classmates but maintained for a lifetime, stood for Caliban and "for good measure the mad emperor, Caligula";

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<sup>5</sup> Biographical information drawn from Mary Jarrell (1985), Bryant, Jr. (1986), and Pritchard (1990).

this clever young man, capable of manipulating the other boys, was also physically powerful and full of vigor, “ready to take on anyone and everyone” (Pritchard 41, 43).

Similar to Warren and Jarrell, Lowell’s literary pursuits started early. In the fall of 1934, Lowell’s senior year at St. Mark’s, he began studying poetry under Richard Ghormley Eberhart and became the associate editor of *Vindex*, the school’s literary magazine. At seventeen he had written his first poem, thereby discovering a new outlet for his boundless energy. Before entering Harvard in September of 1935—a choice dictated by his parents—Lowell and his close friend Frank Parker spent the first of two consecutive summers in Nantucket, reading, writing poetry, and sharpening their intellectual focus. Though Lowell was able to develop his poetic knowledge under the tutelage of Harvard’s James Laughlin, he was largely unhappy with his collegiate experience. Despite his displeasure with Harvard, it was ultimately his parents’ disapproval over his engagement to Anne Dick that drove Lowell to the South. His father’s insistent meddling in their relationship eventually led to a violent confrontation between father and son, in which Lowell knocked his father to the ground with a punch. Merrill Moore, a fringe member of the Fugitives based at Vanderbilt, also happened to be Lowell’s psychiatrist. After the incident between Lowell and his father, Moore drew on connections to Tate and Ransom in order to arrange an escape for Lowell—from his parents, from Harvard, and from Anne Dick and the engagement (Pritchard 46-59). This plan landed Lowell in a tent on Allen Tate’s lawn in the summer of 1937; soon after, he began attending Ransom’s classes at Vanderbilt.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Biographical information drawn from Fein (1970), Hamilton (1982), Mariani (1994), and Hamilton (2005).

### *Fugitive Beginnings*

While Vanderbilt University served as the initial magnet for these three poets, it was the men of Vanderbilt, John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974) and (John Orley) Allen Tate (1899-1979), who provided the figurative glue. Both Warren and Lowell would come to see Ransom as a “father figure”<sup>7</sup> and Tate as “a combination of older brother and tutor.”<sup>8</sup> Though Jarrell was less forthcoming in crediting influences on his work, Adam Kirsch acknowledges that Ransom “was [Jarrell’s] mentor in college and graduate school” (155). Furthermore, Beck notes that after Warren introduced Tate and Jarrell, “a close friendship began ... which flourished for a few years.” Jarrell did, after all, dedicate his first book of poetry to Tate, though Beck argues that this action was “a gesture of mixed gratitude and defiance” (*Fugitive Legacy* 83, 84).

While Ransom and Tate had a strong hand in laying a foundation for the future careers of all three poets, Vanderbilt and the English Department did little more than to provide a foil. In fact, the English Department’s chair, Edwin Mims, with “his old-fashioned values and standards,” was ultimately responsible for driving Tate, Warren, and Ransom—and Jarrell and Lowell along with them—away from Vanderbilt (Conkin 4). Before this exodus, however, the campus did provide fertile ground for the Fugitives, a literary group whose members continued to nurture, shape, and bring recognition to the poetry of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell long after their time in Tennessee.

In 1915, the original Fugitive members—several highly intellectual members of the Vanderbilt community, including Donald Davidson and Ransom—began gathering at the home

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<sup>7</sup> Quotation in Blotner 55; also referenced in Doreski 21 and Beck, *Fugitive Legacy* 99.

<sup>8</sup> Quotation in Blotner 41; also referenced in Doreski 1990.

of Sidney Hirsch to discuss, above all, poetry and aesthetics (Doreski 13, Conkin 1). It was clear from the start that this group never tried to fuse their beliefs into a unified poetic school; one of the only common principles all Fugitive members agreed upon was “a hierarchical view of literature in which poetry was at the pinnacle” (Meyers, *Manic* 31). In 1921, Davidson invited Tate, then a junior at Vanderbilt, to join their Fugitive meetings. Paul K. Conkin relates: “[Tate] joined the Fugitive group, not as a deferential undergraduate but as a cocky, at times arrogant protagonist” (15). Tate’s energy and zeal for poetry, though divisive at times, propelled the Fugitives into their most active period, 1922 - 1925.

When Warren entered Vanderbilt in the fall of 1921, he became deeply entrenched in this invigorating hive of intellectuals. He later recalls his “great good fortune” to attend Vanderbilt University:

For this was the time of the Fugitives at Vanderbilt, a group of poets and arguers—including John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Merrill Moore—and I imagine that more of my education came from those sessions than from the classroom. (Warren, “Self Interview” 2)

In April 1922, the group published their first issue of *The Fugitive: A Journal of Poetry*, and for the next three years brought prestige to Vanderbilt with their well-respected literary magazine. Warren, an undergraduate at the time, submitted his first poem to *The Fugitive* in 1923, and served as Ransom’s assistant editor for all four issues in 1925 (Conkin 19, Blotner 56). In addition to the more tangible lessons on poetics and in the administration of a literary magazine, Warren’s involvement with the Fugitives taught him the value of genuine camaraderie and honest criticism among peers. Conkin explains: “The seminar provided each poet a critical but appreciative audience [and] forced the effort needed to write so many poems” (17). What



Warren, and later Jarrell and Lowell, learned from Ransom and Tate, they would continue to practice with each other for the rest of their lives.

Personal relationships aside, Ransom and Tate also had a significant impact on the content and style of Warren's, Jarrell's, and Lowell's early verse. Before discussing how these three poets eventually "swerved" away from their mentors, it is necessary to understand exactly what they were turning from. As mentioned earlier, the Fugitives could never agree upon a set theory of aesthetics; they did, however, share mutual skepticism of the effects of industrialization on modern society. Some of these early concerns would inspire the main tenets of the Southern Agrarians, in which Ransom, Tate, and Warren were included. Even in this shared concern, however, there are distinctions among Ransom and Tate that are reflected in their poetry.

For Tate, industrialization meant the dehumanizing transformation of man into a non-thinking automaton, a fear voiced by other poets of the early twentieth-century, including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens. In a contemporary twist on Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-1868), Tate believed poetry could rescue man from alienation and return him to faith in brotherhood among men, to a fuller sense of self, and to a restored connection to the divine. This theory underpins both Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead," in which Tate laments the fallen Confederate soldiers while dramatizing the chaos and degeneration of modern society.

Though Ransom also viewed poetry as a potent force in shaping culture, his poems do not depict the same desperate, grand-scale attempt to "save" man from modern times. Warren recalls a face-to-face interaction in which Ransom was "politely declining" a position among

those contemporary poets who passionately spurned the ills of modernity. Warren observes, “[Ransom] was not writing about modern man, but about man. If modern man came in as a case in point (as modern man most surely did), it was under that rubric” (“Notes” 305-306). While Tate and other modernists were breaking tradition and experimenting with aesthetic forms partly in an attempt to restore humanity to modern society, Ransom chose to handle universal themes within the boundaries of traditional forms and local subject matter. Nowhere is the contrast between Tate’s high modernism and Ransom’s formalism exemplified more clearly than in their poems.

*Chills and Fever* (1924) and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927), Ransom’s second and third volumes of poetry, had a great impact on writers in the 1920s through the 1950s; as Ransom’s formalistic approach in the New Criticism gained popularity, so did his carefully constructed, flawlessly metered poems. Ransom favored an adherence to conventional forms, yet he infused irony, often through a playful mocking of those forms, in order to achieve a unique detached tone. This effect is illustrated in “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter,” an elegy in five quatrains that describes the funeral of a young girl. His use of irony in the first quatrain is typical: “There was such speed in her little body, / And such lightness in her footfall.” After observing the balladic meter and charmingly old-fashioned language of these first two lines, the reader comes to expect a quaint tale about youth marked by movement and vigor. The ballad form was originally created to accompany dances, and the repetition of “ls” in “little,” “lightness,” and “footll” adds to the musical, whimsical quality of these lines.

The next two lines turn the reader's expectations upside-down: "It is no wonder her brown study / Astonishes us all" (lines 3-4). The irony in Ransom's choice of the ballad form is clear from this point. A stark contrast to the ballad's characteristic jubilant dance, this form serves instead as an elegy for a dead girl. Ransom's skillful diction contributes to the ironic effect. In contrast to the light-hearted "Is" of the first two lines, lines three and four are laden with hard, heavy consonants, weighing the reader down along with the reality of death. While the light, quick words of the first two lines create a skipping effect, the sounds of "wonder" and "brown," and the four-syllable word "Astonishes" succeed in slowing the reader down. Even the rhyming of "body" and "study" is purposefully awkward, drawing attention to the shocking image of her small corpse inside the coffin. Such detailed attention to technique and word choice exemplifies one of Ransom's principal theories on aesthetics: that form and content are inextricably linked.

Ransom favors harmony in poetry over the disjointed incongruity of modernism, and the balanced contrasts and opposing tensions exemplified in "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" are what enable him to achieve such power at unexpected moments in his poetry. The main tension within this poem is created by the contrast of movement versus stillness; more precisely, the "astonishment" created when something that should be moving is suddenly still. Quatrains two through four relate the narrator's wistful memory of the "little Lady" alive and well, playing in a field of geese. Unlike the active youngster with her "tireless heart" that "made them rise," the geese are comparatively "lazy," "sleepy," engaged in "apple-dreams."

Readers are jarred from this sweet reverie when “now go the bells” in the fifth quatrain. Anyone who has heard bells tolling from a tower knows that the ensuing silence is ever more still once they cease. So, the mourners are “ready,” they have braced themselves for the funeral; yet, they are “sternly stopped” upon seeing the corpse. Ransom is a master at precise, concrete diction, as is exemplified by these final lines: “In one house we are sternly stopped / To say we are vexed at her brown study, / Lying so primly propped.” No word other than “vexed” could more perfectly express not only the grief and sorrow of these mourners, but also their anger, deep disturbance, and perhaps physical discomfort caused by seeing the epitome of youth “lying so primly propped.” In a commentary on this poem, Warren admires “the tension between the irony and the tenderness, between the impulse to withdraw and the impulse to approach” (“Notes” 313). It is easy to understand why a sixteen-year-old Warren sitting in Ransom’s composition class during his freshman year would want to emulate the success of his mentor.

While at Vanderbilt, Warren contributed poems to *Driftwood Flames*, a book of poems dedicated to Ransom, the *American Poetry Magazine*, *Voices*, the *Double Dealer*, and published over a dozen poems in *The Fugitive*. Though several of these poems show promise, this period was most valuable for the intense years of apprenticeship he enjoyed under Ransom and Tate. Within these early poems, Ransom’s influence is inherent in Warren’s tight rhyme schemes, regularly metered lines, and general adherence to classicist principles; one may also note the occasional echoes of Ransom’s themes and content. For example, in December 1924, the year “Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter” was published in *Chills and Fever*, Warren published “Admonition to Those Who Mourn” in *The Fugitive*. This traditional poem, composed of four

quatrains with alternating rhyming lines and regular meter, is an elegy of sorts that begins: “Now is the hour to rhyme a song for death”; note the familiar combination of melody with mortality. In a quatrain particularly reminiscent of Ransom’s “Bells,” Warren writes: “From adequate oblivion unto tears / The house is empty now, the portals broken, / The tenant thief has fled; no one there hears / The bells that once so silverly had spoken” (l. 4-7). Ransom’s bell metaphor, which so effectively embodies the contrast of movement versus stillness, is echoed here in Warren’s early work.

Another parallel may be seen in Warren’s poem “Vision,” which was published in the *American Poetry Magazine*. Warren upsets reader expectations by juxtaposing a playful traditional form with a shockingly dark tone. This poem of three quatrains has an anapestic meter with alternating rhyming lines that creates a sing-song effect: “I shall build me a house where the larkspur blooms / In a narrow glade in an alder wood” (l. 1-2). The bouncing rhythm of this poem does not prepare the reader for the dismal final quatrain which begins, “I shall burn my house with the rising dawn” (l. 9). Though this quatrain is metrically similar to the rest of the poem, its solemn content is shocking once juxtaposed to the deceptively uplifting, lighthearted meter. Rather than the masterful balance of irony and tone in Ransom’s work, this poem reads like a boyhood folk song, but already Warren was experimenting with how to achieve irony within the confines of traditional forms.

As Warren matured as a poet, he developed the insightful human sympathy that is characteristic of Ransom. Warren observes that Pound and Eliot address many of the same issues as Ransom, but:

they set the issues on a world stage, and the issues become aspects of their major theme of the crisis of culture. This expansiveness is precisely the opposite of the reductiveness of [Ransom], for whom the great issues are most poignantly or forcefully dramatized in the local and small. ("Notes" 310)

Some of Warren's finest works follow Ransom's model that he so admired, from early poems like "Kentucky Mountain Farm," published in Warren's first volume, *Thirty-Six Poems* (1936), to later masterpieces like "Audubon: A Vision" (1969). "Kentucky Mountain Farm," indicative of Warren's early naturalistic view of the universe, depicts the local "little stubborn people of the hill" struggling to survive amidst this "rocky place" where the "hills are weary" and "the rocks are stricken." Like Ransom, Warren keeps his focus small, allowing the local hawk and sycamore, that "same old tree," to speak for the greater world.

Another poetic quality that Warren initially imitated from Ransom, but continued to develop on his own, is his clear, rich diction. John M. Bradbury posits that, like Ransom, Warren's "thinking is directly figurative and his language ... is concrete, earthy, and vivid" (78). Warren's skill with language, which increasingly denies abstraction as his writing develops, is revealed in early lines like this:

Wind, down the eastern gap, will lie  
Level along the snow, beating the cedar,  
And lull the drowsy head that it blows over  
To startle a cold and crystalline dream forever.

And sycamores rise down a dark ravine,  
Where a creek in flood, sucking the rock and clay,  
Will tumble the laurel, the sycamore away.  
Think how a body, naked and lean  
And white as the splintered sycamore, would go  
Tumbling and turning, hushed in the end. (III. "History Among the Rocks," l. 3-14)

Warren may have learned the aesthetic implications of such imagery from Ransom, but he arguably possessed a natural ability to capture vivid scenes with vibrant language.

Though Warren respected Ransom and gained much from his example, he recalls harboring an “imperfect rebellion” against Ransom’s poetry when he was “nineteen to twenty-five years old.” Not only because Ransom opposed the great high modernism that caught Warren on fire during his college years, or because his polished poetry was a “painful reproach” to Warren’s own early attempts at greatness, but instead because of a resentment rooted “against the cast of the author’s mind which made such graceful gestures, enunciated such deep truths, and exercised such fascinating authority” (“Notes” 303-304). With a rawer, more corporeal voice, Warren would achieve all of this and more within his literary career, though it was those early yearnings inflamed by his inspiring mentor that encouraged him to attain such success.

Perhaps even more than Ransom’s, Allen Tate’s mentorship was invaluable during Warren’s apprentice years. In January 1923, Warren moved in with Tate and Ridley Wills. When Tate first introduced Warren to Eliot’s poetry, he recalled coming home to discover that Warren had painted scenes from “The Waste Land” on their dorm room walls, “the rat creeping softly through the vegetation and the typist putting a record on the gramophone” (Bradbury 74). Though Warren acquired knowledge of traditional forms and balanced poems from Ransom, he learned innovation and experimentation from Tate and Eliot; and when Ransom publicly berated the very poem that inspired Warren’s dorm room murals, his loyalty to Tate was unquestioned.

In the July 1923 issue of the *New York Evening Post Literary Review*, Ransom published a cutting review—cruelly titled “Waste Lands”—of Eliot’s new poem, which he faulted for “its

extreme disconnection.” Ransom continued: “I do not know how many parts the poem is supposed to have, to me there are something like fifty parts which offer no bridges” and, furthermore:

[there is] a frequent want of grammatical joints and marks of punctuation; as if it were the function of art to break down the usual singleness of the artistic image, and to attack the integrity of the individual fragments. (825)

Clearly Ransom did not realize that the “flaws” he so sharply criticized in Eliot’s work would become marking characteristics of the rising high modernism. In addition to the disjointed form, Tate, and other authors of that time period, chose to emulate the juxtaposition of “many tongues,” “the fragments ... in many metres,” and “above all,” the “emotions kept raw and bleeding, like sores we continue to pick” (826). When Tate responded to the *Review* in a sharp public letter that condemned Ransom’s myopic opinions, he not only became a new champion for high modernism, he also firmly established himself as the primary mentor for the first publications of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell.

Tate’s first volume of poems, *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* (1928), illustrates the large influence of Eliot alongside small echoes of Ransom. Like Eliot, Tate’s poems are heavily allusive from both history and personal experience. In “Ode to the Confederate Dead,” Tate references Zeno and Parmenides, Greek philosophers of the fifth century B.C., and “Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, and Bull Run,” (l. 48), famous battles of the Civil War, alongside “the hound bitch,” “tangle of willows,” “screech-owl,” and “mulberry bush” (l. 55, 68, 69, 88) that leapt onto the page directly from Tate’s hometown in Winchester, Kentucky. Some of the more technical devices, such as the abrupt juxtaposition of words and scenes that lack logical



transitions, the deployment of the “objective correlative,” and the density and complexity in language and images are also directly borrowed from Eliot.

Conkin notes that Tate’s earliest poems “were often so packed and dense that even he had difficulty explaining their meaning” (18). By 1928, Tate’s dense Eliotic images and metaphors were more mature and effective, yet he still occasionally chose to unpack them for readers so that nothing would be lost in his carefully constructed layers of metaphor. For example, Tate explains the “blind crab” metaphor in “Ode to the Confederate Dead” as a:

figure [that] has mobility but no direction, energy but, from the human point of view, no purposeful world to use it in.... The crab is the first intimation of the nature of the moral conflict upon which the drama of the poem develops: the cut-off-ness of the modern “intellectual man” from the world. (“Narcissus as Narcissus” (1938) qtd. in *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* 626)

One is instantly reminded of Eliot’s “pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (l. 73-74) that also symbolizes the alienated “modern intellectual” narrator of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Not entirely free from Ransom’s influence, however, the elements of irony—the title of “Ode” itself for example, since the poem is more of a devastating commentary on modern times than a traditional ode—are as much from Ransom as they are from Eliot.

More so than Tate, who generally favored Eliot’s high modernism over Ransom’s formalism, the early poems of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell appear to have been crafted according to a blend of Ransom’s and Tate’s aesthetic principles. The result is a confused mixture that often results in poems that combine Ransom’s traditional forms with Tate’s dense language and intricate metaphors. Only after Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell developed their mature poetic styles

in the fifties were they able to draw from Ransom's and Tate's influence while avoiding the stilted, contrived qualities that characterized their early attempts at this amalgamation.

Of course, there were many additional early influences on these authors other than Ransom and Tate. Warren and Lowell similarly emulated John Milton and the Metaphysical poets, while Jarrell and Lowell equally esteemed Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud. Warren was further influenced by Thomas Hardy and A. E. Houseman, Jarrell by W. H. Auden, and Lowell by Hart Crane; yet, the foundation personally laid by Ransom and Tate during those early years in university classrooms, literary magazine meetings, and social gatherings would prove to have the sturdiest—and most lasting—footing.

By the January 1928 publication of *Fugitives: An Anthology*, Warren's poems were still confined to mostly traditional forms that Ransom championed, such as couplets, quatrains, and sonnets; however, within his more formal constructions, there are traces of Eliot and the high modernism that Tate encouraged Warren to appreciate. Just as Tate's "blind crab" echoes Eliot's "pair of ragged claws," Warren also chooses to echo Eliot's "Prufrock" in the final two lines of his poem "Midnight." Warren's narrator questions in desperation: "Am I doomed to stand thus ever, / Hesitating on the stair?" which mirrors Prufrock's neurotic, self-doubting lines:

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair (l. 37-40).

In addition to tonal similarities, Warren's "Midnight" also contains the historical allusions and loaded images that both Warren and Tate admired in Eliot's technique:

Have you forgot the green Egyptian moon

That leered into the casement where  
 You sat, wiping bloody fingers through your hair?  
 Or the lizard on the arras never blinking?  
 Though your lips are now gibber in a prayer  
 I perceive you are thinking  
 of leprous mists above the muddy Nile  
 And you, a leper, howling among the tombs; (l. 12-19)

Warren's language, though sometimes mottled by clumsy diction in his earliest works, would never be as opaque or impenetrable as Tate's; therefore his "Egyptian moon" and "howling" "leper" carried a directness that was all his own. It is this natural penchant for clarity that marked his distinction, and later Jarrell's and Lowell's, from their high modernist mentor.

After graduating summa cum laude from Vanderbilt in 1925, Warren entered the University of California at Berkeley as a graduate student and TA. There, he met Emma "Cinina" Brescia, whom he secretly wed in the summer of 1929,<sup>9</sup> and completed his Masters degree in 1927. Soon after beginning graduate work at Yale University in the fall of 1927, Warren was selected as a Rhodes Scholar and entered New College at Oxford in October 1928, completing his B. Litt degree in the spring of 1930. After a brief assistant professorship at Southwestern College, Warren returned to Vanderbilt as an acting assisting professor in the fall of 1931, a year before Jarrell enrolled as an undergraduate. By this time, Warren had already completed a prestigious education, published a successful biography,<sup>10</sup> contributed dozens of poems to reputable literary magazines, and earned a place of respect among the most important literary figures of the time (Blotner 1997, Clark 2001); yet none of this—nor the equally

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<sup>9</sup> They were openly married in September 1930.

<sup>10</sup> *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929).

impressive accolades of Ransom or Tate—was enough to intimidate the precocious young Jarrell.

In the fall of 1932, Jarrell began his Bachelor of Arts at Vanderbilt, where he studied directly under Ransom and Warren and was soon introduced to Tate. Jarrell's first year at Vanderbilt began with Ransom's course in Advanced Composition; it was immediately apparent that Jarrell was a brilliant force to be reckoned with. Ransom recalls: "Nobody could ignore Randall, in those years when I was seeing him daily. He was an insistent and almost overbearing talker," an "*enfant terrible*" (*Randall Jarrell 1914-1965* 155, Pritchard 23). Despite Jarrell's overwhelming presence, Ransom and Jarrell would develop a relationship grounded in healthy debates over literary aesthetics. Lowell would recall: "[Jarrell] knew everything, except Ransom's closed provincial world of Greek, Latin, Aristotle, and Oxford" ("John Crowe Ransom" 24). While Ransom opened this world to Jarrell, the precocious pupil continued to assert himself against his elder mentor in matters from Shakespeare to modernism.

Warren was equally impressed by Jarrell's abilities, though more appreciative and supportive of his over-zealous nature. After Ransom's course in the fall, it was obvious that, even as a freshman, Jarrell belonged in the top section of Warren's sophomore survey course, a "Beowulf-to-Hardy sort" (Travisano 138, Pritchard 23). Warren shared anecdotes of that fateful semester, with Jarrell frightening the other students, "not out of malice but with the cruel innocence of a baby" (Blotner 123). Warren, only twenty-six years old and at the start of his teaching career, had to pull Jarrell aside to suggest that "perhaps [Jarrell] could help the other students rather than 'terrorize' them." Jarrell was entirely unaware of "how intimidating his

classroom presence was,” and vowed to change his ways. From this humorous—yet telling—introduction to one another, a trusting friendship would blossom and grow. The two of them often made trips to the home of Bernard Breyer for his warm hospitality and, as Warren named them, “jolly Jewish dinners” (Pritchard 27). Jarrell also visited the Warrens’ home outside Nashville, sometimes alone and often with his first love, Amy Breyer. Warren remembers: “[Jarrell] would come out to my little whitewashed house and talk poetry and philosophy and brutally criticize my poems. I would listen carefully. He was often right” (qtd. in Blotner 123). It is this sort of honesty and receptiveness that typified their lifetime literary relationship.

By the time Lowell arrived in Nashville in the summer of 1937, the Vanderbilt crew was already parting ways. After having his troublesome left eye removed on February 7, 1934, Warren was dealt another difficult blow. Edwin Mims, always an obstacle for Ransom, Tate, and Warren, had given Warren’s classes to Edd Winfield Parks, forcing Warren to leave the place where he had found comfort, support, and unrivaled intellectual stimulation (Blotner 137-138). In her edition of Jarrell’s letters, Mary Jarrell<sup>11</sup> notes that when Warren left Nashville, “Jarrell keenly felt the loss” (2). Without a renewal of his contract for the fall 1934 term, Warren relied on his Rhodes scholarship connections to secure a teaching position at Louisiana State University, where he would eventually teach Lowell (*Selected Letters of Warren*, Vol. I. 2, 7).

Before graduate work with Warren, however, Lowell had an opportunity to undergo the same intensive Ransom / Tate conditioning as Warren and Jarrell during his remaining undergraduate years. As previously mentioned, Merrill Moore played an instrumental role in facilitating Lowell’s move to the South by establishing connections among the young poet,

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Jarrell was Randall’s second wife and an influential presence in his life.

Ransom, and Tate. Lowell had already decided to transfer from Harvard to Vanderbilt, and so in the spring of 1937, he paid Tate a visit at his home, Benfolly, near Clarksville, Tennessee and attended some of Ransom's lectures at Vanderbilt (Beck, *Fugitive Legacy* 102). Lowell returned that summer with Ford Maddox Ford, whom he had impressed at a Boston cocktail party, to attend two writers' conferences in July and August.

Lowell's visits are famously colored with eventful twists. As Beck notes in *The Fugitive Legacy*, the tale of Lowell's visits to the home of Allen and Caroline Gordon Tate has been told from many perspectives, including Lowell's, with varying details and degrees of truth (102).

Lowell dramatically related his arrival:

My head was full of Miltonic, vaguely piratical ambitions. My only anchor was a suitcase, heavy with bad poetry. I was brought to earth by my bumper mashing the Tates' frail agrarian mailbox post.... I had crashed the civilization of the South. ("Visiting the Tates" 58)

His second summer sojourn was also marked by an unusual beginning. The Tates already had a full house, so when Lowell "offered" himself "as a guest," they replied that there was no room for him unless he pitched a tent on the lawn. Missing the irony, perhaps purposely, Lowell relates: "A few days later, I returned from Nashville with an olive Sears, Roebuck umbrella tent. I stayed for three months" ("Visiting the Tates" 60).

Returning to Beck's summation of the situation, the details about the mailbox and tent are relatively unimportant; what is significant is that "[Lowell] was actually invited in and allowed to form a bond with Tate and his circle" (102). Lowell would never officially enroll at Vanderbilt due to another disappointing choice by the institution's administration. In May 1937, Ransom was offered a better salary by Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Despite the grand

efforts by his loyal followers to keep him—Tate, who wrote a public letter to the chancellor of Vanderbilt in the Nashville *Tennessean*, and Jarrell, who led a student petition—Vanderbilt refused to match the offer, thereby chasing Ransom away just like Warren. Ransom, however, took Lowell and Peter Taylor to Gambier as students, and Jarrell—almost finished with his Masters degree—to become an English instructor along with him at Kenyon College (Doreski 47). As Travisano points out: “These young poets, one in his early twenties, one not yet out of his teens, formed an instant and lasting friendship when they met as John Crowe Ransom’s protégés that autumn at Kenyon College” (27).

Only a few years ahead of Lowell, Jarrell had already made waves in the poetry community, particularly with Tate and Warren. In May 1934, Tate was asked to assemble a poetry supplement for *The American Review*; along with poetry from Ransom, Warren, Louis MacNeice, John Peale Bishop, and Mark Van Doren, Tate included five of Jarrell’s poems. Already attentive to his former pupil’s poetic achievements, Warren wrote to his colleague Cleanth Brooks on May 20, 1934:

What did you think of the poetry issue of the *American Review*? Jarrell is pretty hot, isn’t he? He is a sophomore now, the most precocious fellow I ever knew: has read everything, writes polished critical prose, is on the tennis team, and is a damned good fellow besides. I know him extremely well and like him extremely.  
(*Selected Letters of Warren*, Vol. I. 244)

Warren’s personal and artistic estimation of Jarrell would only increase over the years, but it was already favorable in light of Jarrell’s early poems. Though only a limited number of those poems were included in Jarrell’s *Selected Poems* (1955), there’s no denying the potential within them.

Like Warren's, Jarrell's early poetry reveals the influence of both Ransom and Tate; first and foremost, his work contains a similar treatment of common topics. Though never to be a father himself, Jarrell's poems on children would become almost as widely recognized as his war poems. He was most likely originally drawn to these characters during his apprenticeship with Ransom. Bradbury observes: "Ransom's characters are exhibited to us for the most part in the precarious stage of innocence or of experience still unabsorbed" (33). By similarly depicting young characters in this impressionable state, Jarrell is able to produce irony that emulates the power inherent in Ransom's carefully crafted lines.

Lighter in tone than "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," Ransom writes on death from a child's perspective in "Janet Waking," a poem with seven tight quatrains and an unfaltering abba rhyme scheme. Warren admired this poem of "the pastoral tradition," with "the irony of wisdom out of innocence" and "the shock of truth out of a presumed naivet  " ("Notes" 310). Young Janet, an innocent farm girl, wakes in anticipation of seeing her dear hen "Chucky," only to go "Running across the world upon the grass" (l. 10) to find him dead. Ransom is at his best here with cleverly ironic lines such as "It was a transmogrifying bee / Came droning down on Chucky's old bald head" (l. 13-14), and "Now the poor comb stood up straight / But Chucky did not" (l. 18-19). Though wise readers are able to laugh through Janet's exaggerated crisis, the last stanza is curiously powerful and touching.

Janet is "weeping fast as she had breath" (l. 25) while she begs her family to revive her pet. The last two lines describe this young girl who: "would not be instructed in how deep / Was the forgetful kingdom of death." With a child's disbelief and lack of understanding, she is



unwilling to accept the depth of such remorseful loss; yet, in a universal sense, isn't this how everyone feels upon losing a loved one? The child narrator allows Ransom to create a strikingly clear yet still effectively detached demonstration of true human emotion. Sister Bernetta Quinn highlights a common trend among Warren's and Jarrell's poetry, observing that it "has no American superior in its celebration of childhood, standing in wonder before the 'brave new world'" (40). Though the technique of using a child narrator is far from exclusive to Ransom, these authors—along with Lowell—succeeded in applying his same mixture of childhood, irony, and wisdom within in their poetry.

Jarrell was already making great strides with child narrators in early poems like "The Christmas Roses," which is a first-person lament from a young girl suffering in her hospital bed. This poem, published in Jarrell's first book, *Blood for a Stranger* (1942), was excluded from his *Selected Poems* (1955), possibly due to the empty sentimentality in lines such as: "And now I'm dying and you have your wish. / Dying, dying; and I have the only wish / That I had strength or hope enough to keep, / To die" (l. 30-33). Aside from this heavy-handed display of emotion, there are clever lines that achieve a similar effect as Ransom's "Janet Waking":

but yesterday I cried  
I looked so white.  
I looked like paper.  
Whiter. I dreamt about the pole, and bears,  
And I see snow and sheets and my two nurses and the chart (l. 11-14)

Similar to Ransom's poem, Jarrell's irony creates both humor and genuine sympathy.

As the girl builds on the description of her white face, Jarrell's line breaks add to the humorous effect. One can easily imagine a dramatization of this scene: Girl looks in mirror, "I

looked so white.” Girl’s eyes dart to “the chart,” “I looked like paper.” Girl’s eyes glance back and forth from her face in the mirror to the chart until she determines, “Whiter.” In the next line she reports that she was dreaming “about the pole, and bears”; the extra comma after “pole” forces the reader to consider the pole and the bears separately, as the girl has done. Her innocence is emphasized in this mistake as she most likely misheard or misremembered tales told to her about polar bears, not “pole, and bears,” perhaps even from the nurses present in the scene. The humor in these lines is paired with sorrow when subsequent lines remind us that the white paper and the pole and bears are part of the framework an inexperienced girl must rely upon in order to make sense of her illness.

In addition to similar content and narration techniques, Jarrell’s early work, for the most part, adheres to Ransom’s traditional forms. Jarrell, however, distinguishes himself from Ransom by choosing ordinary language over erudite, and by infusing spontaneity into his poetry, as is exemplified in “The Christmas Roses.” Though Jarrell respected and learned a great deal from Ransom in the 1930s, he was drawn more to Tate; though even this attraction only lasted into the early forties. The reason for these inclinations may be understood from Ransom’s review of *Five Young American Poets* (1940).<sup>12</sup> Ransom praises Jarrell’s verse by arguing: “I think Jarrell is quite the most brilliant of the five.... He has an angel’s velocity and range with language, and drops dazzling textures of meaning” (“Constellation” 15); significantly, the “range” and “textures” are the very characteristics that may be attributed to Ransom’s tutelage.

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<sup>12</sup> *Five Young American Poets* is book of poetry that included George Marion O’Donnell, John Berryman, Mary Barnard, W. R. Moses, and Jarrell’s *The Rage for the Lost Penny*.

Ransom's issue with Jarrell, however, is over his bit of introductory prose, entitled "A Note on Poetry," in which Jarrell argues: "'Modern' poetry is, essentially, an extension of romanticism.... It is the end product of romanticism, all past and no future" (48). In 1940 Jarrell was already announcing the death of modernism, an argument he would elaborate upon in "The End of the Line," published on February 21, 1942 in *The Nation*. Ransom, who—as previously mentioned—found fault with the radical experimentation of modernist poets, gently scolds Jarrell for daring to consider what comes next: "It is self-consciousness which stops the young poets from their own graces; too much thinking about all the technical possibilities at once, as well as too much attention to changes in the fashion" ("Constellation" 16). Jarrell chose to embrace Tate's more progressive approach to poetry, enough to dedicate *Blood for a Stranger* (1942) in his honor, but Tate's unwillingness to look past high modernism would ultimately sever that literary relationship for Jarrell.

Lowell, on the other hand, was Tate's devoted protégé until the late 1950s, when Lowell's loosening of form and innovation in content ultimately drew disapproval from the once forward-thinking Tate, thus causing a parting of ways. Like Jarrell, Lowell also owed much to the early teachings of Ransom. Jeffrey Meyers summarizes: "Lowell and Jarrell came together as pupils of John Crowe Ransom: they absorbed the same lessons and shared the same goals. Their education provided the ideals and context for their literary work" (*Manic* 31). Lowell was a devotee of Ransom's work; in particular, he voiced his admiration for:

the unusual structural clarity, the rightness of tone and rhythm, the brisk and effective ingenuity, the rhetorical fireworks of exposition, description, and dialogue; but even more: the sticking to concrete human subjects—the hardest; and a balance, temperament. ("John Crowe Ransom" 19)

These elements are echoed in letters between Jarrell and Lowell, included in critiques on what was lacking or how this or that poem excelled. Ransom's presence loomed over every bit of their experience at Kenyon College, not just in literature lessons. In September 1937, Lowell and Jarrell roomed together in the attic of Ransom's on-campus house (Mariani 69). The following year they moved into the "Old" Douglass House, "home of eggheads and longhairs," where each man "identified himself as a budding writer and a 'Ransom man'" (Mariani 73). This early college camaraderie led to a lifetime of friendship, honest criticism, and mutual influence on one another's work.

William Doeski details the enormous impact Tate had upon Lowell's work.<sup>13</sup> Unlike Warren, who began developing his own poetic voice from the start, and Jarrell, who seemed suspicious and cynical of literary imitation of any kind (or at least of admitting it), Lowell experimented with everything from heroic couplets and sonnets to blank verse and free verse in an attempt to find his poetic voice.<sup>14</sup> Paul Mariani notes that Lowell also tried imitations of Spenser, Milton, Keats, Wordsworth, and William Carlos Williams, and "a world-weariness derived from Eliot, Laforgue, and surrealism" (51). Ultimately, however, in the 1930s Lowell favored the hard, classical poetry espoused by Ransom and the high modernist techniques of Tate, his heaviest influence drawn from the latter. Lowell later explained, "When I began to publish, I wrote literally under the roof-tree of Allen Tate. When I imitated him, I believed I was imitating the muse of poetry" ("After Enjoying," *Poems* 992). As demonstrated above, the

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<sup>13</sup> William Doeski is the author of *The Years of Our Friendship: Robert Lowell & Allen Tate* (1990).

<sup>14</sup> When he arrived on Allen Tate's doorstep, he was already experimenting with William Carlos Williams' simple free verse.

poetry of that “muse” was highly allusive, dense in language and tangled metaphors, and—somewhat to its detriment—noticeably artificial and self conscious. Even within these parameters, Lowell’s early poetry takes on a life of its own, with muscular lines that burst off the page with vigor and vitality.

The “muse,” who had an equal esteem for young Lowell, is almost entirely responsible for his successful entrance on the literary scene. Not only did Tate convince a publisher to accept Lowell’s first book of poems, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), he also wrote an introduction in which he proclaimed:

There is no other poetry today quite like this. T. S. Eliot’s recent prediction that we should soon see a return to formal and even intricate metres and stanzas was coming true, before he made it, in the verse of Robert Lowell.  
 (“Introduction,” *Complete Poems* 859)

As Mariani and Beck have noted, Tate’s introduction names Lowell as “the true heir, in both form and content, to Fugitive modernism with all its political implications.”<sup>15</sup> The expectations were set high for the young poet, and he did not disappoint. As Tate explains in his introduction, Lowell’s book has two kinds of poems: the first, a heavily religious brand of poetry with “Christian symbolism” that is “intellectualized and frequently given a savage satirical direction”; and the second, poems “richer in immediate experience” with “the references being personal and historical” (“Introduction” 859). Lowell had converted to Catholicism in March 1941, and these poems were fueled by a mixture of religious fervor and the effects of widespread fear caused by the heightening situation in World War II.

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<sup>15</sup> Quotation in *Fugitive Legacy* 111; also referenced in Mariani 119.

“Savage” is an appropriate word to describe Lowell’s tone in the religious poems as he draws on Christian myth in order to pass caustic, ironic judgment on modern society (Kirsch 5). For example, “The Boston Nativity” is a poem written from the perspective of a parent who is forced to endure “unchristian carollings” of Christmas after losing a child. The narrator complains: “Progress can’t pay / For burial. The Town Hall / Shall be his box and pall,” and howls that “If Baby asks for gifts at birth, / Santa will hang / Bones of democracy / Upon the Christmas Tree” (l. 2, 10-12, 21-24). In a contemptuous harangue addressed to his “dead baby’s clay,” and also to the baby Jesus of the nativity scene, the narrator commands mockingly: “So, child, unclasp your fists, / And clap for Freedom and Democracy” (l. 25-26). The faithless narrator, critical of political promises, is a personification of the mood Lowell imbibed from American society in the early 1940s.

“Christ for Sale,” another poem that draws on religious symbolism, is a similarly graphic condemnation of mankind (specifically New Yorkers in this case), “the lunchers” who “stop to spit into Christ’s eye” (l. 17). Lowell does not save grotesque descriptions for sinners in order to highlight the comparative glory of Christ; instead, he references Jesus in equally repulsive language to create an ironic effect (Kirsch 5). The narrator questions: “Dirty Saint Francis, where is Jesus’ blood[?]”; states: “These drippings of the Lamb are Heaven’s crime”; and offers: “Us still our Savior’s mangled mouth may kiss” (l. 8, 10, 13). By the last line of the poem, “O Lamb of God, your loitering carrion will die,” the threatening violence seems just as much directed to Christ as to the filthy sinners the narrator detests. Lowell’s later poems, though also prophetic in nature, eliminate this self-righteous, lofty tone. While crafting *Lord Weary’s Castle*

(1946), largely a revised version of *Land of Unlikeness*, Lowell chose to omit “Christ for Sale” and most of his other religious poems while keeping the more secular verses from Tate’s second category.

Tate’s influence is more easily recognizable in this second category of poems, from similarities in literary technique, as in “A Suicidal Nightmare,” to a common preoccupation with personal and learned history, as in “Scenes from the Historic Comedy.” “A Suicidal Nightmare” is composed of three tightly constructed sestets with an irregular rhyme scheme. The first six lines reveal Tate’s influence:

Tonight and crouching in your jungle-bed,  
O tiger of the gutless heart, you spied  
The maimed man stooping with his bag;  
And there was none to help. Cat, you saw red,  
And like a grinning sphinx, you prophesied  
Cain’s nine and outcast lives are in the bag.

Like Tate, Lowell’s lines are laden with surprising juxtapositions, such as the “maimed man” unexpectedly “stooping” amidst this tiger’s “jungle-bed.” Another characteristic of Tate’s poetry, which contributes to its density, is his tendency towards favoring unusual pairings of adjectives with nouns that force the reader to stop and consider their meaning, such as “casual sacrament,” “Ambitious November,” “uncomfortable angels,” “blind crab,” “immitigable pines,” “crazy hemlocks,” and “insane green” in “Ode to the Confederate Dead.” Here, Lowell adopts this quirk, with adjectives that breed curiosity in the reader, almost to distraction: “gutless heart,” “grinning sphinx,” and in the rest of the poem, “catapulting fur,” “wooly lava,” and “memory’s inflated bag.” Tate’s characteristic may also be observed in Warren’s early poetry; for example, “To a Face in the Crowd,” originally published in June 1925, contains “lascivious grass,”

“arrogant bones,” “lean gulls of your heart,” and “taciturn tall stone.” Later in their careers, Lowell and Warren maintain an intellectual complexity in their language, but shed the overwhelming adjectives.

Lowell’s “Scenes from the Historic Comedy” resembles Tate more in content than form; Lowell adopted a fixation on history from Tate, a preoccupation that was equally shared by Warren and Jarrell. Doreski explains: “Lowell learned much about the formal aspects of verse from Frost, Eliot, and Ransom, but the historical sense ... derives from Tate” (20). Aside from multiple historical references to “Apollo,” “Narcissus,” “Babel,” “The *Lignum Vitae*,” “Jacob’s Well,” and “Allah,” among others, “Scenes” also exemplifies the large-scale dramatization of modernity’s cultural crisis found in Tate’s “Ode” and Eliot’s “The Waste Land.”

Ultimately, Lowell’s poems that can be considered part of Tate’s second category contain a hint of the brilliance Lowell would later achieve, as his poems moved constantly towards a more authentic portrayal of human life. For example, “Death from Cancer” contains the following lines, “Grandfather Winslow, look, the swanboats coast / That island in the Public Gardens, where / The bread-stuffed ducks are brooding” (l. 11-13). While the diction and structure of these lines maintain a classical form, the content is drawn from Lowell’s own memories, infusing the lines with a sense of reality. Together, Lowell, Jarrell, and Warren shifted from the classicism and contrived artificiality of Ransom and Tate, respectively, to the immediacy and authenticity that marked the simultaneous change in their poetry at mid-century.



### *Creating Lifelong Bonds & Poetic Success in the 1930s and 1940s*

The 1930s mark the years of apprenticeship and early friendship among Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell. As noted above, these three poets were already forming literary relationships that were outside of the Ransom and Tate axis of influence. The friendship between Jarrell and Lowell as roommates and the teacher / student relationship between Warren and Jarrell formed the original ties, but these men also established regular habits of correspondence with each other—which mostly centered on writing. Mary Jarrell notes that after Warren left for LSU in 1934, Jarrell’s “letters to Warren were basically about his own writing, or Warren’s” (2). These letters were fueled by Warren’s appointment in 1935 as the managing editor of *The Southern Review*. In the words of William Bedford Clark, *The Southern Review* was “at the center of [Warren’s] working life.” Warren was “determined to establish and maintain the stature of the quarterly even as he systematically nurtured the talent of a younger generation of writers that included ... Randall Jarrell” (*Selected Letters of Warren, Vol II.* 49). The “nurturing” that Clark describes took shape in Warren’s willingness to solicit and publish Jarrell’s early work—only, however, after providing constructive criticism on his writing.

Before publishing the first issue of *The Southern Review* in 1935, Warren wrote to Jarrell that he was unhappy with “the last two stanzas of [Jarrell’s] Asphaltine poem,” especially with phrases he labeled “arbitrary and a trifle hysterical.” Pritchard notes: “Jarrell changed the offending phrases” before the publication went to print (36). Beck also acknowledges that Jarrell’s early work was influenced by Warren: “The impact which Warren had upon Jarrell’s career in the beginning was ... considerable” (“Jarrell and Warren” 83). As will be explored in

depth later, this effect was not one-sided; Jarrell influenced Warren in return. A letter from Jarrell to Warren in February 1937 exemplifies the kind of give and take that characterizes their literary relationship:

I've written twenty or thirty poems since summer, some of which I send. (For you to read and comment on, saying that they make you cry or the top of your head come off or something similar.) Send me your long one. I see a lot of Mr. Ransom, who is well and wise but not writing poetry. (*Jarrell's Letters* 7)

The witty, relaxed tone demonstrates the ease of their friendship; Jarrell's desire for Warren's work in return marks a sense of equality among the colleagues; and Jarrell's subtle dig made at Ransom's expense reflects their mutual trust and gives the impression that they are on the same "side" against their mentor. In response to this last element, Beck notes:

These acts of rebellion [against their Fugitive family] ... generated the creative energy that characterizes Bloom's anxiety of influence. It is evident, therefore, that the poets of the Fugitive legacy succeeded, not *in spite of* but *because of* those exercises in letting go. (*Fugitive Legacy* 72)

For Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell, a large part of "letting go" meant moving forward together.

The final piece of this trio's puzzle, the Lowell and Warren connection, falls into place in the early 1940s. Jarrell accepted a teaching position at the University of Texas, Austin, in 1939 and continued there until 1942 when he entered the U.S. Army Air Force, thereby leaving Lowell to his graduate studies at Louisiana State University under Warren's tutelage. Beck observes: "Warren functioned best in one-to-one relationships with such writers as Jesse Stuart, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, and Peter Taylor" (*Fugitive Legacy* 7). The friendly, honest, closely attentive relationship that Warren developed with Jarrell at Vanderbilt had been recreated at LSU with Lowell, his new dazzling pupil.

On June 9, 1940, Lowell graduated summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and class valedictorian from Kenyon College. Ransom used his connections with Brooks and Warren to secure a junior fellowship for Lowell and a typing job for his new wife, Jean Stafford,<sup>16</sup> at *The Southern Review* (Mariani 88). Before Lowell began at LSU in the fall, he wrote with heady anticipation to his friend, Robie Macauley: “Brooks and Warren / Brooksandwarren are excellent, especially Warren” (*Letters of Lowell* 31). This eagerness was warranted; Doeski argues that Warren was: “another former Fugitive who, like Tate and Ransom, haunted Lowell’s career” (50). “Haunted” is an odd word choice to describe the mutually beneficial literary relationship that developed between the two men, but Doeski is correct to emphasize this significant link.

Like the Vanderbilt connections that were formed as much in Fugitive meetings as in the classroom, Warren and Lowell strengthened their bond at social gatherings and over the production of the influential literary magazine. As soon as Lowell and his wife were settled in Baton Rouge—in the home the Warrens had just vacated—they reported to the offices of the *Southern Review*, which was then in its fifth year and under the editorial control of Warren, Brooks, and Albert Erskine. An important time for American poetry, the *Review* was “preparing for a major offensive in the New Critics’ campaign to convert the academic world to their kind of criticism: the close critical analysis of Modernist texts.” Ransom was doing his part in Ohio at the *Kenyon Review* by preparing a piece on “Literature and the Professors” that was also scheduled for the fall (Mariani 89). Though Lowell did not take on editorial duties as Warren had done for *The Fugitive*, his close proximity to such important work had an effect on him. In

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<sup>16</sup> They were married on April 2, 1940.

fact, Jean Stafford—also a budding writer—was reportedly jealous because while her secretarial job drained her time and creative energy, her husband “rather than she ... received the benefit of Warren’s advice and influence” (Blotner 192).

The classical conservatism and high modernist tendencies that were characteristic of Lowell’s first two books of poetry were certainly indicative of Ransom’s and Tate’s respective influence, but Warren’s tutelage initially encouraged Lowell in this direction as well. These were the years in which Warren and Brooks were developing *Understanding Poetry* and championing the New Criticism, both in the classroom and in every issue of the *Southern Review*. In addition to this larger scope of aesthetic form, Warren also had more pointed influence on the content of Lowell’s early work.

Blotner, Beck, and Mariani all refer to Warren’s anecdote: “Cal Lowell took graduate work with me and then Cal and I locked up the doors several days a week at twelve o’clock and had a sandwich and a quick Coke and then we read Dante for two hours.”<sup>17</sup> At this point, Warren knew just enough to read Dante in the original Italian and Lowell was in the process of learning the language. The lingering presence of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* would forevermore make appearances in the poems of both. Lowell edits the original epitaph from “Napoleon Crosses the Beresina” in *Land of Unlikeness*<sup>18</sup> to quote a reference to Dante’s “Purgatorio” in *Lord Weary’s Castle*: “There will the eagles be gathered together.”<sup>19</sup> He also borrows Dantean

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<sup>17</sup> Blotner 192; Beck, *Fugitive Legacy* 109; Mariani 92.

<sup>18</sup> “And wheresoever you see Eagles, look for the bodies.”

<sup>19</sup> Quotation originally from the Bible: Matthew, 24:28. Dante refers to this parable in *Purgatorio*, Canto IX, “Dante’s Dream of the Eagle.”

imagery for this poem in lines such as, “Ascend the tombstone steppes to Russia” and “the snow / Blazes its carrion-miles to Purgatory” (l. 7, 13-14).

Warren’s extracurricular Dante readings with Lowell similarly informed parts of his poetry. For example, *Rumor Verified, Poems 1979-1980* (1981) begins with a quotation from Dante’s *Inferno*.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, this book is noticeably loaded with Dantean imagery, such as the opening poem, “Mediterranean Basin,” which contains: “the dwindling aperture,” “Eyes starward fixed,” and the “Chalky, steel-hard, or glass-slick” cliff “That you crawl up.” Moreover, *Rumor Verified* is also underpinned by the main theme of Dante’s *Inferno*. Only after Dante has witnessed a realistic portrayal of the past, horrors included, is he able to emerge from hell, return to the world, and behold the stars with new vision. While the narrators of Warren’s poems do not end up in heaven, they are often awakened to a more enlightened understanding of themselves and of the world after confronting the past.

Aside from Dante, Warren’s seminar on sixteenth-century Elizabethan literature further shaped the content of Lowell’s early work. Beck observes that Warren’s course focused on “tyrants” such as Machiavelli, Cesare Borgia, and Huey Long (*Fugitive Legacy* 109). With these figures and their respective power dynamics in mind, Lowell wrote poems for *Land of Unlikeness* such as “Cistercians in Germany,” a political poem that condemns the “tyrants” of World War II. The following lines reveal disgust for those in power, and sympathy for their religious victims:

Rank upon rank the cast-out Christians file

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<sup>20</sup> “... i’ vidi de le cose belle / Che Portia il ciel, per un pertugio tondo, / E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stele.” Dante’s *Inferno*, canto XXXIV. (Translation: “I beheld through a round opening / Some of the beauteous things that Heaven doth bear; / Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars.”)

Unter den Linden to the Wilhelmsplatz,  
 Where Caesar paws the gladiator's breast;  
 His martial bumbling and hypnotic yawp  
 Drum out the pastors of these aimless pastures;  
 And what a muster of scarred hirelings and scared sheep  
 To cheapen and popularize the price of blood! (l. 11-17)

In addition to the similar theme, Lowell's lines also directly echo Warren's poem "Terror",<sup>21</sup> in tone and diction:

Not picnics or pageants or the improbable  
 Powers of air whose tongues exclaim dominion  
 And gull the great man to follow his terrible  
 Star, suffice; ...

Blood splashed on the terrorless intellect creates  
 Corrosive fizzles like the spattered lime,  
 And its enseamed stew but satiates  
 Itself, in that lewd and faceless pantomime.  
 You know, by radio, how hotly the world repeats,  
 When the brute crowd roars or the blunt boot-heels resound  
 In the Piazza or the Wilhelmplatz; (l.1-4, 51-57)

A similar theme is also present in Lowell's "Napoleon Crosses the Beresina" and other more secular poems in *Lord Weary's Castle*.

A more unexpected outcome, Warren's seminar is also partly responsible for Lowell's conversion to Catholicism on March 29, 1941. Warren asked Father Maurice Schexnayder, the college chaplain for Catholic students on campus, to lecture to his class on the Reformation. According to Mariani, Father Schexnayder's talk "so impressed Cal that day that he followed him out into the hall afterwards and asked for instruction in Catholicism" (92). Lowell's conversion, short-lived though it was, had one of the greatest effects on Lowell's work, and on

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<sup>21</sup> "Terror" was originally published in *Poetry* (February 1941) and later in *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (April 1942).

his life. Long after he left the Church in 1948, simultaneously divorcing his first wife, religious symbolism and Catholic teachings remained a large part of his poetry.

While of course there were additional factors that motivated Lowell towards this conversion, it was, indirectly, a result of Warren's seminar that the descendent of Puritan, Unitarian, and Episcopalian clergy became Catholic (Mariani 93). With the development of mutual esteem and respect for one another during this time at LSU, Warren and Lowell would maintain a friendship and a heightened awareness of one another's poetry for the next twenty-five years.<sup>22</sup> In an interview with David Farrell, Warren admitted his disturbance by and subsequent distance from Lowell due to his public battle with manic depression in later years (Mariani, "Reminiscences" 92). While it is true that their more intimate meetings became less frequent in the late sixties, both poets continued to write to one another and critique each other's poems for the rest of their lives.<sup>23</sup>

With literary relationships established and constantly deepening, the 1940s brought professional maturity and success for these three authors. Though Warren published *Thirty-Six Poems* and received a Guggenheim Fellowship by 1940, Jarrell and Lowell quickly made up for lost time with their literary achievements in the following ten years. In addition to earning a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1946, Jarrell's poetic publications were numerous: *The Rage for the Lost Penny* (1940), *Blood for a Stranger* (1942), *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945), and *Losses*

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<sup>22</sup> Though Lowell remained attentive to Warren's work until his death in 1977, Jarrell's death in 1965 marked the point of Warren's declining interest in Lowell's later poetry.

<sup>23</sup> Warren's adolescent years were plagued by anxiety and emotional distress, leading eventually to an attempted suicide in May 1924. Perhaps Warren had more sympathy for Lowell's situation than previous critics have acknowledged.

(1948). Jarrell was also already establishing himself as a valuable, insightful literary critic, and editing the *Nation*. Lowell, also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship (1947), became well-respected in this decade for *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. Warren, not to be outdone, received another Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947 and earned praise for *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942) and *Selected Poems 1923-1943* (1944). More notable for his fiction than the other two,<sup>24</sup> in 1947 Warren was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *All the King's Men* (1946) and also contributed other novels and influential critical publications like *Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Modern Rhetoric* (1949) to the world of letters. As final evidence that these three poets had begun to dominate the literary scene, Warren was named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1944 and Lowell in 1947; Jarrell would later serve this honorable position in 1956-1958. Throughout growing success and relocations around the country—at times, the globe—Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell kept up their letters and attention to one another's work.

Though the major turning point in their poetry would not occur until around 1950, their correspondence throughout the 1940s reveals a growing reliance on each other's honest critiques, both good and bad, both in person and in writing. When Warren's *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* was published on April 4, 1942, Jarrell was wild for them and wanted to express his appreciation publicly. In August 1942, Jarrell wrote to Tate:

I've taken great pleasure in reading Red's late poems, which are wonderful.... I am writing around to magazines trying to get Red's poems to review, if it is not too late; I should love to say what I think of them.

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<sup>24</sup> Jarrell published one novel, *Pictures from an Institution*, in 1954.



Still under the poems' spell three months later, Jarrell wrote to Edmund Wilson: "Have you read Robert Penn Warren's poems, the ones in a New Directions book named *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*? Several of them are awfully good, I think." In yet another letter to James Laughlin, Jarrell expressed his displeasure at the failed pursuit he had mentioned to Tate: "Thanks for the qualified praise about my reviews. I've generally been unlucky enough to be given the bad books and deprived of the good: for instance, if I'd been given Warren's book I'd have praised it very much" (*Jarrell's Letters* 62-63, 68, 75). Jarrell was quite right about the special quality of these poems, some of which—"Bearded Oaks," "Original Sin: A Short Story," and "Terror"—are included among Warren's finest poems.

Though Warren's slim volume is still characterized by the highly technical, traditionally formal style of Ransom, it contains Warren's first deep meditations on selfhood, a theme that would dominate his later work. Ransom taught Warren to ask larger metaphysical questions in his earliest works, but the poems in the 1940s take a more personal approach. "Original Sin," for example, details a "short story" of man's reckoning with the stain on his soul, "Nodding, its great head rattling like a gourd, / ... It acts like the old hound that used to snuffle your door and moan" (l. 1, 5). Tate's influence is also still present in ineffectively dense, clumsily turgid lines such as:

Never met you in the lyric arsenical meadows  
When children call and your heart goes stone in the bosom;  
At the orchard anguish never, nor ovoid horror (l. 26-28)

Aside from these weaknesses, there are also moments of the profound human sympathy that would come to mark Warren's greatest verse.

Jarrell's volume *Blood for a Stranger*, published in September 1942 just five months after Warren's *Eleven Poems*, also has a markedly different tone than his earliest works. Pritchard observes: "we hear for the first time the distinctive note of a human voice in Jarrell's poetry" (76). Similar to Warren's thoughtful contemplations, Jarrell's narrator in "90 North" proclaims:

I reached my North and it had meaning.  
Here at the actual pole of my existence,  
Where all that I have done is meaningless,  
Where I die or live by accident alone— (l. 22-25)

Even this quatrain is lacking in true human emotion compared to what Jarrell later captures, but it is significant to note how both authors slowly moved away from static, heavy-handed rhetoric toward a more realistically human reflection on the self. In a ripple effect of sorts, it was after reading Jarrell's *Blood for a Stranger* that Lowell: "finally dropped the idea of a biography and began again to write poems" (Mariani 101).

World War II played a great role in all three writers' lives, though somewhat more personally for Jarrell and Lowell. In October 1942, Jarrell chose to enlist in the U.S. Army. His original goal of becoming a ferry pilot or flight instructor in the Army Air Corps changed when he failed the flight part of the program; thus, he became a training navigator at army airfields in Texas, Illinois, and Arizona instead (Pritchard 99, Bryant 2). Though Jarrell never saw active duty, these years (1942-1946) brought valuable life experience and worldly sophistication to his poetry. Lowell, on the other hand, imbibed his war-time knowledge in a jail cell. He volunteered for the Army and the Navy earlier only to be rejected for "physical disabilities." By 1943, however, he was so opposed to "Roosevelt's insistence on unconditional surrender of the enemy" and to Roosevelt's and Churchill's "*de facto* policy of bombing civilian populations,"

that he decided to draft a letter—published and sent to Roosevelt himself—of refusal to serve in the Armed Forces (Mariani 106). On October 13, 1943, Lowell was sentenced to one year and a day in jail for objecting to the war, an event he later memorialized in his poem “Memories of West Street and Lepke.” After being released on March 15, 1944, having served five months of his sentence, he had stores of new material to draw upon for poetic inspiration (Doreski 66). Though these years marked a temporary poetic drought for Warren, they were fertile for Jarrell and Lowell who were publishing new works in the *Sewanee Review*,<sup>25</sup> drafting volumes of poetry, and writing frequent letters to each other that centered on their newly energized poetic production.

In July 1944, Lowell sent an expanded and heavily revised version of *Land of Unlikeness* to Jarrell, who was currently stationed at Davis-Monthan Field in Tucson, Arizona. The series of letters between Lowell and Jarrell that followed this manuscript and preceded the publication of *Lord Weary's Castle* is an exemplary instance of Jarrell's capacity for intellectual generosity and poetic insight. Beck acknowledges: “Not since the Pound excision of Eliot's *Waste Land* had there been such a fruitful collaboration between equals” (*Fugitive Legacy* 112). The multiple-paged letters written with care and the extensive hand-written notes that Jarrell produced on Lowell's manuscript serve as evidence for the crucial role he played in the success of Lowell's second book.

After *Unlikeness* was published, Jarrell wrote a glowing review in the *Partisan Review* commending Lowell, a “traditional poet,” for how “His world, his rhetoric, and his beliefs are

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<sup>25</sup> The *Sewanee Review* was under Tate's control from 1944-1946.

joined in an iron unity of temperament” (“Poetry in War and Peace” 132), a quality that Ransom would have similarly praised. Looking towards the future, Jarrell prophesized:

At his best Mr. Lowell is a serious, objective, and extraordinarily accomplished poet. He is a promising poet in this specific sense: some of the best poems of the next years ought to be written by him. (“Poetry in War and Peace” 134)

As if fueled by his own prediction, Jarrell assumed an integral role in Lowell’s next publication. He instructed Lowell on large-scale decisions—which poems should remain, which should be omitted, and which should make a reappearance from *Unlikeness*—as well as necessary small-scale changes in structural form, diction, tone, and punctuation; for example: “I’d use a dash here instead of a comma,” in the last two lines of “Colloquy in Black Rock.” Kirsch credits Lowell for the “sureness” of his “revisions” from *Unlikeness* to *Lord Weary’s Castle*. For Kirsch, the fact that “[Lowell] discarded all the weakest and most confused poems in the book—makes clear that he himself understood the problems with his early work” (5). Contrary to this assertion, however, the letters and unpublished manuscript draft reveal that Jarrell was the one supremely aware of Lowell’s poetic strengths and weaknesses.

Bruce Michelson carefully details most of Jarrell’s suggestions to Lowell, those in letters and manuscript margins, and traces Lowell’s subsequent changes.<sup>26</sup> Providing a litany of all modifications here would be redundant; however, identifying the major trends of this exchange will provide insight into the core of this study. Michelson concludes from his close analysis: “Together Jarrell and Lowell set American verse on a new course after the war; these letters show how they managed to do it” (403-404). Indeed, the letters, reviews, critiques, and

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<sup>26</sup> Michelson is the author of “Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell: The Making of *Lord Weary’s Castle*” (1985).

conversations among Jarrell, Lowell—and Warren—played a very large role in their post-WW II poetic change and resulting influence on American poetry.

Like any well-intentioned critic, Jarrell began his commentary on Lowell's manuscript with praise in his August 1945 letter:

I had rather read your poems than anybody else in the world who is writing now.... You are the only writer I feel much in common with (when I read your poems I not only wish that I had written them but feel that mine in some queer sense are related to them—i.e., if I didn't write the way I do I might or would like to write the way you do; your poems about the war are the only ones I like except my own—both of them have the same core of sorrow and horror and so on) and the only good friend of my own age I have.  
(*Jarrell's Letters* 127-128)

This letter reveals the tenderness and respect Jarrell has for Lowell while also demonstrating Jarrell's awareness of the inherent "same core" present in their poetry. Deeper than the surface "sorrow and horror," the core of both of their poems reflects their common beginnings. They are, in fact, "related" to each other through their upbringing by Ransom, Tate, and Warren. Jarrell echoes Ransom when he reprimands Lowell for "not putting enough about *people* in the poems—they are more about the actions of you, God, the sea, and cemeteries than they are about the 'actions of men'" (*Jarrell's Letters* 139). Capturing the essence of the "actions of men" is a skill that Jarrell surely admired in Ransom but also noticed in the more recent Warren poems that he so highly praised. Jarrell's second admonition, to avoid "being too harsh and *severe*" would also please Ransom, the champion of balance, harmony, and refinement.

The rest of Jarrell's advice in the letter, however, encourages Lowell to depart from their poetic mentors:

your worst tendency is to do too-mannered, mechanical, wonderfully contrived, exercise poems; but these you don't do much when you feel enough about the subject or start from a real point of departure in contemporary real life. (*Jarrell's Letters* 139)

Jarrell called for Lowell to increase the authenticity in his portrayal of the world and to leave behind the more formal, lofty, self-conscious poetry of Ransom and Tate. Significant to note, this is exactly what Jarrell had just achieved in some poems of his most recent publication, *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945), as seen in these lines from "Soldier [T. P.]":

When the runner's whistle lights the last miles of darkness  
And the soldier stumbles into the hard green clothes  
...  
And stands for his hour there in the cold green lines  
That are always waiting for something, or waiting;  
There wakes in the cropped dusty head, one supposes,  
In the blistered hands, in the soft uneasy eyes,  
The smell of the ages where no one is dying (l. 1-2, 6-10)

Gone are the stilted, contrived lines of his earliest work and the awkward, accidental humor created by botched attempts at serious irony; Jarrell was learning how to "start from a real point of departure" and portray reality in concrete terms.

Jarrell's marginal comments on Lowell's manuscript reiterate this advice. These are the last lines of Lowell's "At a Bible House" draft:

"I must move  
Down, down, and neither good  
Nor evil, hopes nor fears  
Compassion nor desire  
Will mar the dowered, adored  
All-moment." Come, O Lord:  
Arm with bow, shafts and fire.

Jarrell drew a dark circle around the last three lines and wrote, "I don't think the end is nearly up to the rest of the poem; it seems elevated and general and rather arbitrarily said by the poet—the

rest seems particular, real” (Houghton Library, MS Am 1905, 2079-2080). In response to Jarrell’s suggestion, Lowell changed the lines to:

It is all  
A moment. The trees  
Grow earthward: neither good  
Nor evil, hopes nor fears,  
Repulsion nor desire,  
Earth, water, air or fire  
Will serve to stay the fall.

Replacing the awkward, archaic “dowered, adored / All-moment” with the more conversational, “It is all / A moment,” eliminates the unfavorable “elevated” tone; the addition of “The trees” that “Grow earthward” literally roots the image to the ground. Also, calling on the elements of “Earth, water, air or fire” makes tangible the otherwise “arbitrary” call to the Lord with his “bow, shafts and fire.”

In a similar attempt to only keep what is “real” and energetic, Jarrell advises Lowell to remove the last lines of his “Forest Hills Cemetery” draft: “I think you ought to leave out this stanza, which is very flat and scrappy compared to the other two, more like an afterthought” (Houghton Library, MS Am 1905). Jarrell lavished this same level of attention to detail on all of Lowell’s poems, resulting in a Pulitzer Prize winning book of poetry, one that inspired Warren to write this to Lowell on December 3, 1946:

Your book has given the Warren household a great deal of pleasure.... It is real poetry, very strong and original, and doesn’t bear the slightest resemblance to most of the stuff which is passing as poetry. There is nobody around any better than you are. (qtd. in Beck, *Fugitive Legacy* 116)

In agreement with Warren’s statement, Doeski claims that by this point, “Lowell had grown independent of Tate—and also of Eliot, Crane, Ransom, Williams, Frost, and all his other early

influences” (81). Lowell was already forging a path of his own; one that was paved by Jarrell and also followed by Warren.

Jarrell’s landmark review of *Lord Weary’s Castle*, “From the Kingdom of Necessity,” published in *The Nation* in January 1947, identifies a trend that would continue to reflect Lowell’s poetic career (likewise for Jarrell and Warren): “Anyone who compares Mr. Lowell’s earlier and later poems will see this movement from constriction to liberation as his work’s ruling principle of growth” (22). Jarrell also spends time extolling the very elements of Lowell’s new poems that he had a hand in shaping. He praises Lowell’s ability to discover “powerful, homely, grotesque, but exactly appropriate particulars for his poems,” and the “flowing ease of a few passages, the ... colloquial ease of others” (24, 25). As mentioned above, Jarrell had announced the death of modernism in 1940 and again in 1942. By molding Lowell’s poetry and consequently publicly praising the elements he most heavily favored, Jarrell was paving the way for “what came next,” for what he identified in Lowell’s new poems as “a unique fusion of modernist and traditional poetry,” “a post- or anti-modernist poetry” (Mariani 148).

Furthermore, in this highly influential review, Jarrell described in Lowell’s poetry what he and Warren would similarly achieve in their newer works:

Inside its elaborate stanzas the poem is put together like a mosaic: the shifts of movement, the varied pauses, the alternation in the length of sentences, and the counterpoint lines and sentences are the outer form of a subject matter that has been given a dramatic, dialectical internal organization; and it is hard to exaggerate the strength and life, the constant richness and surprise of metaphor and sound and motion, of the language itself. (24)

As Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell began to experiment with new ways of bringing “strength and life” to their poetry, they distanced themselves from their earliest mentors without completely



rejecting them. What unites these three authors is how they learned the rules before breaking them. As Travisano puts it, WW II provided a “dynamic arena in which to test and bring to life a conception of [new] poetic structures” (176). An important part of this defining period for American poetry, Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell turned from formality and obscurity as they discovered innovative ways to depict new times. Chapter two aims to shed light on these important changes in American poetry.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE MID-CENTURY SHIFT

*Chapter two focuses on the mid-century shift within each of their poetic careers, highlighting the important changes in their transitional works (Warren's Selected Poems (1944), Jarrell's Losses (1948), and Lowell's The Mills of the Kavanaughs (1951)) which serve as a bridge to their respective turning point works (Warren's Brother to Dragons (1953) and Promises (1957), Jarrell's Seven-League Crutches (1951), and Lowell's Life Studies (1959)). Though the more experimental schools of poetry would not reach their height until the 1950s, by the 1940s Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell were already searching for a new aesthetic. With friendships strong, correspondences frequent, and critical attention to one another's work constant throughout this decade, their poetry shifted in similar ways, both in content and style, by no coincidence.*

### ***An Overview***

Many scholars look to World War II as a catalyst for a shift in American poetry. David Perkins, for example, refers to the “new human consciousness” that was being formed within poets by “contemporary history and technology” (332) during this time. Authors were forced to determine how to write poetry after the horror of concentration camps, Dresden, and atomic warfare. The legacy of American poetry shows that devastating historical events—such as the Civil War, WW I, WW II, the Vietnam War, and even the more recent terrorist attack of 9/11—serve as an impetus for vigorous poetic production. One likely reason for the pattern of literary

resurgence is captured in a letter written by Randall Jarrell to Amy Breyer de Blasio shortly after he enlisted in the army: “to write what you can about the world makes it almost bearable” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 65). As Americans labor to make sense of the times, contemporary poets work to discover innovative ways to depict the modern world.

Thomas Travisano explains that WW II provided a “dynamic arena in which to test and bring to life a conception of [new] poetic structures” (176), and William Carlos Williams argued in 1948: “It is in many ways a different world from the past calling for a different measure” (“Field of Action” 53). While the work of John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate remained stylistically unchanged through the 1940s and beyond, their protégés, Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell, moved away from the formalism Ransom promoted and the high modernist verse techniques Tate championed. The tight forms, classical references, and stilted, artificial verse no longer suited their new world; they required looser forms to allow for spontaneity, authenticity, and “a point of departure from real life.” An important part of this defining period for American poetry, Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell maintained a close working relationship particularly as they experimented with freer poetic forms and more personal poetry in the mid-1940s and beyond.

### ***The 1940s: Discovering a New Aesthetic***

In the 1940s, the tradition of high modernism that had dominated the poetic scene since the early 1920s began its gradual decline. Though the more experimental Black Mountain poets, New York School poets, Beat poets, Confessional poets, and Deep Image poets would not reach

their height until the 1950s and later, some poets—including Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell—were already searching for a new aesthetic. Williams, for example, declared “the poem as a field of action” and proposed “sweeping changes from top to bottom of the poetic structure.” His aspiration stemmed from the fact that he was “*through* with the iambic pentameter as presently conceived” (Williams, “Field of Action” 51). Furthermore, Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse” (1950) expands Williams’s theory by arguing for “projective or OPEN verse,” which is “opposed to inherited line, stanza, overall-all form, ... the ‘old’ base of the non-projective” (Olson 174). Years before these artists called for radical change to the conventions of poetic structure, however, Jarrell revealed his budding search for a new aesthetic in a letter to Allen Tate in the fall of 1941.

Though he had recently produced many poems, Jarrell complained: “I have the impression that I’m at a sort of dead end.” William Pritchard assumes that Jarrell’s “dead end” stems purely from his “lack of a subject” (Pritchard 93). No scholar would deny that Jarrell’s time in the military (October 1942 to February 1946) provided him with the life experience and fresh subject matter necessary for success in *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945) and *Losses* (1948), but in addition to the need for new material, Jarrell was also feeling stymied by the aesthetic forms of his predecessors. Soon after his letter to Tate, he voices this frustration in *The Nation*,<sup>27</sup> claiming that modernist poetry was merely “the culminating point of romanticism, ... the end of the line” (“End of the Line” 81). Within this article, Jarrell announces his yearning for what would come *after* modernism.

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<sup>27</sup> “The End of the Line” was published on February 21, 1942 in *The Nation*. This article is an elaboration on his short piece, “A Note on Poetry,” originally published in *Five Young American Poets* (1940).

Just a few years later, Jarrell yokes Lowell into his search by identifying “what comes next” in parts of Lowell’s *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946). Jarrell’s review celebrates Lowell’s book, claiming: “it is essentially a post- or anti-modernist poetry, and as such is certain to be influential” (“Kingdom of Necessity” 24). Jarrell was correct to identify some important aesthetic shifts in *Lord Weary’s Castle* that are also present in *Mills of the Kavanaghs* (1951), though Lowell was still largely confined to the traditional modes of Ransom and the lingering influence of Tate’s high modern techniques. It is therefore revealing that the poetry Jarrell labeled as “post- or anti-modernist poetry” in Lowell’s book was not a complete abandonment of formalism and high modernism, but rather an altered version of both.

In an echo of Jarrell’s “dead end” confession to Tate, Lowell wrote to Peter Taylor after publishing *Mills of the Kavanaghs*: “It’s hell finding a new style or rather finding that your old style won’t say any of the things that you want to” (*Letters of Lowell* 196). Also swept up in the search for a new aesthetic, Warren commented on his poem “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” published in 1943: “I was trying to get back, make a tie between modernism and balladry and make them both stack up to a kind of view of American history *and* a kind of interplay of styles” (Blotner 210). Though Warren would not publish another new poem for ten years, this quotation reveals that he was already searching for something stylistically fresh to transcend high modernism. Much like the new qualities Jarrell recognized in Lowell’s *Lord Weary’s Castle*, Warren also saw value in infusing modernism with an innovative “interplay of styles.”

It is clear that all three poets craved a change in their poetic styles in the 1940s, so the next challenge was how exactly to achieve this. With friendships strong, correspondences

frequent, and critical attention to one another's work constant throughout this decade, the poetry of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell shifted in similar ways, both in content and style, by no coincidence. Travisano makes the following observation about Jarrell and Lowell (and Bishop and Berryman), but it is also true for Warren:

each consciously or unconsciously recognized in the others a shared determination to bypass or unmake modernism's impersonal aesthetic and to create amongst themselves a new aesthetic that would empower them to address the problem of selfhood in the postmodern world. (9)

Ultimately, Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell purposefully amended the formalist and high modernist aesthetics taught by their Fugitive masters in order to create poetry that engaged in an authentic exploration of selfhood within the real-life contexts of the postmodern world.

In terms of content, this change encouraged the authors to mine their autobiographies for concrete details and to address political matters more frequently; furthermore, each poet began drawing more heavily from American and local history, and less from classical antiquity. As for poetic style, there were five major changes. First, there was an overall loosening of forms, which resulted in an increase of free verse, blank verse, varied rhythms and line-lengths, and less regular rhyme schemes.<sup>28</sup> Second, the effort to create more realistic characters resulted in more narrative and less lyrical poems. In an attempt to capture true speech, there was also an increase of realistic dialogue, vernacular, and colloquialisms. Third, the authors favored less ornate language in order to create more conversational diction, without sacrificing philosophical

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<sup>28</sup> Though some of these characteristics are frequently found in high modernism, they are employed to achieve different ends. In high modernism, the loosening of forms and irregularity in rhythm, line-lengths, and rhyme schemes are often utilized to create a purposeful disharmony or discordance, often in an effort to reflect the chaos inherent in the subject matter (i.e., T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*). For Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell, however, these same techniques were used in order to create a more informal, conversational, personal mode.

complexity. The more accessible verse, marked by a less formal tone and the use of the inclusive “you,” led to a style that, in many ways, engages the reader’s involvement directly. As Warren explains in “Pure and Impure Poetry” (1943): “A good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must ... make the reader into ‘an active creative being’” (25).

As early as 1942, Jarrell articulated two more of their style changes in a lecture: “We think of the structure of poetry too much in static terms, .... But the poem is completely temporal, about as static as an explosion; there are no things in a poem, only processes” (“Levels and Opposites” 389).<sup>29</sup> Partly, this argument provides a method for reading poetry that opposes the New Critical technique: a poem should not be methodically dissected in a predictable step-by-step formula, mined for a checklist of irony, ambiguity, and tension, for instance; instead, it should be approached in a more flexible manner that allows for, as Jarrell puts it, the “extremely complicated systems of thoughts, perceptions, and emotions, which have extremely complicated non-logical structures” to be appreciated and understood (“Levels and Opposites” 392). Moreover, aside from being a commentary on literary criticism, this lecture provides insight into the kind of poetry Jarrell was creating—more accurately, hoping to create—in the mid-1940s and beyond. Jarrell’s lecture emphasizes “the importance of process, of dramatizing the mind in action, ... of polivocality and multiple points of view” (Travisano 173). These elements, which are now commonly understood as defining characteristics of postmodernism, describe the additional stylistic changes within the post-WW II work of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell: fourth,

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<sup>29</sup> The lecture, “Levels and Opposites: Structure in Poetry,” was presented in 1942. The essay was first published in *The Georgia Review*, vol. 50, no. 4., copyright 1966 by Mary Jarrell.

their tendency to depict the narrator's mind as it processes emotions, images, and experiences; and fifth, their occasional use of multiple voices as a narrative mode.

Jarrell's call for "dramatizing the mind in action," though somewhat reminiscent of nineteenth-century "automatic" writing and the modernist stream-of-consciousness mode, more importantly foreshadows Olson's theories on projective verse, in which poetry must "put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listening." Jarrell's emphasis on the "processes" of a poem also prefigures Olson's insistence that the poet capture "the process of the thing," and Jarrell's advice to heed the "complicated systems of ... perceptions" in poetry foretells Olson's command: "in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!" ("Projective Verse" 174-175). Through this method of dramatizing the mind's continuous perceptions, the poet often succeeds in depicting a narrator's realistic self-exploration.

In Warren's "The Child Next Door," for example, the narrator watches two children, one "beautiful like a saint," the other a "defective," "monstrous other." The narrator cynically views the handicapped girl as she smiles, thinking, "I come, and her triptych beauty and joy stir hate /-- Is it hate?—in my heart" (l.9-10). The line break gives the reader a moment to absorb the impact of the word "hate" before the narrator himself questions if this is a fitting description of his current emotion. Jarrell's "A Conversation with the Devil" contains two voices, those of the narrator and the devil; both are working through individual thought processes. Here, the Devil thinks through the plural versus the singular form of "man," and the narrator attempts to identify the source of the Devil's voice: "*Mortal men, man! mortal men!* So says my heart / Or else my



belly—some poor empty part” (l.11-12). As in Warren’s poem, the line break allows the initial impression to sink in before the narrator questions his own observation in the next line. This structure resembles an act of real-time revision by the poet; the narrator increasingly grasps the truth, or improves his understanding, as the poem (and the poet’s perception) moves forward.

Lowell often replicates this method in his post-WW II imagery. For example, in “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” the narrator observes: “What were those sunflowers? Pumpkins floating shoulder-high?” (l. 37). Though he correctly identifies the objects as sunflowers, he revises his description to reflect what he is seeing more accurately. Ultimately, this technique allows the poets to portray the world before them more effectively. Their fifth, and final, movement towards contemporary verse, the pointed presentation of multiple voices, achieves the same effect. As is explored in detail within the poets’ respective chapters, whether in Warren’s *Brother to Dragons* (1953), Jarrell’s war poems, or Lowell’s biographical poems in Part Three of *Life Studies*, the additional voices present a fuller picture of the historical situation / personal experience / individual at hand.

This series of aesthetic shifts was not fully realized until the 1950s: for Jarrell in *The Seven-League Crutches* (1951), for Warren in *Brother to Dragons* and *Promises: Poems 1954-1956* (1957), and for Lowell in *Life Studies* (1959). However, their works from the 1940s contain early intimations of these stylistic changes, and their correspondences reveal support and encouragement towards those ends. Charlotte Beck is one of the few critics to recognize the significance of the literary relationship between Warren and Jarrell:

The impact which Warren had upon Jarrell's career in the beginning was ... considerable; and the manner in which their poetry evolved in parallel directions constitutes a slight but remarkable chapter in the literary history of America in this century.

However, Beck pairs this wise observation with a corollary: "Evidence of poetic cross-fertilization is scarce, for neither wrote widely on the other's poetry in his role as critic" ("Fugitive Fugitives" 83). Though Warren and Jarrell may not have published as frequently on one another's work as say, Lowell and Jarrell, their letters from the 1940s reveal a mutual awareness of one another's literary advancements.

Their notes to each other are telling, but sometimes it is their letters *about* each other that reveal a fuller truth. In October 1944, Jarrell wrote a letter to Amy Breyer de Blasio including almost two full pages of ruminations on Warren's most recent publications, *At Heaven's Gate* (1943) and *Selected Poems: 1923-1943* (1944). Towards the close of this letter, Jarrell explains why he didn't publish on *Selected Poems*:

Aren't the best poems wonderful, though? They certainly make most other poets look sick and trivial. I'd certainly love to write an article about them—but it would be embarrassing and impossible, so I've just written a little of it in this private form. (*Jarrell's Letters* 117)

This confession demonstrates Jarrell's admiration for Warren's most recent work; however, the rest of the letter reveals his personal dissatisfaction with Warren for the way he presents the world as "so purely Original Sin, horror, loathing, morbidity, final evil, that to somebody who knows Red it is plain he manages his life by pushing all the evil in it out into the poems" (*Jarrell's Letters* 117). In other words, Jarrell, the close friend and ever-insightful critic, notices how Warren's personal turmoil, namely his unhappy marriage to his first wife, negatively affects

his earlier work.<sup>30</sup> In the long run, Jarrell is right. Warren had a ten-year poetic dry spell after *Selected Poems* in which he ended his difficult first marriage, found happiness with his second wife, Eleanor Clark, discovered pure joy by fathering two children, and eventually experienced a revival of poetic creativity that lasted almost until his death nearly forty years later.

Aside from Jarrell's private reaction to Warren's *Selected Poems*, his direct response to Warren proves that he was aware of—and impressed by—Warren's stylistic changes. He wrote to Warren in 1945 that the newly published *Selected Poems* is “the best book of poetry anybody's published in seven or eight years—I thought it decidedly better than [T. S. Eliot's] *Four Quartets*, for instance.” Jarrell, a bluntly honest critic—and also one known for his subjective appraisals—praises Warren by purposely naming his success greater than Eliot's. Beck notes, “Both Jarrell and Warren had, in effect, loosened ties with the past and deliberately set out to forge new allegiances and new poetic styles” (*Fugitive Legacy* 87). Jarrell acknowledges Warren's departure from high modernism and offers approbation for the successful result, just as he had done for Lowell.

Out of the three new poems in Warren's *Selected Poems: 1923-1943*,<sup>31</sup> “The Ballad of Billie Potts” is most indicative of Warren's shifting style. Truly an “interplay of styles,” this narrative poem shifts between bawdy, sing-song balladic lines—“Big Billie Potts was big and stout / In the land between the rivers. / His shoulders were wide and his gut stuck out / Like a

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<sup>30</sup> Known for honest criticism on the work of other writers, but also for loyalty to his friends, Jarrell most likely would have felt embarrassed to address such personal matters in a review of his dear friend Warren's work.

<sup>31</sup> “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” “Variation: Ode to Fear,” and the five-part sequence, “Mexico is a Foreign Country: Five Studies in Naturalism”

croker of nubbins and his holler and shout” (l.1-4)—and philosophical meditations on selfhood that are set off by parentheses:

(There is always another country and always another place.  
 There is always another name and another face.  
 And the name and the face are you, and you  
 The name and the face, and the stream you gaze into  
 Will show the adoring face, show the lips that lift to you  
 As you lean with the implacable thirst of self  
 As you lean to the image which is yourself ...) (l. 214-220)

Experimentation with these two voices, the balladic folktale and the philosophical narrator, foreshadows Warren’s technique in the long verse play *Brother to Dragons*, where he uses multiple narrative voices to tell a story from various points of view. By 1953, Warren would trade in clumsy, heavy-handed narratorial lines like, “The name and the face are you. / The name and the face are always new. / And they are you. / Are new” (l. 236-239), for the wise R. P. W. character, who tells the truth in idiomatic speech.

Aside from the narrative mode, the loosening of form in “Billie Potts” also foreshadows his later work; the “tie between modernism and balladry” takes shape with varying rhythms, an irregular rhyme scheme, and sections of inconsistent length. Though these stylistic changes are reminiscent of the experimentation in high modernism, Warren’s style differs in that it achieves the unity and harmony espoused by Ransom along with a dramatic and authentic quality that marked Warren’s originality. “Billie Potts” contains some of the realistic dialogue that brings Warren’s later characters to life: “‘Durn if’n hit ain’t Joe Drew!’ / ‘I reckon hit’s me,’ says Joe and gives a spit, ‘But whupped if’n I figger how you knows hit” (l.266-268). One final characteristic here that marks Warren’s later work is how the narrator speaks directly to readers,

inviting their participation in self reflection: “Think of yourself at dawn: Which are you? What?” (l. 144). Notably, this is one of the only lines in all 513 that stands alone as its own stanza. Warren would increasingly set off lines in this manner in order to draw attention to their particular significance.

In 1945, the same year Jarrell had written to Warren with high praise of *Selected Poems*, Lowell published a version of “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” in the *Partisan Review*. Jarrell’s extensive influence on Lowell’s poetic development in the 1940s, particularly evidenced in *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946), is described in detail in chapter one. Essentially, Jarrell instructed Lowell to increase the authenticity in his portrayal of the world while leaving behind the more formal, self-conscious poetry of their mentors. Though Jarrell publicly praised Lowell’s successful efforts in his review, “From the Kingdom of Necessity,” Warren was equally awed by Lowell’s poems in *Lord Weary’s Castle*.

In an interview of Lowell conducted by Warren and Cleanth Brooks, Warren requests that Lowell read “some of the Warren Winslow elegy,” which refers to “The Quaker Graveyard at Nantucket,” a poem about Lowell’s cousin whose body was never recovered after his naval ship sank in the New York harbor during WW II (*Collected Poems* 1008).<sup>32</sup> Lowell chooses section II, an eighteen-line rhymed segment in iambic pentameter. After reading aloud, Lowell acknowledges Allen Tate’s influence on the lines, stating “I feel it’s like [Tate’s] poetry and yet unlike it, and I’ve never quite known how.” Warren immediately agrees with Lowell, identifying his divergence from their common mentor: “your rhythm is entirely different from

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<sup>32</sup> Jarrell also favored “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” calling it Lowell’s “very best big poem” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 137).

his.... It has a different feel to it. It'd be very hard to prove it by a graph but no one could miss that difference" ("Robert Lowell" 39). Despite the traditional form of these lines, Warren notices how Lowell's unique rhythm somehow overwhelms the conventional syllable count. Even if Warren does not put this "difference" into words, it is significant that he thought, or at least wanted to claim, that Lowell's poetry was different than that of their shared mentor.

Next in the interview, Warren specifically requests the third section, "one of the best," which is noteworthy for its more conversational tone and irregular rhyme scheme and line lengths.

All you recovered from Poseidon died  
 With you, my cousin, ...  
 Guns, cradled on the tide,  
 Blast the eelgrass about a waterclock  
 Of bilge and backwash, roil the salt and sand  
 Lashing earth's scaffold, rock  
 Our warships in the hand  
 Of the great God, where time's contrition blues  
 Whatever it was these Quaker sailors lost  
 In the mad scramble of their lives. They died  
 When time was open-eyed,  
 Wooden and childish; ...  
 I see the Quakers drown and hear their cry:  
 "If God himself had not been on our side,  
 If God himself had not been on our side,  
 When the Atlantic rose against us, why,  
 Then it had swallowed us up quick." (l. 1-2, 6-15, 20-24)

Warren chooses to highlight the notable characteristics of Lowell's style shift; he observes, "Two wonderful effects in there: the line 'mad scramble for their lives' and then the last line has sudden shifts of rhythm and general feeling in that poem. Great strokes, there, I think." Amid the muscular, pulsing rhythm of the poem, these two lines stand out as echoes of idiomatic

speech, halting the forward-thrusting movement typical of Lowell's early work. Warren notes, the "idiom" of "mad scramble" is "very dramatic and 'quick' ... That does something to the rhythm, doesn't it?" The same observation applies to the last line that Warren had singled out. The four lines of dialogue at the end of the quoted passage initially appear to be arranged as a conventional prayer; the antiquated language and the repetition of the line "If God himself had not been at our side" heightens the reader's expectation for a dramatic flourish at the end. Instead, Lowell supplies, "Then it had swallowed us up quick." The informal phrase "swallowed us up" and the purposeful omission of the "ly" from "quick" creates an anti-climactic, yet entirely human, ending to the desperate plea.

In a final note of importance, Lowell points out to Warren that these lines, "the hard ones to get in," are "both slightly prosy and harsh." In a telling response, Warren replies, "Prosy and harsh, yet they come with a great shiver, both of them" ("Robert Lowell" 40). Here is evidence that Warren and Lowell mutually acknowledged the great potential power in mixing prose with poetry. Considering that Lowell would later praise Warren's *Brother to Dragons* as "prose genius in verse," that Warren would commend Lowell for *Life Studies*, and that Jarrell would extol both works, it is clear that part of moving forward stylistically meant redefining "poetry" to include highly conceptualized, metaphorical, musical "prose" (Lowell, "Warren's *Brother to Dragons*" 73).

As mentioned above, the three poets also shifted simultaneously in terms of content. By no means were they one-minded on politics, especially early in their careers. Warren began as the conservative southern agrarian; Lowell, the aristocratic northerner; and Jarrell, the left-

leaning Marxist. However, World War II succeeded in uniting these poets in shared doubt and cynicism for the future of America. In addition to stylistic similarities, there is also a philosophical overlap between Lowell's "Quaker Graveyard" and Warren's *Brother to Dragons*. Lowell's poem is laden with references to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, including "Ahab's void and forehead," "The Pequod's sea wings, beating landward," and "The bones [that] cry for the blood of the white whale." Lowell later explains that the one image he would choose for America, "would be one taken from Melville's *Moby Dick*: the fanatical idealist who brings the world down in ruin through some sort of simplicity of the mind." Lowell's belief is embodied in his poetic allusions to *Moby Dick* while Warren expresses a similar fear for America in his portrayal of the blindly idealistic Thomas Jefferson. The description Lowell provides for the "symbolic figure" of Captain Ahab functions doubly to describe Warren's Jefferson. Both are "doomed and ready, for their idealism, to face any amount of violence" ("Endnotes" *Lowell's Collected Poems* 1008). Though, as Warren illuminates in *Brother to Dragons*, Jefferson isn't quite prepared to face such violence within his own family.

Much like Lowell and Warren, in 1945 Jarrell also presents a less than glamorous depiction of America. He was deeply affected by what he observed first-hand during his time in the military, and was therefore inspired to capture these observations within his art. Though he never actually saw combat, he did witness the "great machine" of the military. In September 1945, he wrote to Lowell: "I *am* going to write about Nagasaki. I'm going to write a lot about the war, articles and stories too." Three months later, he reiterated to Lowell: "After I'm out I'm going to write—besides a great many army poems about the war—some historical poems"



(*Jarrell's Letters* 132,151). Essentially, Jarrell was foretelling a shift in content for all three authors, from the close of WW II to the end of their careers.

Most critics agree that Jarrell's *Little Friend, Little Friend* serves as the starting point of what would eventually become his mature poetic voice. In fact, Lowell argues that this book "contains some of the best poems on modern war, better, I think, and far more professional than those of Wilfred Owen" ("Wild Dogmatism" 27). One of Lowell's former students recalls Lowell's declaration while teaching Jarrell's poems in class: "[Jarrell] found himself as a poet by writing about war" (Partridge 310). Not surprisingly, these poems identify Jarrell's movement toward that mid-century shift. Pritchard notes: "Jarrell's perception ... of what had happened to him and his fellow human beings comes sharply to life" (129). No longer as dryly satiric or ironically detached, Jarrell follows the advice he had prescribed for Lowell by "start[ing] from a real point of departure in contemporary real life" (*Jarrell's Letters* 139). Keen on this change, Beck observes, "Like Warren's fiction, Jarrell's war poems were intimately concerned with real events.... [They] uniquely capture the voices of war's victims" ("Fugitive Fugitives" 88).

Similar to Warren and Lowell, Jarrell's post-WW II poems aim to present a more authentic portrayal of the world. Jarrell abandons the empty, forced verses of his younger years in which the emotions presented aren't justified, such as "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" (1940) which contains the following lines:

My daemon shifts, impatient, laughs at me  
As I sit crying, lonely, out of luck,  
Asks like a grey mouse: Am what? Why?  
Thinks little of my loss, is careless if I die.

...

"Pity me!"

I too was happy. And I too have lost

The little I could make my own, my life, my love—  
 Speak for me!" May they be plain to me! (l. 3-6, 23-26)

Rather than evoke sympathy from the reader, the frantic, desperate tone of this poem seems unmerited. The laughing daemon and the crying narrator are empty characters, leaving the reader with nothing more than excessive, inexplicable demonstrations of sentimentality punctuated by an abundance of exclamation and question marks.

By comparing it to "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," one may easily notice Jarrell's growth as a poet in "Losses" (1944). The first line strips death equally of its mystery, horror, and glory: "It was not dying: everybody died." Warren later echoed Jarrell in the first line of "Harvard '61: Battle Fatigue" in order to achieve the same effect: "I didn't mind dying—it wasn't that at all." With an even, matter-of-fact tone throughout, Jarrell's narrator describes the "losses" of war, from those in training who "blazed up on the lines we never saw" to soldiers who died in battle for whom "It wasn't different: but if we died / It was not an accident but a mistake" (l.9, 18-19). The concrete details and conversational tone of Jarrell's newer poems succeed in evoking a real emotional response from the reader, as from the following lines,

We died on the wrong page of the almanac,  
 Scattered on mountains fifty miles away;  
 Diving on haystacks, fighting with a friend,  
 We blazed up on the lines we never saw.  
 We died like aunts or pets or foreigners.  
 ...  
 We read our mail and counted up our missions—  
 In bombers named for girls, we burned  
 The cities we had learned about in school—  
 Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among  
 The people we had killed and never seen.

When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;  
 When we died they said, “Our casualties were low.” (l.6-10, 21-27).

The clever, unconventional metaphors that so uniquely characterize Jarrell’s poignant literary reviews were finally making their way into his poetry, as in, “We died like aunts or pets or foreigners.” The repetition of the conjunction “or” serves to diminish the significance of these living creatures to an even more painful degree, which is fitting for the dying soldiers in the poem.

The last seven lines quoted also demonstrate how Jarrell is able to manipulate ordinary language skillfully in order to explore complex, philosophical matters. For example, in these three lines: “We read our mail and counted up our missions— / In bombers named for girls, we burned / The cities we had learned about in school,” Jarrell juxtaposes the innocence—boys who read mail, gave nicknames, and studied geography—and guilt—men who dropped bombs and burned cities—that universally characterizes the duality of soldiers during wartime. The last few lines continue in a philosophical vein, as Jarrell subtly reveals his cynicism for America: “our bodies lay among / The people we had killed and never seen. / When we lasted long enough they gave us medals; / When we died they said, “Our casualties were low.” Here, Jarrell is pointing to the commodification and mechanization of human beings that resulted from industrialism and—more recently—atomic warfare. Soldiers are no longer seen as human; they are replaceable parts who earn meaningless awards for merely lasting past their warranties. The new style and content of this poem serves as a fairly accurate representation of the poems in *Little Friend*, *Little Friend* and *Losses*. To quote Warren’s definition of a good war-time writer, Jarrell “presented the pathos and endurance ... of the individual caught and mangled in the great

anonymous mechanism of a modern war fought for reasons that the individual could not understand” (Warren, “Ernest Hemingway” 164).

The latter part of the 1940s found Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell as close as ever. In April 1946, when Jarrell temporarily took the place of Margaret Marshall as literary editor of *The Nation*, his friends were very much in the forefront of his mind. Jarrell assured Marshall that he was up for the task, including: “I’d become quite familiar with the way things were done at the *Southern Review*—Red Warren was one of my best friends while I was in college, and I visited him [at Baton Rouge] a lot” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 152). It was also this “best friend” to whom Jarrell sent his first official letter as editor, begging for some reviews and poems to publish. Jarrell wrote to Warren: “I was awfully glad you like *Little Friend* so well.... Will you, if you have any time at all, do me a couple of reviews? If you’re terribly rushed for time I could give you Briefer Notices.... but if you are too busy even for that please let me see your poems when you do get back to writing poetry” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 160). This letter, typical of their correspondence during this time, reveals several things: the comfort with which they communicated, the respect Jarrell had for Warren’s critical voice, the mutual esteem they held for one another’s work, and Jarrell’s unflagging confidence that Warren would return to writing poetry after his hiatus.

Earlier, Jarrell had revealed to Lowell that he found Warren’s preoccupation with anything over poetry to be a waste,<sup>33</sup> but his June 1946 letter to Warren demonstrates a sincere appreciation for his most recent novel:

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<sup>33</sup> In a letter to Lowell in November 1945, Jarrell wrote, “Nothing is so foolish as doing what Red does; wasting your life on textbooks, criticism, and so-so novels when you are a good poet” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 139). Of course, this was before the publication of *All the King’s Men* (1946), but it is clear that Jarrell saw Warren foremost as a poet.

I thought I ought to write you a fan letter about *All the King's Men*. It's an overwhelming book: I, and my wife, and four people I lent it to, and several people who've talked to me about it, were all like people in a movie advertisement—we'd had an 'experience,' and still felt stunned. (*Jarrell's Letters* 167)

As further insight into the nature of their literary connection, when Tate requested a regional poem to fit the theme of the *Sewanee Review*, Jarrell responded: “the only Southern subjects I ever thought of writing about are you, Red, and Mr. Ransom—your poems, I mean” (qtd. in Beck, *Fugitive Legacy* 86). Indeed, all three “subjects” were present in his life's work, but it is Warren's influence that is most identifiable in Jarrell's post-WW II poetry.

Aside from Jarrell's continued association with Warren, the late 1940s brought him closer to Lowell than ever before; not only was Jarrell instrumental in Lowell's success in *Lord Weary's Castle*, he also served as a reliable friend through Lowell's bitter divorce from his first wife, Jean Stafford. Reportedly, when Stafford had trouble finding Lowell, she called the Jarrells, the only people in New York that Lowell was seeing besides his mistress, Gertrude Buckman (Mariani 147). Furthermore, as in Jarrell's letter to Warren above, Jarrell also nudged Lowell to produce more poetry, questioning: “And the other new poems, where are they? You won't have any readers if you don't send out your new work” (*Jarrell's Letters* 168). Of course, Jarrell mutually benefited from Lowell's creative production since he published “as many Lowell poems as he could get his hands on” in *The Nation*, but he was also continuing the practice he had learned from the Fugitives in the 1930s by encouraging his friends to keep writing poetry.

In a typical letter from this time period, Jarrell wrote to Lowell in April 1946: “When do you expect to come down? We're looking forward very much to having you here.... Be sure to bring all your new poems. Red was in town this week” (*Jarrell's Letters* 161). This note

illustrates the genuine friendship between the two men, proves the deep interest Jarrell maintained for Lowell's poetry, and serves as proof that Warren's visit would have been a point of interest for Lowell. As further evidence of the Warren / Lowell literary connection, in a letter to Louis Untermeyer in February 1947, Lowell writes: "I'm sure your revised anthology [of American poets] will include Shapiro; but I hope it will also have selections from Randall Jarrell and Elizabeth Bishop and some of the later work of R. P. Warren" (Mariani 149). Of all the poets of this time period, Lowell was most eager to see the work of Jarrell, Bishop, and Warren alongside his own poems.<sup>34</sup>

Admittedly, the nature of this study necessitates a somewhat disproportionate emphasis on the relationships among Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell, but there are obviously additional elements that prompted these authors towards a poetic shift at mid-century. Looking past personal factors—divorces and remarriages,<sup>35</sup> physical and mental health issues,<sup>36</sup> world travel, deaths of parents, fatherhood,<sup>37</sup> etc.—that had an impact on their work, there are several tangible literary influences worth noting. In studies of Jarrell and Lowell in particular, the role of William Carlos Williams is often highlighted due to his literary influence on and friendships with both poets. Jarrell published on Williams with warm praise such as, "*Paterson (Book I)* seems to me the best thing William Carlos Williams has ever written; I read it seven or eight times, and ended lost in delight" ("Poets" 226). Furthermore, Pritchard names Williams as "a stimulus [for

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<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that Lowell already favored the "later work" of Warren.

<sup>35</sup> Lowell divorced Jean Stafford in 1946 and married Elizabeth Hardwick in 1949; Warren divorced Emma "Cinina" Brescia in 1951 and married Eleanor Clark in 1952; and Jarrell divorced Mackie Langham in 1951 and married Mary von Schrader in 1952.

<sup>36</sup> For all three, at one point or another, though most notably for Lowell and his struggle with manic depression.

<sup>37</sup> For Jarrell, by way of Mary's two daughters.

Jarrell] toward composition by the musical phrase (in Pound's words) and toward the incorporation of more disparate kinds of materials and juxtapositions" in his poetry (180).

Lowell's biographer also emphasizes Williams's influence, describing Lowell at mid-century in "a war to decide the future of American poetry, ... caught between his old aristocratic and classical allegiance for Tate and Eliot and his growing democratic allegiance for Williams" (Mariani 174). Williams's influence on Lowell is unquestionably important in terms of re-defining the limitations of and possibilities for poetry, but it is not as immediately apparent in the structure of his verse as it is in Jarrell's. Lowell later recalls being "drawn" to Williams but also admits: "I differed so in temperament and technical training ... that nothing I wrote could easily be confused with [his] poems" ("Endnotes" *Lowell's Collected Poems* 992). Warren is not typically linked to Williams at mid-century, but one of his later works, *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*, is notably reminiscent of *Paterson*. Like Williams, Warren inserts real history—from battlefield markers, to interviews, to the American Sculpture Catalogue—within his tale about Chief Joseph. Ultimately, while Williams may have influenced Jarrell, Lowell, and Warren in highly individualized ways throughout their careers, there is another more significant figure who played a direct role in these poets' similar, simultaneous mid-century shifts: Robert Frost.

Leading up to Frost's simultaneous resurgence in their work in 1947, the three poets spent a considerable amount of time together. Early 1947 brought Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell together at a Writers' Forum at the Woman's College in Greensboro, North Carolina. Warren was invited to give a lecture at the forum for which Joseph Blotner explained, "one compensation would be seeing friends," including Jarrell and Lowell (238). Lowell reported to

Buckman on the event: “There’s lots that will make good talk that would take forever to write.

Red was wonderful and I impressed everyone that I shouldn’t of’ (*Letters of Lowell* 61-62).

Along with the formal lectures and forum events, the poets would have followed the social

model they learned in their college years: poetry, alcohol, and more poetry.<sup>38</sup> Jarrell’s

description of a visit from Lowell that same year exemplifies what their time was like when they

were together: “I have been talking and listening steadily for five days” (*Letters of Lowell* 76).

That year in particular, they would have had a lot to discuss.

Following Jarrell’s 1946 Guggenheim Fellowship, both Warren and Lowell each earned a Guggenheim and a Pulitzer Prize in 1947. Jarrell, who would never be as publicly acclaimed as his friends, was still enjoying success among literary circles from *Little Friend, Little Friend* and publishing additional poems that would be collected in *Losses*. Aside from their own poetic progress, evidence makes it safe to assume that they were also discussing Robert Frost. Jarrell’s biographer can’t quite explain the poet’s newfound interest in Frost in 1947. Pritchard notes that in his Kenyon days, Jarrell had been

contemptuous of Frost, but changed his mind after re-reading him in 1947 and giving a lecture on him at Indiana University.... In his own career, Jarrell had long aspired to get more “speech” into his poems, but didn’t think of Frost as a poet notable for such effects. It is likely that his conversations with Lowell, who was himself attempting to loosen up his forms so as to accommodate the sound of someone talking, spurred the interest in Frost. (160)

It is understandable why Pritchard would assume Jarrell’s reevaluation had been inspired by

Lowell. Lowell did, after all, take a bus trip with Theodore Roethke to Vermont in June of that

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<sup>38</sup> Though Jarrell was not a drinker, except for “the occasional German white wine,” it never stopped him from socializing at parties among literary friends (Pritchard 142).



year to visit Frost at his farm, and both Lowell and Jarrell were aiming for a more conversational quality in their poetry (Mariani 152). However, what Pritchard fails to note is that Warren's renewed interest in Frost surfaced before that of Jarrell and Lowell. Warren presented a Hopwood Lecture that year entitled "The Themes of Robert Frost"<sup>39</sup> which is noticeably similar to Jarrell's later article, "The Other Frost" (1947).

This overlap is significant for American literary history because the qualities of Frost that Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell emphasize, illustrate, and celebrate in lectures and in writing, are precisely the characteristics that mark their mid-century poetic shift. Though perhaps they were already headed in this direction, Frost served as a steadfast signpost marking the path. An investigation into the lectures, articles, and letters from 1947 reveals how Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell looked to Frost as a model for the following: first, how to infuse ostensibly simple verse with multi-faceted layers of meaning; second, how to utilize concrete details to create an authentic presentation of the world; third, how to capture the language of real men, both in diction and rhythm; and fourth, how to raise actual human experience to the universal level.

Warren begins "The Themes of Robert Frost" with his methodology for explicating Frost's poems: "we must be able to look forward as well as back as we move through the poem—be able to sense the complex of relationships and implications—before we can truly have that immediate grasp" (286). This statement directly echoes Jarrell's 1942 lecture on poetic structure, which calls for poems to be read for "extremely complicated systems of thoughts,

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<sup>39</sup> The lecture, presented in May, was later published in *Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review* in December, 1947.

perceptions, and emotions” (“Levels and Opposites” 392); this noticeable similarity points to the fact that both poets approached Frost from a similar mindset. Warren and Jarrell were equally impressed by the layers of complexity that underlie the deceptive simplicity of Frost’s poetry, and by the pointed inclusion of specific details that adds to the overall effect.

Warren notes, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” may be said to “be simple ... But this does not mean that the implications of the event are not complex” (“Themes of Frost” 287), just as Jarrell acknowledges, “It is easy to underestimate the effect” of Frost’s poetry, where “objects have the tremendous strength ... of things merely put down and left to speak for themselves” (“The Other Frost” 30). The simple language and detail—such as the “frozen lake,” “harness bells,” and “deep” woods—work together to create palpable tension within the poem. The same may be said for the deceptive simplicity and skillful use of concrete details in Jarrell’s “The Face” in *Seven-League Crutches*, Lowell’s “Father’s Bedroom” in *Life Studies*, and Warren’s “The Hazel Leaf” in *Promises*, which has resonances of Frost’s “Stopping by Woods” in style, content, and metaphysical underpinning:

Tonight the woods are darkened  
     You have forgotten what pain  
 Had once drawn you forth:  
     To remember it might yet be some pain.  
     But to forget may, too, be pain. (l.1-5)

There is the same lone traveler in the deep woods drawn deeper by the same unknown force, illustrated with the same simple language that speaks volumes. This poem, and Jarrell’s “Face” and Lowell’s “Bedroom,” all contain the quality that Warren admires in Frost: they “drop a stone into the pool of our being, and the ripples spread.” Warren claims that this powerful impact in

Frost's work stems partly from the "simple contrasts" which transform into deeper layers of meaning ("Themes of Frost" 287, 288). Jarrell dutifully echoes Warren, claiming: "the contrasts [Frost] gets from his greyed or unsaturated shades are often more satisfying to a thoughtful rhetorician than some dazzling arrangements of prismatic colors" ("The Other Frost" 32). The same may be said of those subtle contrasts in the later poetry of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell.

Another large part of what they admire in Frost is how he creates unique contrasts, effective points of tension, and surprising depth in his poetry, all while writing in the speech of ordinary men. Jarrell overflows with praise for how Frost "uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech" ("The Other Frost" 30). Lowell echoes this sentiment in an interview with Frederick Seidel as he admires Frost's "sense of rhythm and words and composition, and [how he gets] into his lines language that is very much like the language he speaks" ("Art of Poetry" 71). It is evident from poems as early as "The Ballad of Billie Potts" that Warren also aimed to bring his poems to life with vernacular speech, both in dialogue and breath-like rhythms. In essence, the authors traded the lofty, prophetic tone of Eliot for the living, breathing speech of Frost.

An additional element that all three poets admired in Frost is how he creates universal portrayals of rural life that are rooted in real human experience.<sup>40</sup> In an analysis of "After Apple-Picking," Warren identifies Frost's aesthetic theory in one of the "implications" of the poem's meaning: "art must stem from the literal world, from the common body of experience, and must

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<sup>40</sup> Lowell praises the work of Elizabeth Bishop in 1947 by comparing her to Frost: "[Her work's] purpose is to heighten and dramatize the description and, at the same time, to unify and universalize it. In this, and in her marvelous command of shifting speech tones, Bishop resembles Robert Frost" ("Elizabeth Bishop's *North & South*" 77).

be a magnified ‘dream’ of that experience as it has achieved meaning” (“Themes of Frost” 298).

In other words, the key to effectively presenting human experience in poetry is to heighten the raw material through the perception and artistic lens of the creator. This important distinction sets the later poetry of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell apart from the simplistic, truly confessional poems of poor poets. Warren explains how a poem can provide:

a poignant chapter of biography.... But we may remember that the poem ... is not an attempt merely to present the personal problem but an attempt to transcend the personal problem, to objectify and universalize, that we can distinguish the themes inherent in the poem as such from the personal theme or themes which remain irrevocably tied to the man. (“A Poem of Pure Imagination” 349)

Though their post-WW II poetry increasingly contains personal, autobiographical elements, they succeed in raising such material to what they regarded as a universal level, as Frost attempts in his pastoral scenes. For example, when Lowell draws from his childhood memories of the “old South Boston Aquarium” to create a narrator who recalls:

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;  
my hand tingled  
to burst the bubbles  
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish (“For the Union Dead” l. 5-8)

or Jarrell recollects his time in California:

My lifetime  
Got rid of, I sit in a dark blue sedan  
Beside my great-grandmother, in Hollywood (“A Street off Sunset” l. 10-12)

or Warren portrays a sweet family moment:

You leap like a fish-flash in bright air,  
And reach out. Yes, I’m well aware  
That this is the spot, and hour,  
For you to demand your flower (“The Flower” l. 38-41)

they are all employing concrete, sensory details to create a transcendent exploration of selfhood, not only for the narrator, but also for those who share in his humanity.

Within this quest for authenticity, there is also a noticeable post-WW II shift from lyrical poems toward narrative poems, replete with the realistic characters and dramatic scenes that were also characteristic of Frost. Jarrell celebrates Frost's characters as "living beings he has known or created ... with their real speech and real thoughts and real emotions," and compliments his "wonderful dramatic monologues ... that come out of a knowledge of people that few poets had" ("The Other Frost" 32, 34, 30). Furthermore, an interview of Lowell conducted by Cleanth Brooks and Warren solidifies the mutual Warren / Lowell connection to Frost while echoing Jarrell's comment. Warren says to Lowell: "I remember now our talk with Frost some time back. He said, 'What makes a line stick in your head? ... A good line's got to be catchy. A good poem's got to be catchy.' Now you want to say 'catchy' is based on a dramatic element in the poem." Lowell responds to Warren with an anecdote about meeting Frost, claiming: "[Frost] was the first poet I ever met who told me about this." Lowell describes how Frost read some Keats and pointed to a line stating, "There it comes alive." From this discussion, both Warren and Lowell agree that "what we ultimately mean by 'dramatic' in poetry," is when the lines come alive ("Robert Lowell" 37-38). Looking at Jarrell's *Losses* (1948), Lowell's *Mills of the Kavanaghs* (1951), and Warren's *Brother to Dragons* (1953), all three poets arguably had the "extremely wonderful dramatic and narrative element" of Frost in mind, though in all three books there remains room for further growth in their subsequent works ("The Other Frost" 34).

If Jarrell's poems were divided into "early," "middle," and "late," *Losses* serves as the bridge between the fairly successful "middle" poems and the "late" poems that marked his greatest work in *The Seven-League Crutches* and beyond. William Doeski supports this progression in an observation that while Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* still conforms mostly to New Critical principles, the poems "in Jarrell's *Losses* were cut from a different cloth" (92); much of that cloth was Frost's, but there were also elements of his own. In many ways, "Orestes at Tauris" embodies the incongruities of Jarrell's early and late poetic style.

Despite his attempt at a Frost-like sustained narrative, Jarrell clings to the antiquity of his early work, portraying classical Greek figures in a story centered on the painful, horrid loss of a sibling. Though these characters are more intriguing than those in some earlier works, they remain static types, far from the flesh and blood characters with real thoughts and emotions that are depicted by Frost. Most notably, however, Jarrell's battle between the old high-minded classical tone and the newer conversational tone results in an accidental mock epic tone:

Yet when she pressed it to your lips you gulped at it,  
 And it was so thick and bitter with some drug  
 Your teeth rang on the rim, you gave a long shudder,  
 Snatched it, and poured the rest on the ground—  
 Then you looked up at her and laughed.  
 Her head began to swim away, you fell asleep. (l.135-140)

Amid the more classically oriented diction of "pressed it to your lips," "Your teeth rang on the rim," and "gave a long shudder," the moment Orestes "looked up at her and *laughed*" and then "*fell asleep*" seems woefully out of place, both in rhythm and diction. In comparison to Lowell, who successfully integrates "prosy and harsh" lines into "Quaker Graveyard" amid local details and time-appropriate references to World War II, Jarrell's shift in tone is entirely unexpected, yet

not in an effective way to pleasantly surprise readers with something new, as Lowell had achieved.

The same awkward effect is replicated later in the poem, when Jarrell includes details that are superfluous and inappropriate for the scene:

Others ... looked piteously  
 From jewels sewn in their lids, into your eyes,  
 As though to beckon you to their blind world.  
 A man came walking through their midst, with clumsy steps.  
 A long, white, and heavy coat, high shapeless boots,  
 A broad-sleeved and knee-long coat, and great peaked hood:  
 Such garments, white as salt, hung covering him.  
 Come to the goddess, he swayed and stood (l.156, 157-164)

The imagery of jewels and creatures beckoning Orestes to the “blind world” builds suspense for the entrance of an impressive figure, yet Jarrell instead provides a description fit for the villain in a low-budget horror film. In addition to the ineffectual word choice of “walking,” “clumsy,” and “swayed,” the elaborate, somewhat feminine description of the garments seems ridiculous.

Aside from the occasional bits of well-written vivid imagery, this poem serves most helpfully as an example of what Jarrell was leaving behind.

Other poems in *Losses*, such as “Moving” and “Lady Bates,” represent the ways in which he was moving forward. “Moving,” a poem with irregular line lengths and speech-like rhythm, contains powerful realistic imagery that is characteristic of Jarrell’s later work, such as:

A smeared, banged, tow-headed  
 Girl in a flowered, flour-sack print  
 Sniffles and holds up her last bite  
 Of bread and butter and brown sugar to the wind. (l.5-8)

This passage functions similarly to Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," each line building on the last to create a complete realistic image. Far from the artificial, mannered verse in "Orestes at Tauris" the looser form allows Jarrell to play with sounds and pacing in this poem. The four – ed adjectives in a row slow readers down, allowing them to savor each additional description of the little girl. Jarrell's word-play with near-homonyms "flowered" and "flour" similarly slow the pace, forcing a separate consideration for the "flowered" and "flour-sack" elements of her dress. The enjambment removes all sense of urgency, as the lines trickle onward until the last, significantly longer line, made longer still by the repetition of "and." The next two lines make Jarrell's purpose clear: "Butter the cat's paws / And bread the wind. We are moving" (l.9-10). A noticeable contrast from the slow-paced first stanza, the second stanza begins with these short, clipped commands. As the rest of the work reveals, the poem captures the little girl's thoughts in a stream-of-consciousness style as she processes all that she will be forced to sacrifice for this move. The quick, imperative statements demonstrate a shift in tone. No longer is she holding on to her "last bite," she is newly resolved to accept that she will "never again sing / Good morning, Dear Teacher, to my own dear teacher" (l.11-12), among other heartbreaking truths.

Similar in structure to "Moving," "Lady Bates" is also composed with irregular line lengths and irregular stanzas, allowing the narrative voice and content of the poem to determine the form. An example of the real-time revision described above, this poem also captures the spontaneous process of the mind:

The lightning of a summer  
 Storm wakes, in her clay cave  
 At the end of the weeds, past the mock-orange tree—  
 Where she would come barefooted, curled-up-footed





reflections of Anne Kavanaugh, a young widow, as she recalls her husband's frightening decline into madness, partly a result of the announcement of WW II, and his ultimate death.

Indicative of impending style changes, Lowell struggled with this long poem from its inception. In the summer of 1947, Jarrell—high on his new-found appreciation of Frost's narrative skills—wrote to Lowell in response to an early version of "Mills": "I thought the writing was good but that it needed more story or argument" (*Jarrell's Letters* 177). Some years later, in early 1950, Warren and Lowell exchanged visits while performing readings at each other's universities. Mariani notes, without drawing a connection, that after these visits, Lowell "seemed to know that the poem was far too long on classical and biblical allusion and far too short on narrative" (191). It is safe to assume that the advice of both Jarrell and Warren on the poem's shortcomings had been in unison.

Though not entirely successful in his revision of "Mills," Lowell's failures aren't half as detrimental as Jarrell's in "Orestes," since Lowell at least maintains a consistent tone and is able to develop deeply haunting images and insightful psychological portrayals of his characters. Jarrell provides a summative statement in his review of *Mills of the Kavanaughs*: "Mills" is "an interesting and powerful poem; but in spite of having wonderful lines and sections ... it does not seem to me successful as a unified work of art, a narrative poem" ("Three Books" 258). Though aesthetics were still—and would always be—of great importance to all three poets, attention was increasingly focused on narrative. The rest of Jarrell's review confirms the goal of authenticity that these poets shared at mid-century.

Ultimately, Jarrell argues—in addition to improving his narrative voice—Lowell must increase the element of “spontaneity, the live half-accidental half-providential rightness” in his poems, and aim to create “real” characters, instead of those who “too often seem to be acting *in the manner of* Robert Lowell, rather than plausibly as real people act” (“Three Books” 258). Not surprisingly, after *Mills* was published, Lowell opted for a comparison to Frost in order to reflect on the failed elements of his work: “I don’t know how to describe this business of direct experience.... In Frost you feel that’s just what the farmers and so on were like. It has the virtue of a photograph but all the finish of art” (“Art of Poetry” 71). Ironically, the last sentence of this statement serves as a perfect description of what Lowell would later achieve in *Life Studies*.

A mirror of Jarrell’s *Losses* in many ways, Lowell’s *Mills of the Kavanaughs* also contains highly successful poems in addition to the less widely acclaimed long narrative poem. Jarrell includes an enthusiastic appraisal in his review: “ ‘Mother Marie Therese’ is the best poem Mr. Lowell has ever written, and ‘Falling Asleep over the Aeneid’ is—is better; *very few* living poets have written poems that surpass these” (“Three Books” 255). One may add “Her Dead Brother” to that group, though the incestuous subject matter may have prevented Jarrell, with his sensitive moral compass, from including it on his list. In many ways, “Her Dead Brother” foreshadows techniques that would become characteristic of Lowell’s later work. Reportedly, Lowell lifted the theme of suppressed incest from a deeply private confession by his first wife about “some sort of sexual intimacy” between her and her brother during childhood (Mariani 149). In a practice that would become habit for Lowell, he drew from this personal experience to create a gripping piece of art.

As the speaker of this dramatic monologue mourns for her brother lost in battle, her tender, forbidden thoughts evoke a twisted empathy in the reader rivaled only by that inspired by Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*:

My mind holds you as I would have you live,  
 A wintering dragon. Summer was too short  
 When we went picnicking with telescopes  
 And crocking leather handbooks to that fort  
 Above the lank and heroned Sheepscot, where its slopes  
 Are clutched by hemlocks—spotting birds. I give  
 You back that idyll, Brother. Was it more?  
 Remember riding, scotching with your spur  
 That four-foot milk-snake in a juniper?  
 Father shellacked it to the ice-house door.

Then you were grown; I left you on your own.  
 We will forget that August twenty-third,  
 When mother motored with the maids to Stowe,  
 And the pale summer shades were drawn—so low  
 No one could see us; no, nor catch your hissing word,  
 As false as Cressid! Let our deaths atone:  
 The fingers on your sword-knot are alive,  
 And Hope, that fouls my brightness with its grace,  
 Will anchor in the narrows of your face.  
 My husband's Packard crunches up the drive. (l. 11-30)

Jarrell famously identified the “dark side” of Frost, a man who employed simple language to write poems far from “orthodox,” often “extraordinarily subtle and strange” (“The Other Frost” 30). Though Frost’s “darkness” did not include such blatant appeals to sexuality, here Lowell is similarly weighting deceptively simple lines with his own flavor of darkness: an artful display of double entendre.

The first stanza quoted relates the initiation of incestual feelings between brother and sister; theme-appropriate, there are images and words pregnant with additional sexual references

throughout these lines. For example, the siblings trek to the fort above the Sheepscot River armed with tools for exploration, “telescopes” and “leather handbooks,” or instruction manuals. The surrounding syntax and imagery subtly hints where the real exploration may have occurred: “Summer was too short / When we went picnicking with telescopes / And crocking leather handbooks to that fort / Above the lank and heroned Sheepscot, where its slopes / Are clutched by hemlocks—spotting birds.” The ostensible reason for visits to the fort, “spotting birds,” is purposely delayed for four full lines and further set apart by a noticeable dash. Furthermore, the sexually charged diction “lank,” “slopes,” and “clutched,” and the fact that “hemlocks” are known for their poisonous properties adds to the illicit gestalt created by these lines. Next, there is the image of the phallic “four-foot milk-snake” which her brother discovers “in a juniper,” a shrub with the feminine qualities of “fragrant wood and bluish-gray berrylike fruit” (Webster’s Dictionary). In a highly metaphorical last line, “Father shellacked [the snake] to the ice-house door,” therefore immortalizing the symbol of their immoral intimacy.

The second quoted stanza continues with the double entendre, but also demonstrates another technique that Lowell was to employ so handily in his late work. He juxtaposes classical allusions, such as “Cressid,” the Trojan woman who eternally betrayed Troilus, with banal images from daily life, such as when the narrator’s “husband’s Packard crunches up the drive.” Never purely a confessional poet, as he had been mislabeled, Lowell combines the intellectual acuity of his former training with the immediacy of his new poetic style in order to create poetry that breathes with life but also depth, rippling with the additional symbolic weight of historical and literary allusions.

Lowell also drew from his early style for the traditional ten-line stanzas of iambic pentameter and regular rhyme scheme in this poem. However, whereas his pulsing rhythm once seemed to buck against the noose of conventional forms, here he manipulates the constraints to his advantage. In a sense, Lowell employs these tighter forms as a technique to bridle, control, and temper the sensuality inherent in the poem; the formality keeps the difficult topic controlled, even if in structure only. This poem proves Jarrell's observation of *Mills* to be true: Lowell had "poured every variety of feeling and technique into it" (Mariani 209). The experimental moves in structure, content, and style within this poem characterize Lowell's work for the rest of his poetic career.

### ***The 1950s: The Mid-Century Poetic Shift***

As the second half of the twentieth-century began, the United States was deeply entrenched in difficult international relations. The country was still reeling from what Jarrell saw as the "anxious mortality that would haunt the postmodern world" after WW II (Travisano 180-181), the arms race was heating up, and the Korean War had just begun. William Faulkner, with his fingers on the pulse of the nation, encapsulates the mood of the times in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, delivered on December 10, 1950:

Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up? Because of this, the young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about. (*Nobel Lectures*)

In the very same month, Warren echoed Faulkner's sentiment, "The world news gets me down.... the general picture is so grim that it makes all your ordinary pursuits, the business of literature and so forth, seem trivial in the face of the absolute bestial blankness of the objective world" (Blotner 267). Indeed, these were depressing times, especially for the heightened sensitivity of many artists.

Though most obvious for Jarrell in light of his military experience and celebrated war poems, there is evidence within correspondences, interviews, and works—both poems and prose—that Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell were equally affected by the palpable sense of impending doom that defines the post-WW II era. Warren reports in *Democracy and Poetry*, "the experts tell us: somebody may, really, drop the big bomb; the air may really get unbreatheable" (44). Furthermore, after reading Jarrell's apocalyptic poem "Jerome," its first line warning, "Each day brings its toad, each night its dragon," Lowell wrote to Elizabeth Bishop insisting that one of the "great facts which had emerged since World War II [was] our *probable* total nuclear extinction." Lowell writes that Jarrell was "nuts on the subject" but agrees that "he was right" and laments the country's "growing reliance on the Bomb" and the resulting "crass commercial vulgarity of our country" (Mariani 273).

All three poets recognize that this "crass commercial vulgarity" of society was a symptom of an obsession with the present that resulted in blindness to the past and the future. Warren observes: "A society with no sense of the past, with no sense of the human role as significant, not merely in experiencing history but in creating it, can have no sense of destiny"

(*Democracy and Poetry* 56). For Warren, poetry can play a “therapeutic role” in reversing this pandemic blindness. Jarrell similarly identifies society’s partial vision; for the artist, he argues:

the present is no more than the last ring on the trunk, understandable and valuable only in terms of all the earlier rings. The rest of our society sees only that great last ring, the enveloping surface of the trunk; what’s underneath is a disregarded, almost mythical foundation. (“Sad Heart” 74)

Jarrell and Warren encourage readers to identify their place in history in order to foster the development of selfhood, of individual identity, through the way both authors integrate history into their later poetry. Beck observes: “Both [Jarrell and Warren] found in the re-creation of actual events a way of attacking the epistemological dilemma implicit in the recording of history” (“Fugitive Fugitives” 89); they were able to bring their version of truth to the historical facts. Though the history presented in Lowell’s work, like Jarrell’s, is more frequently aligned with the individual, his poetry should also be included in this distinction. The way Lowell explores familial and regional history equally inspires readers to identify their place in history. One may easily see Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell taking on the role of poet / philosopher / historian and even public figure after World War II.

All of the mid-century poetic changes described thus far—the loosening of forms; aim for authenticity in narrative, characters, and speech; newly conversational tone; increase in immediacy and spontaneity; and occasional polivocality—are more properly suited for the highly charged content of current political issues and recent events in American history. The way Warren looks to poetry to “fulfill its function of bringing us face to face with our nature and our fate” (“Use of the Past” 31) reveals a trend among these three poets who were all using art to voice their concerns for America in the modern world. Despite, or perhaps in spite of, the



difficult challenges of the times, each poet responded to Faulkner's charge that it is "The poet's ... duty ... to write about these things" (*Nobel Lectures*). In responding to the nation's need, each poet wrote his best book of poetry to date, and that which fully marked his turning point within this decade.

Jarrell was the first to meet this mark with *The Seven-League Crutches* (1951). Considering the long road to the mid-century poetic shift that has already been described, the flaws in Adam Kirsch's argument on Jarrell's poetic change are obvious. Kirsch asserts: "[Jarrell] would advance not by attacking the old values, but by almost naively discovering and practicing new ones" (154). Not only had Jarrell been finding defects in the old values since "A Note on Poetry" was published eleven years prior, he—along with his colleagues—engaged in a fairly rigorous approach to shaping a new poetic style. As the letters and critical responses have exhibited, Jarrell had a vision for what postmodern poetry should achieve, and this vision was shared by both Warren and Lowell. At the start of Lowell's review of *The Seven-League Crutches*,<sup>41</sup> after naming Jarrell "our most talented poet under 40," he identifies how "Jarrell is able to see our whole scientific, political and spiritual situation directly and on its own terms" ("Wild Dogmatism" 27).

When Jarrell's *Complete Poems* was published after his death (1969), Helen Vendler voiced a position that has long clung to Jarrell's reputation: "[Jarrell] put his genius into his criticism and his talent into his poetry" (qtd. in Pritchard 4). It is a shame that Jarrell's legacy as a poet has been so far reduced beneath his role as literary critic because while his criticism is

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<sup>41</sup> "Randall Jarrell's Wild Dogmatism," originally published in the *New York Times Book Review* on October 7, 1951.

insightful and sharp and brilliant, his poetry—especially in *Seven-League Crutches* and beyond—truly deserves Lowell’s high praise from 1951. This work does not contain as many war poems as his last two books, but its poems speak more wisely of the post-war culture. From soldiers to women and children, Jarrell’s new-found poetic voice expresses the complexity and psychology of those times, all in skilled poetic verse. For example, Jarrell’s looser poetic structure allows him to capture a realistic moment in the life of a soldier in “Transient Barracks”:

Summer. Sunset. Someone is playing  
 The ocarina in the latrine:  
 You Are My Sunshine. A man shaving  
 Sees—past the day-room, past the night K.P.’s  
 Bent over a G.I. can of beets  
 In the yard of the mess—the red and green  
 Lights of a runway full of ‘24’s.  
 The first night flight goes over with a roar  
 And disappears, a star, among mountains.

The day-room radio, switched on next door,  
 Says, “The thing about you is, you’re *real*.”  
 The man sees his own face, black against lather,  
 In the steamed, starred mirror: it is real.  
 And the others—the boy in underwear  
 Hunting for something in his barracks-bags  
 With a money-belt around his middle—  
 The voice from the doorway: “Where’s the C.Q.?”  
 “Who wants to know?” “He’s gone to the movies.”  
 “Tell him Red wants to sign his clearance”—  
 These are. Are what? Are. (l. 1-20).

In place of the strained, artificial lines of older poems like “Orestes at Tauris,” Jarrell employs the diction, rhythm, and colloquialisms of real speech, in both the body of the poem and the dialogue.

Deceptively simple like Frost's work, this poem contains several layers of meaning, and several voices. In addition to the voice of the narrator who describes the details of the scene from a detached point of view, readers are privy to the shaving man's immediate thought process when he looks in the mirror and identifies himself as "real," not a dream. Jarrell also gives voices to the actual soldiers, from the boy in underwear to someone slightly higher in rank.<sup>42</sup> A fifth and sixth voice depict an exchange between the poet and his imagined reader: "These are. Are what? Are." It is as if the poet is reassuring his audience that these images *are* real; this is a side of war unseen by most. The loosening in poetic form also enables Jarrell to present the dream-like verse in "A Quilt-Pattern" and the stark, yet stunning work of "The Face," with its referent laden lines that require the reader's thought process to fill in the unspoken subcontext: "Not good any more, not beautiful – / Not even young. / This isn't mine. / Where is the old one, the old ones? / Those were mine" (l.1-5). Like "Transient Barracks," this poem is centered on a character in the midst of self-evaluation, once again in front of a mirror. By requiring the reader's participation to complete this character's personal reflection, Jarrell flouts the New Critical principle that a poem should be an independent and self-sufficient verbal object; Warren and Lowell would also increasingly follow this model.

Aside from the spontaneous element of Jarrell's work that invited reader participation, his goal of presenting real-life narratives and characters is also somewhat at odds with New Critical principles, which in 1951 were at the height of their influence. At a time when poems became "increasingly well wrought, autotelic, full of ironic tension, unified through paradoxical

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<sup>42</sup> Though "Red" is a fairly common nickname due to its association with redheads, it is worth noting that Lowell invokes Warren's moniker in "Mills of the Kavanaugh" for the character Red Kavanaugh, and Jarrell repeats it here.

resolutions,” Jarrell’s poetry was already moving past this literary wave. Kirsch notes, “A Girl in a Library” is:

historically significant, since such New Critical terms don’t take us far in describing its style. But its more important significance has to do with the amount of “life”—the illusion of a world going on—he managed to get into the experience of a poem. (178)

As mentioned earlier, Kirsch mistakenly accuses Jarrell of blindly stumbling upon new techniques; however, it is precisely this quality of “life” that Jarrell had been encouraging Lowell to increase in his work since 1945, when he recommended for him to “start from a real point of departure in contemporary real life” and scolded him for “not putting enough about *people* in the poems” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 139). It is also this “life” that Warren and Lowell had celebrated in Keats as the “dramatic” element one should aim to create in poetry. Finally, it is that very quality of “life” that all three poets came to admire so specifically in Frost’s work in 1947.

After being reared on Ransom’s New Critical theories—and Warren’s, as he literally wrote the book on the practical application of New Criticism in *Understanding Poetry* (1938)—by mid-century, Jarrell was ready for the next thing, as were Warren and Lowell. Jarrell had written to his second wife, Mary von Schrader, that in *Crutches* he had started to consider himself as a “dramatic rather than a lyric poet” (Pritchard 235). One may understand why from observing the dynamic storylines and rounded characters of “Nollekens,” “Hohensalzburg: Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Romantic character,” “The Night Before the Night Before Christmas,” and especially in “Seele im Raum” and “A Girl in a Library.” His “girl” in the library does seem to enter into existence genuinely:

An object among dreams, you sit here with your shoes off  
And curl your legs up under you; your eyes

Close for a moment, your face moves toward sleep . . .  
 You are very human.

But my mind, gone out in tenderness,  
 Shrinks from its object with a thoughtful sigh.  
 This is a waist the spirit breaks its arm on.  
 The gods themselves, against you, struggle in vain.  
 This broad low strong-boned brow; these heavy eyes;  
 These calves, grown muscular with certainties;  
 This nose, three medium-sized pink strawberries  
 --But I exaggerate. In a little you will leave:  
 I'll hear, half squeal, half shriek, your laugh of greeting—  
 Then, *decrecendo*, bars of that strange speech  
 In which each sound sets out to seek each other,  
 Murders its own father, marries its own mother,  
 And ends as one grand transcendental vowel. (l.1-17).

The rest of *Crutches* contains similarly well-chosen details and concrete images that bring Jarrell's characters to life amid various backdrops of home life, history, fantasy, and dream-worlds. Travisano explains how both Jarrell's and Lowell's post-WW II work is written in "a style that would be able to explore lost worlds on many levels, in the realm of personal loss, in the realm of history, in the realm of myth." Ultimately, however, these ruminations are tied to the issue of selfhood, and the "exploration of the domestic, historical, and mythic backgrounds that help to shape one's perceptions of the self" (217).

The form and content of Warren's post-WW II poetry is also inextricably linked to the issue of selfhood for modern man. Hugh Ruppersburg identifies that by 1953 Warren increasingly explored "the individual's place in modern America and in the modern world," and Joseph Blotner similarly notes that Warren's "attempt to render the sweep of history, which had earlier prompted references to classic ages, focused powerfully now on the American past" (Ruppersburg 2, Blotner 289). Like Jarrell and Lowell, Warren pushed further away from the

formalism of his early poetic style in order to examine selfhood more fully amidst the backdrop of American life and history. An echo of Jarrell's letter to Mary, Warren felt an increasing "dramatic impulse" that would "bring more flexibility to his poetic style" (Blotner 289). This impulse resulted in *Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices*, a book-length dramatic narrative that builds on the interplay of styles from "Billie Potts" with a play-like format including eight characters who speak alternately in mostly blank verse.

Warren describes this poem as "a kind of hybrid," with "a complicated narrative" and "many fictional problems" ("Self Interview" 2). *Brother to Dragons* tells the real-life story about how Lilburne Lewis, aided by his brother Isham, brutally butchers a slave as punishment for breaking a vase; the intrigue of this story heightens because Lilburne and Isham Lewis are nephews of Thomas Jefferson. Warren controls this "séance" of "an array of historical and quasi-historical spirits" through a persona of himself, the R. P. W. character (Justus 61). Though always presented through the lens of art, R. P. W. reflects the three poets' increasing tendency to insert their voices within the action of the poem. Like Jarrell, Warren's unique style allows for openness, spontaneity, colloquial speech, and even a "polyphony of voices" which succeed in depicting authenticity (Blotner 290). Though there are many rich points of discussion for this work, it is most important for this study to highlight the elements that both Jarrell and Lowell focus on in their reviews. Not surprisingly, they emphasize the issues they had been discussing with each other for the past decade: the dramatic narrative form, the believability of characters, and the level of "life" presented in the work.

Jarrell's review of *Brother to Dragons* is more favorable than Lowell's. Even before the work was published, Jarrell wrote to Mary: "When I woke up Sunday morning I had such a strong hunch that [Warren would] win the Pulitzer Prize that I told Red about it. I hope I turn out to be a prophet" (*Jarrell's Letters* 351). Perhaps, as for Lowell's work in the 1940s, Jarrell's review aimed to convince others to fulfill that prophecy. He begins "On the Underside of the Stone" claiming: "This is Robert Penn Warren's best book" (176). Even in a private letter to Warren in August 1953, Jarrell gushes: "It's one of the best long poems I've ever read, and everybody I've seen that's read it thinks so too" (*Jarrell's Letters* 385).

One gets the sense that Lowell, though equally intrigued, was slightly more critical of Warren's work due to its connection to his own recent (and future) literary pursuits; *Brother to Dragons* resembles the length and range of his long narrative poem "Mills of the Kavanaughs" published only two years prior. Norma Procopiow proposes: "Lowell used the review to expose his dilemma about the proper limits of literary form, both thematic and linguistic" (304). Considering how Lowell seems to resolve some of these issues in the review and later in the format of his own book *Life Studies*, this is quite a convincing argument. As for Warren's unique form, Jarrell presents unabashed praise of Warren's achievement, and Lowell—most tellingly—provides an honest appraisal of the potential for Warren's new style: "*Brother to Dragons* is a model and an opportunity. It can be imitated without plagiarism, and one hopes its matter and its method will become common property." It is not difficult to deduce that *Life Studies* is in fact modeled after what Lowell deems "the prose genius in verse" of Warren's *Brother to Dragons* ("Warren's *Dragons*" 68, 73).

In addition to aesthetic form, Jarrell's and Lowell's reviews linger over Warren's characters in *Brother to Dragons*. Considering their own efforts towards realistic characterization, it is not a surprise that both poets point to some places where Warren could improve in this category. Lowell comments: "these monstrous heroes are so extremely *literary* that their actual lives seem to have been imagined by anti-romantic Southern moderns" ("Warren's *Dragons*" 67); and Jarrell notes: "[The characters] say what people do not say, but would say if they could. When they are through we know them, and what they have done, very thoroughly, and we give a long marveling sigh" ("Underside" 176). Even though these characters do not embody realistic qualities as effectively as those in Frost's work, Jarrell acknowledges that Laetitia and "Ishey-boy" are "two of the most touching creations in American literature" ("Underside" 176), and Lowell admires how *Brother to Dragons* ultimately "triumphs through its characters, most of all through ... Lucy and Laetitia Lewis" ("Warren's *Dragons*" 70).

It is easy to see why Lowell admires Warren's portrayal of Lucy, especially in passages that demonstrate her true-to-life motherly guilt over her sons' actions:

I did the best I could. No, that's a lie.  
 I did not do my best. I died. I know  
 That if you love enough, and well, no death  
 Can come to kill you while there's need of you.  
 And there was need of me. Yes, if I had lived,  
 My love, somehow, might have sustained my son.  
 It might have been to him like a hand stretched out.  
 And for my other son, my love, somehow,  
 Might have been at least some light against the ignorant torpor  
 That breathed from the dark land. Yes, if I had loved,  
 Loved well enough to live, the tiptoe horror  
 Had not come sly and thus insinuated



Itself in my name to my dearest son.  
This was my crime (p. 22)

and why both Jarrell and Lowell praise Warren's portrayal of Laetitia's earthy, honest voice.

Here, for example, she describes the murder from her point of view:

Yes, yes, that's right, it just filled up the room,  
And the dark outside the room, and the whole world,  
Or seemed to. Yet it wasn't loud, far off,  
Being so far off, down there in the meat-house.  
But soon as I heard it, it was like the world  
Just started screaming by itself, and like I  
Had just been waiting for years for it to start,  
And all my life had been waiting for it, and every  
Dead leaf in the woods just screamed just like a tongue,  
A little tongue, not loud, and maybe you couldn't  
Hear one alone, it was so weak, but together  
All screaming they made a big scream filling  
Up all the world, and filled my head, and my poor head  
Was one big hollow echo full of dark,  
Big as the world, and the whole world, all the mountains,  
The rivers, creeks, and fields and hills and woods and every  
Leaf screaming in the dark, and all the stars,  
Was in my head and lost, and my poor head  
Kept whirling bigger. And I tried to scream. (50-51)

The clear distinctions between these voices in syntax, diction, and tone, and the seamless changes from one to the other, rightfully encourage critics to honor the "texture gained by the variation of speech styles" (Bradbury 74), most notably the freest, most realistic voice of R.P.W.

R. P. W.'s conversational tone combined with realistic facts often cuts through the rest of the voices in order to present the correct "version" of history. Jefferson argues in dreamy language about the existence of the old house: "It is not gone, for I who never saw it, / See it, see it now," only for R. P. W. to interrupt and set the facts straight: "I assure you it is gone. I know the place. / Up Highway 109 from Hopkinsville, / To Dawson Springs, then west on 62, / Across

Kentucky at the narrow neck, / Two hours now, not more, for the road's fair" (14-15). Ultimately the concrete details and trustworthy ethos of R. P. W. allows his voice to surface as the pragmatic truth teller.

This effect is often repeated throughout the poem, such as when R. P. W. sheds realistic light on Laetitia's soulful prayer: "You don't ask much. Yet you ask everything, / And maybe just the one thing God can't give" (68); or when he interrupts Isham in an effort to keep his story on track: "To be more systematic, first things first, / And let whatever the deuce this last thing is / Go till the last. Suppose I summarize. / Correct me when you wish" (117). The presence of this life-like voice that captures both immediacy and spontaneity would continue to increase in the later work of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell alike.

In addition to commenting on Warren's form and characters, both Jarrell and Lowell praise *Brother to Dragons* for the essential element most highly coveted by these authors in their post-WW II poems: the ability to bring *life* into poetry. Lowell, continuing with his partially critical voice, notes: "though tactless and voluminous, [*Brother to Dragons*] is also alive." As a result, Lowell concedes that despite the flaws he identifies in the review, "Warren has written his best book" ("Warren's *Dragons*" 68). Jarrell echoes Lowell's praise: "There is a wonderful amount of life in it," and elaborates by noting, "the poem is a net, wide enough, high enough, deep enough, to have caught most of the world inside it" ("Underside" 177). Many critics name Warren's *Promises: Poems 1954-1956* (1957) as the "turning point" in his career,<sup>43</sup> but *Brother to Dragons*—with its elements of *life*, looser forms, experimental techniques, narrative

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<sup>43</sup> R. W. B. Lewis, James A. Grimshaw, Jr., and Hilton Kramer, to name a few.

retrospection, conversational tone, spontaneous voices, and realistic details—debuts many of the successful characteristics that earned *Promises* a Pulitzer Prize.

Also like *Brother to Dragons*, *Promises* increasingly draws from personal material and American history to simulate an act of self-reflection that includes readers. Victor Strandberg confirms: “Warren devotes this book of lyrics to a scrutiny of his experience, his own and his generation’s, in order to derive a vision of the total meaning of experience, encompassing its past, present, and future” (174). For example, “Court-martial” collapses the past with the present to explore “life’s long irony” in a narrative about a grandson who tries “somehow, to untie / The knot of History” (l.41-42) of his grandfather’s war stories:

In the dusk by his chair  
 I undertook to repair  
 The mistakes of his old war.  
 Hunched on that toy terrain,  
 Campaign by campaign,  
 I sought, somehow, to untie  
 The knot of History,  
 For in our shade I knew  
 That only the Truth is true,  
 That life is only the act  
 To transfigure all fact,  
 And life is only a story  
 And death is only the glory  
 Of the telling of the story,  
 And the *done* and the *to-be-done*  
 In that timelessness were one,  
 Beyond the poor *being done*.

The afternoon stood still.  
 Sun dazzled the far hill. (l.36-54)

As in *Brother to Dragons*, the narrator here is contemplating the “real version” of historical facts; for Warren, to know the past is to know the self.

The end of this poem echoes Jarrell's "Transient Barracks" with the line "The world is real. It is there" (l.133), thereby representing the narrators' mutual searches for what is *real* in this world. Whether recalling boyhood in "Gold Glade"; relating more recent personal experience in the sequence "To a Little Girl, One Year Old, in a Ruined Fortress"; addressing the reader with a conversational "you" in "Country Burying," "Summer Storm," and "When the Century Dragged"; remaining observantly detached in "School Lesson Based on Word of Tragic Death of Entire Gillum Family," "Founding Fathers, Nineteenth-Century Style, Southeast U. S. A.," and "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme"; or speaking to his son directly in the "Lullaby" poems, Warren's poetic voice records the narrator's attempt to comprehend the world—events, places, and people—in its entirety.

Lowell's *Life Studies* is marked by a similar mission, to comprehend and, in turn, reflect the world around him with concrete details that transcend to a more universal level. Due to the increased autobiographical content, the looser forms, and the mixture of poetry and prose in this book, critics often argue that *Life Studies* marks an entirely new phase for Lowell. The truth is, however, it is a continuation of the path Lowell had been following with Jarrell and Warren since the early 1940s. Mariani summarizes, "What *was* common to all [Lowell's] poems—he hoped—was the sense of lived experience. After all, nothing else ... made a poem" (282).

Like Jarrell in *The Seven-League Crutches* and Warren in *Brother to Dragons* and *Promises*, Lowell was aiming, above all, to achieve authenticity within *Life Studies*. Procopiow describes how Lowell's "Warren's *Brother to Dragons*" was "the prolegomena for the poetic of *Life Studies* ... in the guise of a book review." Warren's experimental narrative form certainly

did inspire Lowell to contemplate the difficulties he had with his own writing: “how to mix dialogue with narrative voice; how to sustain a long poem without growing ‘puffy, paralyzed, and pretentious’; how to achieve the historical sense with documentary detail” (Procopiw 304). The flaws (and the successes) that Lowell identified in Warren’s work served as teaching points for Lowell as he shaped and altered his poetic style for the second half of the century.

As is to be expected, Jarrell also had a hand in directing Lowell’s poetic shift at this point. On October 11, 1957, Lowell wrote to Jarrell:

I’ve been writing poems lately again, my first in a good four years. And I want to try them out on you! [...] I’ve been loosening up the meter, as you’ll see, and horsing out all the old theology and symbolism. (*Letters of Lowell* 295)

Jarrell must have eagerly critiqued and responded to Lowell’s poem because less than two weeks later, Lowell wrote that it was:

terribly refreshing to know that you and Mary liked my *Skunks* [“Skunk Hour”]. I’ve been working like a skunk, doggedly and happily since mid-August and have seven or eight poems finished (?) some quite long and all very direct and personal. They are mostly written in a sort of free verse.... I’ll get them typed for you next week and mail them off. I’ll be very sad if you don’t like them. I don’t see how I could ever have finished *Lord Weary* without your quips and praise. (*Letters of Lowell* 297-298)

Similar to their correspondence from over a decade ago, this letter reveals Lowell’s unyielding respect for Jarrell’s critical opinion and also proves that they continued to discuss their poetic changes in matters from style to content.

Lowell proudly reported to Elizabeth Bishop that in addition to the approval of “Skunk Hour,” Jarrell provided a general note of praise on his recent work: “The motion has changed and is much clearer and easier” (*Letters of Lowell* 299). The “motion” to which Jarrell refers is

created by Lowell's irregular meter and line lengths; his newer poetry moves along the rhythms of speech, as is exemplified within the sestets of "Skunk Hour":

only skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church.

I stand on top  
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—  
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.  
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup  
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,  
and will not scare. (l.37-48)

In place of the heavily metered stresses and unrelenting sustained rhythms, here Lowell loosens the firm grip on his lines in order to capture the immediacy of experience.

As previously acknowledged, this study lends itself to a somewhat narrow view of the cause behind the poetic changes of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell. However, as demonstrated, the additional outside influences upon these poets, such as Williams and Frost, were often in common. Reminiscent of their shared appreciation of Frost's life-like poetry, Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell collectively hailed the unique talent of W. D. Snodgrass, a widely acclaimed poet known for his highly personal or "confessional" subject matter. In 1957, while Jarrell provided feedback on Lowell's new poems, Lowell opened Jarrell's eyes to an upcoming trend in poetry. Lowell not only recommends for Jarrell to read Snodgrass, he firmly instructs his friend to specifically purchase "a copy of the Hall, Simpson *The New Poets of England and America* (Meridian), and read the Snodgrass selections." He explains: "I now think he is incomparably

the best poet we've had since you started" (*Letters of Lowell* 297). Coming full circle, Warren wrote to Lowell: "you mentioned in a letter that Snodgrass is a friend of yours. Did I ever tell you how damned good I thought his book [*Heart's Needle*]?" (*Selected Letters of Warren* 289). Though neither Warren nor Jarrell would depict subject matter quite as personal as Lowell's, they would all increasingly draw from autobiographical material for their work until the end of their poetic careers.

The deep shared appreciation for Snodgrass and his personal poetry likely contributed to this tendency, at least by providing encouragement for Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell to continue a practice they had discovered in the 1940s. Lowell would eventually become a poster boy for personal poems such as "Memories of West Street and Lepke," which depicts the time Lowell spent at the West Street Jail in New York City for being a conscientious objector of the war:

Given a year,  
I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail, a short  
enclosure like my school soccer court,  
and saw the Hudson River once a day  
through sooty clothesline entanglements  
and bleaching khaki tenements.

...

"Are you a C.O.?" I asked a fellow jailbird.  
"No," he answered, "I'm a J.W."  
He taught me the "hospital tuck,"  
and pointed out the T-shirted back  
of *Murder Incorporated's* Czar Lepke,  
there piling towels on a rack,  
or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full  
of things forbidden the common man:

...

Flabby, bald, lobotomized,  
he drifted in a sheepish calm,

where no agonizing reappraisal  
 jarred his concentration on the electric chair—  
 hanging like an oasis in his air  
 of lost connections. . . . (l. 20-25, 38-45, 48-53)

More and more, such personal details—ranging from jail experience to personal family secrets—would become the subjects of his later work. Far from merely purging personal emotions, however, Lowell's work always maintains that essential layer of artistry.

In addition to drawing on personal experience in the late 1950s and 1960s, Lowell's increasing desire to address U.S. history and challenge his modern audience is demonstrated in the form and content of his later work, much like Jarrell and Warren. Lowell's "For the Union Dead," a poem which Lowell was commissioned to write specifically for the 1960 Boston Arts Festival, is included at the end of *Life Studies* and later printed as the title poem of *For the Union Dead* (1964). A sharp contrast to Lowell's earlier stringent adherence to formal meter and rhyme, "For the Union Dead" is meant to be read aloud, intended to be an accessible colloquy with his audience. His line lengths seem determined by rhythms of speech and breath; one can *hear* how Lowell would have delivered this poem, where he would have paused, where his pace would have quickened (Thurston 98). Though structured into quatrains, the blend of short and long lines is tied together by alliteration and assonance rather than strict meter and rhyme.

Similar to Warren's literary technique, Lowell uses the historical backdrop of Colonel Shaw, leader of the first black battalion of the Civil War, in order to address the ills of modern American society. Lowell meditates on the St. Gaudens' monument of Colonel Shaw:

Shaw's father wanted no monument  
 except the ditch,  
 where his son's body was thrown



and lost with his “niggers.” (l. 49-52)

Lowell invokes Christian symbols and imagery to resonate with his American audience by drawing Colonel Shaw as a Christ figure. As Shaw’s “body was thrown / and lost with his ‘niggers’” Christ’s body was also thrown in an unmarked tomb after dying nearby society’s “undesirables,” each hero scorned by his respective community. Lowell’s analogy concludes that Boston’s people no longer appreciate the sacrifice of Colonel Shaw nor of Christ. He continues:

The ditch is nearer.  
There are no statues for the last war here;  
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph  
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the “Rock of Ages”  
that survived the blast. (l. 53-58)

Both Boston and the doomed cities in the book of Revelation traded their God for wealth and progress, and this “ditch” of oblivion is “nearer” for those who no longer honor the soldiers but instead have found a material substitute for their praise. The inter-linear assonance of “Boylston” and “boiling” implies that Boylston Street is every bit as threatened by the bomb as Hiroshima was. Furthermore, in describing the Mosler Safe advertisement, Lowell invokes the biblical language, “Rock of Ages,” ironically giving money the sanctity of a religious icon. The apocalypse seems imminent for a society that would use the deaths of eighty-thousand people for the advancement of commercialism.

Though less apocalyptic in tone, Jarrell similarly bemoans the current state of modern America in *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*, a book Lowell praised as [its] author’s *Culture and*

*Anarchy*,” with “essays that speak with prophetic distress about our culture” (Mariani 305).

Creating a similar image to Lowell’s Mosler safe, Jarrell argues:

The act of buying something is at the root of our world; if anyone wishes to paint the genesis of things in our society, he will paint a picture of God holding out to Adam a check-book or credit card or Charge-A-Plate. (*Sad Heart* 66)

Once again in tune with Lowell and Jarrell, Warren also points to the failure of society for prioritizing commercialism over a sense of identity: “Americans, by and large, have had little use for the past except for purposes of interior decorating, personal vanity, or pietistic and self-congratulatory celebrations” (“Use of the Past” 31). This shared concern for America, as well as the changes in both content and style depicted here at mid-century, would continue to characterize the work of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell through the rest of their careers. The next three chapters will illuminate these changes in each author’s respective career.

## CHAPTER THREE: ROBERT PENN WARREN<sup>44</sup>

*Chapter three emphasizes Warren's work of the fifties and sixties, a period of great change and shifting consciousness for America and for the world. After returning to Brother to Dragons and Promises, this chapter examines You, Emperors, and Others (1960) through Altitudes and Extensions (1984), in relation to Warren's prose works, The Legacy of the Civil War (1961), Who Speaks for the Negro (1965), and Democracy and Poetry (1975). Warren's poems from this period are characterized by open, flexible forms that are better suited for the highly charged content of then-current political issues and events in American history. The chapter discusses how similar, albeit not identical, changes transpire in the work of Jarrell and Lowell. Not only do their critical works and correspondence demonstrate an awareness of these changes, they also exhibit the implicit and explicit ways the three poets encouraged changes in one another's verse.*

### ***An Overview***

The 1960s marked a period of great change and shifting consciousness for America and for the world. The Cold War raged on, heightened by the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the highly controversial war in Vietnam. As millions of children from the post-WW II baby boom entered young adulthood, the decade became characterized by

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<sup>44</sup> Some sections of this chapter are drawn from my article, " 'Reckoning' with America's Past: Robert Penn Warren's Later Poetry." *rWp: An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies*. Ed. Mark D. Miller. Bowling Green, KY: Western Kentucky University Press, 2012. 63-82.

revolutionary thought and opposition to conservatism. The Civil Rights Movement, supported by President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and President Lyndon B. Johnson, made great strides for African Americans and women via the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and contentious debate and protest—particularly on college campuses—became commonplace for a generation that craved change. A far cry from what Lowell described in “Memories of West Street and Lepke” as the “tranquilized Fifties,” Americans identified this decade as the Swinging Sixties, a time that inspired artists—Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell among them—in all genres to respond to the incendiary world events.

In the literary world, New Criticism continued to take precedence in academia through the sixties. As time passes, the tenets of New Criticism are sometimes inaccurately conflated into a unified vision, though its contributors were never actually cohesive enough to form a “school.” In fact, the figures of New Criticism were as divergent in their approaches to literary study as the original Fugitives were on matters of aesthetics. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* mistakenly homogenizes New Critics as those who “called for an end to a concern by critics and teachers of English with matters outside the work itself—the life of the author, the history of his times, or the social and economic implications of the literary work” (*Handbook* 81). Though this theory holds true for W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, who argue in “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) for “the true and objective way of criticism” over “the way of biographical or genetic inquiry,” most of the best known New Critics consistently brought history, biography, and other “external indexes to the author’s *intention*” into their work (“Fallacy” 756-757). For example, Allen Tate’s *The Forlorn Demon: Didactic and Critical*

*Essays* (1953) and *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* (1955) contain cultural commentary on authors ranging from Longinus and Dante to Dostoevsky and Poe. Moreover, Cleanth Brooks, often considered the archetypal New Critic, penned *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963), in which he focuses on the role of Faulkner's cultural surroundings—personal views on ethics and religion included—in the creation of his fictional world; and *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (1978), a biography-driven exploration of Faulkner's development as a writer.

Warren and his circle frequently emphasize cultural contexts in their work, contrary to the stereotype that New Critics consider literature as if written in a cultural vacuum. Warren, much more in line with his close colleagues Tate and Brooks than Wimsatt and Beardsley, included cultural commentary in practically all of his criticism, from “Ernest Hemingway” (1947) to “John Greenleaf Whittier: Poetry as Experience” (1971) and “Hawthorne Revisited: Some Remarks on Hell-Firedness” (1973). This element of cultural awareness cries out for a richer critical evaluation of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell, and it is mistaken to ignore the impact of their surroundings on their writing and public personas.

Especially in light of their political activity, it is therefore enriching to include the roles of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell in politics as part of this study's cultural materials. Warren explains in a letter to Brainard “Lon” Cheney: “I ... recognize a distinction between the arts and politics, but it is not an air-tight distinction (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. Four* 450). Lowell, who had been jailed as a Conscientious Objector during WW II, made a similar comment in a public letter to President Johnson while declining his invitation to the White House Festival of

Arts by claiming: “every serious artist knows that he cannot enjoy public celebration without making subtle public commitments” (“To President” 371). Thrust into the limelight due to notable success in American letters, Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell served as public spokesmen in the 1960s and beyond, and national concerns took shape in their poetry, fiction, and nonfiction alike.

William Bedford Clark acknowledges that during this time, Warren “not only followed the headlines assiduously but also was keenly attuned to the drama and dynamics of history itself”; therefore Clark advises scholars to “situate [Warren’s] correspondence from this period against the backdrop of his age, a time of intense collective anxiety born of mounting global conflict” (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. Four* 3). This statement should be expanded to include all of Warren’s written works and, furthermore, the same consideration should be made for Lowell and Jarrell. Ernest J. Smith articulates a similar observation of Lowell,<sup>45</sup> stating that during the 1950s and 1960s he was always “in the center of the stream of history, hyperconscious of the simultaneous flow of contemporary society and culture, and of history itself” (“Approaching” 287). Though not as much in the public eye as Warren and Lowell, Jarrell did not avoid addressing cultural issues. From the Marxism inherent in his poetry of the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>46</sup> to the social criticism of “mass culture” he expressed in poetry and prose during the 1950s until his death in 1965, Jarrell was highly opinionated on matters of the times (S. Burt 26, 76-84). Like Warren and Lowell, he also mourned the nation’s neglect for history as

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<sup>45</sup> Smith’s comments refer to both Lowell and John Berryman.

<sup>46</sup> More information about Jarrell’s Marxist leanings in Travisano 135-36, Mariani 98-99, and Bryant 7.

he complained: “We feel that the present is better and more interesting, more real, than the past, and that the future will be better and more interesting, more real, than the present” (“Sad Heart” 72).

All three men communicated regularly about cultural issues and they proved to be like-minded in their response. For example, Jarrell wrote to Lowell in November 1960, “Did you see a piece of mine ... named ‘A Sad Heart at the Supermarket’? It rather goes with your ... poem [‘For the Union Dead’]” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 446). Jarrell is referring to the similar way both his prose piece and Lowell’s poem bemoan society’s destructive tendency to praise and prioritize commercialism over human life, religion, and all else. Completing the literary circle, Warren wrote to Jarrell: “I have lately finished your *Sad Heart*, with the greatest pleasure. I wrote a note to Pat Knopf about it, trying to define my admiration.... It’s a delightful, not to say, pointed, book” (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. Four* 331).

Furthermore, in an interview of Lowell by Warren and Cleanth Brooks, Lowell reads “For the Union Dead” aloud and Warren responds: “Very fine. That’s one of your best, I expect. One of your very best” (“Robert Lowell” 47).<sup>47</sup> This shared concern for America determined much of the content of their later works and influenced their stylistic choices. The aesthetic changes made at mid-century—the loosening of forms; preference for the concrete over the abstract; the attempt to infuse *life* into poetry by creating authentic characters, rhythms of speech, and conversational diction; and partiality for narrative over lyric poems—were maintained and

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<sup>47</sup> These comments of praise do not offer direct evidence that Warren approved Lowell’s use of poetry as a vehicle for political thought, but considering Warren’s quoted statement above about the lack of an “air-tight distinction” between the arts and politics, and taking into account Warren’s own integration of politics in his poetry, one may gather that Warren’s approval of the poem may have had further reaching implications.

heightened by a greater attempt to communicate directly with the reader. Especially for Warren, the distressing events of the second half of the twentieth-century called for a colloquy with his audience that would direct their attention to self-reflection.

### ***Warren's Turning Point***

From the very beginning of Warren's life as a scholar, history played a large role in his academic endeavors. His Fugitive roots taught him to investigate the implications of a shared "Southern heritage" and a collective national identity (Moore, Jr. 12), as was demonstrated when Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and their colleagues published *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) in response to Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."<sup>48</sup> Although Warren's role in this publication reflects his early concern for American society, his reluctance and hesitancy about the project demonstrates a lukewarm commitment to the issues it highlighted.

Paul K. Conkin argues that Warren "never committed himself unreservedly to the Southern cause" (59). This assertion is supported by Warren's later admission to not taking the compilation of essays as seriously as his colleagues. Warren rejected Tate's originally suggested book title *Tracts Against Communism* for its "partisan, politically-loaded implications," and even expressed displeasure for *I'll Take My Stand*, calling it "the god-damnedest thing I ever heard of"

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<sup>48</sup> *I'll Take My Stand* contains an introduction entitled "A Statement of Principles" followed by twelve essays that address multiple aspects of Southern economics and culture. Underlying each essay is an argument for the superiority of an agricultural economy, which shaped the Southern way of life, over the industry-based society that characterized the rest of the country. Andrew Hook notes, the authors insisted that the South "preserved a way of life in which there was order and stability, the correct adjustment between men and nature, between the individual and his community, which was fast disappearing from the rest of American society" (Hook 433).



and begging Tate: “for the love of God block it if you can” (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. One* 185). Wise beyond his twenty-five years, Warren appeared to foresee the negative consequences of being involved with this controversial publication. Warren was especially wary of his essay’s topic, the Negro’s place in the economics and society of the South. He voiced his concern in a letter to Tate: “The negro is a delicate subject and one which could be most easily attacked; consequently, for my own good and the good of others, I can’t afford to pull a boner in dealing with it” (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. One* 185). Despite feeling uncomfortable about the piece (Blotner 106), Warren completed “The Briar Patch,” in which he argues that while segregation should be upheld, Black Americans should receive the same treatment and rights as their white counterparts. His intuition was proven correct; the essay would haunt him throughout his career.

After the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand*, the early-established Fugitive practice of re-examining and re-evaluating history, regional and otherwise, continued to take precedence in Warren’s work. Through the thirties and forties his national concerns were expressed mostly in poetry and fiction, but starting in the 1950s and continuing increasingly, Warren was propelled into almost three decades of active involvement and commentary on national affairs—not only in his poetry and fiction, but also in articles, lectures, and books of prose. Hugh Ruppersburg points to Warren’s “increasing vigor” and “ever-strengthening interest in the individual’s place in modern America” at mid-century (2). For example, in 1956, the same year Warren attended a three-day Fugitives’ reunion at Vanderbilt, Warren addressed the issue of race in American life in *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*. His following prose works similarly explore issues of American identity, including *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961), *Who Speaks for the*

*Negro?* (1965), and *Democracy and Poetry* (1975). During this time, the primary message of Warren's work was for Americans to understand the historical weight of contemporary issues and to respond accordingly with a moral awareness and a sense of responsibility to improve the situation at hand. Though Jarrell's assessment of society was slightly more cynical and Lowell's more pessimistic, all three authors increasingly relied on such historical backdrops for depicting narrators in the midst of metaphysical ruminations on their place in the world.

As discussed in chapter two, *Promises* is often considered the "turning point" in Warren's poetic career (Grimshaw 126, Kramer 11). Most often this distinction refers to the stylistic changes in his work, but Warren's content shifted too. As Joseph Blotner points out, in *Promises*:

[Warren] had given additional evidence of his technical mastery of form at the same time that he was broadening his subject matter. He was using the direct conversational mode where it helped him to ask the fundamental ontological questions that obsessed him. (315)

The looser, less conventional style that Warren discovered and honed alongside Jarrell and Lowell in the late 1940s and early 1950s provided a suitable platform to address issues concerning the modern world. The sequence "Promises" contains poems dedicated to his son, Gabriel, but Warren's "you" takes on universal significance. "XI. Infant Boy at Midcentury, 1. When the Century Dragged," contains these prophetic lines:

You enter an age when the neurotic clock-tick  
Of midnight competes with the heart's pulsed assurance of power.  
You have entered our world at scarcely its finest hour,  
And smile now life's gold Apollonian smile at a sick dialectic. (lines 5-8)

Though this quatrain addresses real fears for the timing of his son's birth, it also resonates for a generation of parents and, through the description of the son's smile as "Apollonian"—a reference to the ancient god of prophecy, intellectual pursuits, and the protection of the young—the passage becomes an amplified commentary on the history of the world.

Victor Strandberg observes: "Warren devotes [*Promises*] to a scrutiny of experience, his own and his generation's, in order to derive a vision of the total meaning of experience, encompassing its past, present, and future, its heritage and its promises" (*Colder Fire* 174). Essentially, Warren achieves in *Promises* what he—along with Jarrell and Lowell—admired so deeply in Robert Frost: he creates what they considered universal portrayals of life that are rooted in real human experience. The theory that Warren derives from Frost's "After Apple-Picking" doubles as a description for Warren's pursuit in this significant book, "art must stem from the literal world, from the common body of experience, and must be a magnified 'dream' of that experience as it has achieved meaning" ("Themes of Frost" 298).

James H. Justus points out how, similar to the turning point works of Jarrell and Lowell,<sup>49</sup> *Promises* includes an increase in autobiographical narrative: "Despite the foreign setting of *Promises*, the volume contains more poems about the poet's Kentucky childhood and about America generally than are found in previous volumes" (72). The experimental narrative style and reliance on local content that was first exhibited in "The Ballad of Billie Potts" increasingly becomes the norm for Warren's later poetry. For example, "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme" brings together elements of Warren's boyhood memories with ancient folklore and current

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<sup>49</sup> *The Seven-League Crutches* (1951) and *Life Studies* (1959), respectively.

politics in a narrative poem that recounts the legendary tale of a Kentucky county notorious for unexplained deaths and disappearances. Like Frost, and the contemporary work of Jarrell and Lowell, Warren invokes colloquial speech to depict images from real-life experience in order to frame the poem:

I was only a boy when Jack Simms reported the first depredation,  
What something had done to his hog pen. They called him a God-damn liar.  
Then said it must be a bear, after some had viewed the location,  
With fence rails, like matchwood, splintered, and earth a bloody mire. (l. 5-8)

Also like Frost, Warren's deceptively simple lines are loaded with multiple layers of meaning. Hilton Kramer describes Warren's language in *Promises* as "at once grave and earthly, an instrument of metaphysical discourse that lives on easy, intimate terms with the folklore of the past. This is a poetry ... filled with dramatic incident, vivid landscapes, and philosophical reflection" (13). This comment serves as a particularly fitting description for "Dragon Country," a poem that contains the dramatic incident of unsolved deaths—"the wagon turned on its side" and "Jebb Johnson's boot, with the leg, what was left, inside" (l. 14, 35)—and the vivid landscape of political issues: "We were promised troops, the Guard, but the Governor's skin got thin / When up in New York the papers called him Saint George of Kentucky" (l. 25-26), along with the realistic backdrop of the struggling Southern region:

Yes, other sections have problems somewhat different from ours.  
Their crops may fail, bank rates rise, on rumor of war loans be called,  
But we feel removed from maneuvers of Russia, or other great powers,  
And from much ordinary hope are now disenthralled. (l. 41-44)

Finally, the poem, which serves as a creative explanation for the depopulation of the rural South, is heightened by philosophical reflection. The poem ends:

We are human, and the human heart  
 Demands language for reality that has no slightest dependence  
 On desire, or need. Now in church they pray only that evil depart.

But if the Beast were withdrawn now, life might dwindle again  
 To the ennui, the pleasure, and night sweat, known in the time before  
 Necessity of truth had trodden the land, and heart, to pain,  
 And left, in darkness, the fearful glimmer of joy, like a spoor. (l. 46-52)

This narrative reflection sheds light on the human need for mystery and consequence. The poem concludes that “the Beast,” which has been identified as the source of the county’s “evil” and suffering, actually enlivens and animates the otherwise sleepy town. The human heart requires the threat of evil to create the “fearful glimmer of joy,” which—far from the *joy* of the lifeless “pleasure” described in the absence of the Beast—is a *joy* that ignites the human heart’s desperate search for “truth.”

### ***Growing Pains***

In a sense, Warren’s next book, *You, Emperors, and Others: Poems, 1957-1960* (1960), is Warren’s sophomore slump after his stylistic transformation at mid-century. Though it may not stand as his finest book overall, the successful poems within foreshadow the superior work of Warren’s late period. There is also textual evidence that Warren was looking to the examples of Jarrell and Lowell for guidance while searching for a “real center.” Like *Promises, You, Emperors, and Others* is characterized by poems that depict the heart’s search for Truth and the scrutiny of personal experience. Warren also draws on autobiographical material—memories from childhood and from more recent European adventures—while presenting narrators in

various states of yearning; yearning for acceptance, for answers, or just for more of the right questions.

In terms of literary technique, Warren continues to experiment with poetic structure, sometimes opting for long lines and speech-like rhythms as in “Switzerland” and “A Real Question Calling for Solution,” and sometimes employing short, tight lines and regular rhyme schemes as in “The Self That Stares” and “Nocturne: Traveling Salesman in Hotel Bedroom.” Warren adds further complexity to the conventions of rhyme in the five-quatrain ballad “I Can’t Even Remember the Name” by limiting end rhymes to “fell,” “yell,” “well,” “tell,” and “hell” and the repetition of “boxcars.” Truly a demonstration of his stylistic gamut, Warren’s diction also ranges (Blotner 337) from the classical, high-minded lines of “Tiberius on Capri”:

*All is nothing, nothing all:*  
 To tired Tiberius soft sang the sea thus,  
 Under his cliff-palace wall.  
 The sea, in soft approach and repulse,  
 Sings thus, and Tiberius,  
 Sea-sad, stares past the dusking sea-pulse  
 Yonder, where come,  
 One now by one, the lights far off, of Surrentum.  
 He stares in the blue dusk-fall,  
 For all is nothing, nothing all. (l. 1-10)

to the conversational, colloquial, and sometimes vulgar language in “Bear Track

Plantation: Shortly after Shiloh”:

‘Taint fair, a man rides and knows he won’t live forever,  
 And a man needs something to take with him when he dies.  
 Ain’t much worth taking, but what happens under the cover  
 Or at the steel-point—yeah, that look in their eyes. (l. 5-8)

Warren even ventures into the nursery rhyme genre in the second-to-last poetic sequence; for example, “Knockety-Knockety-Knock,” is an adult version of “Hickory-Dickory-Dock.”

Though the rhythm and rhyme scheme remain playful and familiar, the lyrics tell of a drunken narrator who mourns the present and longs for the simpler days of childhood:

Hickory-dickory-dock—  
 The mouse ran up the clock,  
 And the clock struck one  
 And my poor head spun,  
 Hickory-dickory-dock,  
 And Ma’s deader than a mackerel,  
 And pa pickled as a pickerel,  
 And oh! knockety-knockety-knock,  
 God’s red eyes glare  
 From sockets of dark air—  
 Knockety-knockety-knock. (l. 34-44)

Warren closes *You, Emperors, and Others* with an unusual sequence entitled “Short Thoughts for Long Nights,” which contains abbreviated, surreal poems such as the humorous “Colloquy With Cockroach”:

I know I smell. But everyone does, somewhat.  
 I smell this way only because I crawl down the drain.  
 I’ve no slightest idea how you got the smell you’ve got.  
 No, I haven’t time now—it might take you too long to explain. (l. 1-4)

More than anything, this book of poetry serves as a demonstration of Warren’s far-ranging poetic interests and talents, though it is not as successful as *Promises* in terms of cohesion. Even Warren admits, “I was on the wrong track; ... [the book] has no real center. I was groping for a center” (qtd. in Blotner 338). It seems that part of Warren’s “groping” resulted in echoes of Lowell and Jarrell.

After the publication of *Life Studies* (1959), Warren wrote Lowell a letter expressing sincere appreciation for and deep understanding of what he deemed as Lowell's intentions for the book:

For some time I have been meaning to write and say how much I rejoice in the reception your book is having. It is a strong, original, and memorable book.... I see what you are up to—or think I do—... many [of the poems] bring wonderful dramatic flashes, and sudden glints of language. It is in no way a disparagement—quite the contrary—to say that I feel this is a transitional book. To say so is to say that you are vitally in motion, and that the achievements are, as the best achievements should be, marks along the way. Needless to say, we are happy to have the book come to us from your hand.

As indicated in chapters one and two, from the mid-1940s onward Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell encouraged one other to move away from the Fugitive formalism of their collective past towards new poetry that would transcend high modernism. In Warren's letter, he congratulates Lowell on achieving their shared goal.

Lowell was still very much on Warren's mind the year *You, Emperors, and Others* was published. On May 24, 1960, Warren wrote to Lowell to praise his "rather well read, and extremely well received" poems which were presented at the National Arts Club. Warren also explained his current project, *Conversations on the Craft of Poetry*, for which he and Cleanth Brooks were collecting taped "interviews and long statements by several poets on technical questions, meter, etc. to be used in colleges." Warren was most charming in his effort to cajole Lowell's participation: "We'd like you very, very much.... Can you be persuaded? We devoutly hope so."<sup>50</sup> At the end of the note, Warren expresses his unyielding respect for Lowell's opinion of his work: "I'll be letting one [poem] totter on to your indulgent eye when

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<sup>50</sup> Lowell did in fact agree to participate in the project.



my copies are available. At least, I hope that eye will be indulgent” (*Selected Letters of RPW*, Vol. Four 256-257, 287-288).

Far from an empty gesture of politeness, an examination of Warren’s poems from this time period demonstrates that he admired and sometimes emulated his colleague, Lowell. Immediately after *Life Studies* was published, Warren wrote Lowell: “the pieces I like best” include “Beyond the Alps,” “The Banker’s Daughter,” “Ford Madox Ford,” “For Santayana,” “Sailing Home,” and “Memories of West Street” (*Selected Letters of RPW*, Vol. Four 256). Warren’s inclusion of Lowell’s personal poem “Memories of West Street and Lepke” verifies that both authors understood the potential for the role of autobiographical material within art<sup>51</sup> unlike Allen Tate, who disapprovingly assumed that “Lowell had written these poems while mad or on the verge of madness” (qtd. in Doreski 124). More than merely approving of where Lowell’s poetry was headed, Warren proves that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery when he echoes Lowell’s “Sailing Home from Rapallo” in his “Mortmain, 1. After Night Flight.” Though it is a coincidence that Lowell’s mother died in 1954, just one year prior to the death of Warren’s father, the similar presentation of this autobiographical material does not seem accidental.

“Mortmain” is arguably the most personal poem in *You, Emperors, and Others*, so it is understandable why Warren would follow Lowell’s impressive lead on how to handle such content; he did, after all, list “Sailing Home” as one of his favorite works in *Life Studies*. Both

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<sup>51</sup> Warren also wrote to Lowell, “Speaking of poetry, you mentioned in a letter that Snodgrass is a friend of yours. Did I ever tell you how damned good I thought his book [*Heart’s Needle*]? [...] In confidence, I’ll recall that he was my #1, with the winner [Donald Justice] my #2” (*Selected Letters of RPW*, Vol. Four 289). Clearly, Warren had an appreciation for the more personal poetry that was gaining popularity at the time.

poems begin with narrators recounting the moment they reach the deathbeds of their parents. In Lowell's poem, the narrator arrives too late, his mother already dead:

Your nurse could only speak Italian,  
but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week,  
and tears ran down my cheeks. . . . (l. 1-3)

In Warren's poem, the narrator's father is unconscious:

In Time's concatenation and  
Carnal conventicle, I,  
Arriving, being flung through dark and  
The abstract flight-grid of sky,  
Saw rising from the sweated sheet and  
Ruck of bedclothes ritualistically  
Reordered by the paid hand  
Of mercy—saw rising the hand— (l. 1-8)

Both first-person narrators immediately refer to the hired help—Lowell's Italian nurse and Warren's "paid hand / Of mercy"—as a subtle expression of guilt for paying strangers to fulfill the role of caretaker for their parents. From there, the plots divide; Lowell focuses on the transport and burial of his mother's corpse while Warren dwells on a memory of his father that he once related: "Now unconscious, he occasionally moved. Once, as though by remarkable effort, his right arm slowly rose in the air, and the hand moved as though trying to grasp something" (qtd. in Blotner 296). Despite the divergent plot lines, similarities abound.

Most noticeably, Warren imitates Lowell's technique of invoking the elegiac tradition sparingly, while relying more heavily on innovation. In his earlier work, Lowell often clung to traditional forms as a method for controlling and containing the emotion in his poems.<sup>52</sup> Despite the free verse, irregular stanza lengths, and absence of rhyme scheme in "Sailing Home," he still

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<sup>52</sup> Demonstrated in the explication of Lowell's "Her Dead Brother" in chapter two.

manages to control the emotion structurally, through the strategic juxtapositions of images. The tears mentioned in the first stanza are the only raw emotion Lowell permits in this poem. After the initial lines, each traditional grief ridden image is juxtaposed with an image much lighter in tone, which effectively trivializes and subdues the emotional effect.

After the fourth line—“When I embarked from Italy with my Mother’s body”—the reader expects an emotional outpouring from the narrator, especially considering the first stanza; instead, Lowell provides a colorful image: “the whole shoreline of the *Golfo di Genova* / was breaking into fiery flower” (l. 4-6). The shock and grief that should accompany the image of “my Mother’s body” is tempered by the vibrant and visually pleasing landscape. Though the contrast between death and nature’s fecundity is a traditional convention of elegy, the juxtapositions are more jarring due to the immediate, personal subject matter Lowell invokes. He repeats this strategy throughout the poem:

While the passengers were tanning  
on the Mediterranean in deck-chairs,  
our family cemetery in Dunbarton  
lay under the White Mountains  
in the sub-zero weather. (l. 14-18)

Here, the order is reversed. Lowell presents the reader with an image of travelers enjoying a carefree vacation only to shock him with the cold, stark description of a cemetery.

The poem ends with two more complex juxtapositions:

In the grandiloquent lettering on Mother’s coffin,  
*Lowell* had been misspelled *LOVEL*.  
The corpse  
was wrapped like *panettone* in Italian tinfoil. (l. 35-38)

After all the pomp and circumstance Lowell describes surrounding his mother's family, "twenty or thirty Winslows and Starks. / Frost had given their names a diamond edge" (l. 34), her married name is defiled and mocked with a misspelling etched permanently on her gravestone. The calculated line break after "The corpse" creates a moment of suspense; after the highs and lows created by Lowell's juxtapositions, it is unclear how the poem will end. Lowell opts for an irreverent image cloaked heavily in irony as he compares his mother's dead body to an Italian dessert. Perhaps taking a cue from Lowell's irony, Warren's "newspaper headline-style" (Blotner 334) of "After Night Flight Son Reaches Bedside of Already Unconscious Father, Whose Right Hand Lifts in a Spasmodic Gesture, as Though Trying to Make Contact: 1955" alerts the reader to the fact that—like Lowell's—this will not be a typical elegy.

Warren opts for a more traditional form—regular octaves and a consistent abababaa rhyme scheme, only occasionally disrupted by near-rhymes—to control the emotion of an intense experience for the narrator. Far from the stilted artifice of Warren's early work, however, the enjambment and speech-like rhythms control the pacing of this poem. After the narrator spots the rising hand, he succumbs to a very human spontaneous reaction:

Christ, start again! What was it I,  
 Standing there, travel-shaken, saw  
 Rising? What could it be that I,  
 Caught sudden in gut- or conscience-gnaw,  
 Saw rising out of the past, which I  
 Saw now as twisted bedclothes? Like law,  
 The hand rose cold from History  
 To claw at a star in the black sky (l. 9-16)

In line with Jarrell's "Moving" and "Lady Bates" and Lowell's "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," Warren allows the narrative voice and content of the poem to determine

the rhythm. Instead of determining line lengths according to a standard syllable or stress count, Warren inserts line breaks strategically to heighten the dramatic effect of the poem.

An example of the real-time revision effect, this poem also captures the spontaneous process of the mind. The exclamation mark after “Christ, start again!” creates a long pause before the narrator begins asking questions in an attempt to process the experience. T. R. Hummer acknowledges the symbolic weight of this line, arguing: “what is important about this moment is the impulse to *start again*: not ex nihilo, but in as full cognizance as possible of what has come before.” Even in times of “profoundest crisis” the narrator must acknowledge the past (“Christ” 38). The following deliberate line breaks are highly effective for creating suspense and evoking speech-like rhythm: “What was it *I*, / *Standing* there, travel-shaken, *saw* / *Rising*?” (emphasis added). The break between “I” and “Standing there” highlights the narrator’s attempt to parse dream from reality as he checks his “travel-shaken,” weary brain for hallucinations. Similarly, the natural pause created between “saw / Rising?” seems precipitated by choking disbelief. It is as if the word “rising” is caught in the narrator’s throat as he struggles to define the image before him.

Even though Warren does not imitate Lowell’s free verse from “Sailing Home” he chooses to end four significant lines with “I,” drawing repeated emphasis to the poet’s persona, a technique that intensifies the intimate tone and personal nature of the poem. Also like Lowell, Warren employs strategic juxtapositions to that are more personal in nature than the standard conventions of an elegy. The intensity and grave nature of the situation builds for two and a half fervent octaves until Warren breaks the tension with three lines of colloquial language:

Lifts in last tension of tendon, but cannot  
 Make contact—*oh, oop-si-daisy*, churns  
 The sad heart, *oh, atta-boy, daddio's got*  
*One more shot in the locker, peas-porridge hot*— (l. 21-24)

Although the sudden juxtaposition to these fond memories does not trivialize the situation, as Lowell's light and ironic images had done, it creates an analogous overall effect. Expectations for a sustained, somber, elegiac poem are purposely left unfulfilled as Warren substitutes a far more human, authentic, and tender portrayal of human response.

Another similarity to Lowell's flouting of the traditional elegy, the narrator's recollections of his father are far from distinguished. Warren immortalizes his father's childish colloquialisms instead of some Great remembered quotation, and he also selects several unsavory memories to recount including "the failed exam" and "boyhood's first whore" (l. 28, 30). In a final note of similarity that is characteristic of the rest of Lowell's and Warren's poetry, both poets are compelled to historicize their dead loved ones. For Lowell:

The only "unhistoric" soul to come here  
 was Father, now buried beneath his recent  
 unweathered pink-veined slice of marble.  
 Even the Latin of his Lowell motto:  
*Occasionem cognosce*,  
 seemed too businesslike and pushing here,  
 where the burning cold illuminated  
 the hewn inscriptions of Mother's relatives: (l. 25-32)

Lowell's description of his father as "unhistoric"—a man who lacks the impressive and traceable ancestry of his wife—reveals a narrator who is considering his place among familial history, a practice which Warren championed in his poetry, fiction, and prose. This literary device is echoed in Warren's "After Night Flight":

Like law,  
 The hand rose cold from History  
 To claw at a star in the black sky, (l. 14-16)

Warren's narrator had already begun to consider his father a part of "History"; the rising hand acts to bring the past into the present for a moment of reconciliation. Hummer explains: "In his dying, the father is—predictably but nonetheless powerfully—identified with history, with guilt and debt and also with the human will" ("Christ" 38).

Just as Warren looked to Lowell's qualified example for how to write poetry on personal matters, he followed Jarrell's lead in writing about war, one of Jarrell's areas of expertise. In the case of Jarrell's "Losses" (1944) and Warren's "Harvard '61: Battle Fatigue," Warren is responding directly to Jarrell's poem, including echoes of his original words. Both poets minimize the gravity of death in the first line: Jarrell begins, "It was not dying: everybody died," which Warren paraphrases, "I didn't mind dying—it wasn't that at all." Jarrell's poem is told from the point of view of "we" young WW II soldiers who die (and kill) innocently as mechanized instruments of war. Warren's poem is part of a two-part sequence entitled "Two Studies in Idealism: Short Survey of American, and Human, History" which depicts Civil War soldiers—the first narrator Southern, the second narrator Northern.

In all three poems, each narrator finds a way to justify death: in "Losses," the innocent soldiers follow orders unquestioningly: "They said, 'Here are the maps'; we burned the cities" (l. 28). Warren's soldiers rationalize their acts through the respective moral codes instilled within them by their upbringing. For the Southerner, there are simply: "Two things a man's built for, killing and you-know-what" (l. 1), and for the Northerner: "It behooves a man to prove manhood

by dying for Right” (l. 2). By playing off these stereotypes—the innocent soldier, the ignorant Southerner, and the exhaustingly didactic Northerner—both Jarrell and Warren force readers to consider the often inflated, sometimes fabricated causes for war and death. Emphasizing this point, the narrators experience moments of doubt that momentarily cloud their idealistic logic.

Jarrell pointedly repeats a version of the first line of “Losses” in the last stanza only to call its legitimacy into question with a “but” clause:

It was not dying—no, not ever dying;  
But the night I died I dreamed that I was dead,  
And the cities said to me: “Why are you dying?  
We are satisfied, if you are; but why did I die?” (l. 29-32)

Warren also implements a “but” clause to introduce a moment of uncertainty for the Southerner in “Bear Track Plantation: Shortly after Shiloh,” though the narrator simply reverts to an unenlightened validation of his beliefs:

But now I lie worrying what look my own eyes got  
When that Blue-Belly caught me off balance. Did that look mean then  
That I’d honed for something not killing or you-know-what?  
Hell, no. I’d lie easy if Jeff had just give me that ten. (l. 17-20)

The Northerner, true to stereotypical form, never admits a flaw in his reasoning but instead condemns the world’s logic with a renewed sense of haughty disgust; perhaps the *righteous* proclamation is more of a reminder for himself than anything else: “And I was dead, / too //”

Dead, and had died for the Right, as I had a right to,  
And glad to be dead, and hold my residence  
Beyond life’s awful illogic, and the world’s stew,  
Where people who haven’t the right just die, with ghastly impertinence. (l. 24-29)

Both Jarrell and Warren reveal that when the significance of death is undervalued during wartime, blindness, whether caused by innocence or idealism (both inextricably linked), is often



to blame for the destructive consequences. Warren's title, "Two Studies in Idealism: Short Survey of American, and Human, History," confirms the larger implications of this message. The ostensibly gratuitous commas that hug the phrase "and Human" require the reader to consider "American" and "Human" separately—a reminder that the falsely justified idealism that caused blindness for both sides of the American Civil War is often repeated in Human History.<sup>53</sup>

This ideology and the resulting desire to expose the truth about history came to define the underlying principles of Warren's prose works in the 1960s. Arguably a catalyst, though not the sole cause, Warren's public commentary on national matters was reignited by his friend and colleague at Yale, the historian C. Vann Woodward (Blotner 343). Woodward challenged fellow historians in his book *The Burden of Southern History* to mark the bicentennial by remaining true to the facts, having a "special obligation of sobriety and fidelity to the record" so as not to "flatter the self-righteousness of neither side" (Woodward 87). Most likely encouraged by the fact that Woodward dedicated this book to Warren, he accepted Woodward's challenge and responded with *Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial*, published in 1961. This book, in which Warren names the Civil War as "the greatest event of our history" for "the American imagination"<sup>54</sup> contains the seeds of what would later grow into Warren's *Democracy*

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<sup>53</sup> Warren expresses this concept even more clearly in a later poem, "Bad Year, Bad War: A New Year's Card, 1969" (1969): "For conscience // Is, of innocence, the final criterion, and the fact that now we / Are troubled, and candidly admit it, simply proves // That in the past we, being then untroubled, / Were innocent. Dear God, we pray // To be restored to that purity of heart / That sanctifies the shedding of blood." (l. 20-26)

<sup>54</sup> Joseph Blotner explains Warren's reasoning in *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography*: "The war gave the South the Great Alibi and gave the North the Treasury of Virtue.... 'By the Great Alibi pellagra, hookworm, and illiteracy are all explained.' ... The Southerner 'turns defeat into victory, defects into virtues.' For the Northerner, the Treasury of Virtue is 'a consciously undertaken crusade so full of righteousness that there is enough overplus stored in Heaven' to constitute 'a plenary indulgence, for all sins past, present, and future, freely given by the hand of history'" (344).

and *Poetry* and “The Use of the Past” (*Legacy* 3). In *Legacy*, Warren claims, “History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves . . . so that we can better face the future” (*Legacy* 100). For Warren, a realistic grasp of the past facilitates the development of selfhood and identity.

After Woodward’s challenge was met, Warren continued to be vocal on issues of American events, past and present. *Legacy of the Civil War* was followed by *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), in which Warren “calls on Americans to respond appropriately to the moral demands of a historical situation” and encourages them to come to terms with the past for the good of the nation’s future (Ruppersburg 22). The quotation Warren selects to introduce his book hints at the guilt he felt for the old views expressed in “The Briar Patch”<sup>55</sup>: “I believe that the future will be merciful to us all. Revolutionist and reactionary, victim and executioner, betrayer and betrayed, they shall all be pitied together when the light breaks.”<sup>56</sup> Warren’s urge to shed light on the wrongs of the past, his own as well as society’s, inspired him to write a book that literally gives voice to “the people . . . who are making the Negro Revolution what it is—one of the dramatic events of the American story” (“Foreword” 1).

Warren’s journalistic style includes context and commentary on extensive interviews with African Americans ranging from Joe Carter, a reverend of West Feliciana Parish in Louisiana, to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. In his Foreword, Warren explains that the

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Hints of this philosophy are inherent within Warren’s poem, “Two Studies in Idealism: Short Survey of American, and Human, History.”

<sup>55</sup> He also confronted his early racist views in poems like “Old Nigger on One-Mule Car Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home from Party in the Back Country,” in which the narrator discovers common humanity with a black man he had once dismissively and mistakenly named a “fool-nigger.”

<sup>56</sup> Quotation from a character in *Under Western Eyes*, by Joseph Conrad.

purpose for writing this book was “to find out something, first hand, about the people.” It is therefore no surprise that the concept of identity is a common link throughout *Who Speaks*.

When Warren asks Dr. Clark of Southern University about the “Negro Revolution,” Clark responds: “It’s part of a world movement for freedom, for a sense of identity.” At this point, Warren pauses the transcript of the interview to interject:

I seize the word *identity*. It is a key word. You hear it over and over again. On this word will focus, around this word will coagulate, a dozen issues, shifting, shading into each other.... how can the Negro define himself? (*Who Speaks* 17)

A familiar concept for Warren scholars, *Who Speaks* is centered on the topic of defining the self and discovering identity.

The first question Warren poses to Malcolm X is about “the Negro’s sense of a lack of identity.” When Malcolm X suggests, “it is necessary to teach him that [the Afro-American] had some type of identity, culture, civilization before he was brought here,” he is foreshadowing Warren’s “The Use of the Past.” Within Warren’s reaction to Malcolm X, one may recognize those arguments formulating: “the purpose of the self-improvement [for Black Muslims] is ... to become worthy of the newly discovered self, as well as of a glorious past and a more glorious future” (*Who Speaks* 252-254). Essentially, what Warren gains from his exploration of the African American mind is a common thread that unites humanity: the need to understand the past in order to discover selfhood and pave the way for a “more glorious future.” This is a sentiment echoed by Jarrell, who observes, “The climate of our culture is changing.... The American present is very different from the American past: so different that our awareness of the extent of the changes has been repressed” (“Sad Heart” 86). For both Warren and Jarrell—and Lowell,

whose later poetry reflects a similar theory—society suffers deeply from selective blindness to the past.

Unfortunately, in the same year *Who Speaks* was published, Warren was forced to say goodbye to his like-minded colleague and friend. Jarrell had suffered from bouts of depression since 1963, leading him to a moment of acute despair in April 1965 when he cut his wrist deeply by putting his hand through a glass window (*Letters of Lowell* 463). Warren responded to this incident with a letter full of characteristic genuine praise and sincere expression of friendship:

I have been wanting to write you, simply to say that your friends—the friends in this house—are unhappy to think of your being unhappy. [...] the other night Bill Meredith stopped by with us, and among poems read aloud were some of yours, and how beautifully they came off. And I don't suppose it would hurt your feelings to know your last book [*The Lost World*], as all agreed, is splendid.  
(*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. Four* 437-438)

His mind always partly on poetry, the tie that bound their friendship, Warren included a copy of “the longish poem” he had been working on, which was most likely the “Tale of Time” sequence (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. Four* 438). In one of his last letters, Jarrell replied to Warren praising that poem, expressing gratitude and stating, “as I read it everything in it was extraordinarily real to me” (*Jarrell's Letters* 515). Despite the depression that was most likely haunting Jarrell at that very moment, he still made the effort to encourage Warren on their shared endeavor to create *real* poetry, authentic and full of life.

When Jarrell was struck and killed by an oncoming car just one month later—the question of accidental death or suicide still a mystery—both Warren and Lowell were devastated. Not only did Warren take a central role in planning a memorial gathering for Jarrell at Yale, he, along with Lowell and Peter Taylor, were the editors of *Randall Jarrell, 1914-1965*, a book of

reviews, tributes, and memoirs that honored his close friend's life. Warren continued to quote and refer to that "bright and particular spot in my own life," his "prized and special friend" (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. Four* 445) for the rest of his life.<sup>57</sup>

On October 7, 1966, Warren's *Selected Poems: New and Old 1923-1966* was published, the new poems grouped together in *Tale of Time* (Blotner 366). It is no wonder why Jarrell was struck by the "extraordinarily real" title poem, a six-part series that is drawn from Warren's experience of losing his mother. Warren moves skillfully from the irregular stanzas and free verse of "What Happened" to the regularly rhymed quatrains of "The Mad Druggist," and continues switching handily among poems while allowing content to determine form. Throughout this sequence, Warren presents a mourner's realistic journey through the stages of grief, starting with shock and denial:

You wash your face in cold water.  
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 ("What Happened," l. 21-25);

moving through pain and guilt,

Not clearly remembering them,<sup>58</sup> I have therefore lost that much  
Of her, and if I do remember,  
I remember the lineaments only beyond the ice-blur and soot-smutch

Of boyhood contempt, for I had not thought they were real.

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<sup>57</sup> For example, Warren refers to Jarrell's Walt Whitman essay in a letter to R.W.B. Lewis and Cleanth Brooks on September 12, 1968 (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. Four* 547-548), quotes Jarrell in a March 1969 interview with Richard B. Sale (133-134), and mentions Jarrell twice, with admiration, in an interview with Peter Stitt in March 1977 (235).

<sup>58</sup> "Them" refers to "the faces she saw every day" (II. "The Mad Druggist," l. 1)

(“The Mad Druggist,” l. 6-9);

experiencing the anger, the depression, and the reconstruction in which one discovers resolutions to problems caused by the loss, “But the solution: You / Must eat the dead”<sup>59</sup> (IV. “The Interim,” part 8, l.1-2). Only after Warren’s narrator figuratively imbibes his mother “completely, bone, blood, flesh, gristle” (l. 3) is he able to reach acceptance and hope in the last lines of the poem:

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

They are born one by one. (VI. “Insomnia,” 4.15-21)

Whether or not Warren consciously considered the known stages of grief during his writing process, there is no denying that this personal poem authentically archives the human experience of losing a loved one.<sup>60</sup> Representative of the book *Tale of Time*, Warren invokes both traditional and experimental aesthetic forms to craft an authentic yet artful presentation of autobiographical material in this title poem, a method that he perfected alongside Jarrell and Lowell.

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<sup>59</sup> The “solution” is for the problem of “how to live” (IV. “The Interim,” part 6, l. 2). Blotner adds that the solution implies an answer for “coming to terms with the past and living in history” (367).

<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, Warren borrows his own language from the 1943 essay “Pure and Impure Poetry” to explain “the solution” of “how to live” after death in “The Interim.” In the essay, Warren argues that in order to “conquer the monster” of poetry, “you must eat it, bones, blood, skin, pelt, and gristle. And even then the monster is not dead, for it lives in you, is assimilated into you, and you are different, and somewhat monstrous yourself, for having eaten it” (4). One may essentially replace the word “monster” with “mother” to explain how Warren’s narrator copes with his mother’s death.

Like *You, Emperors, and Others*, there are echoes of Jarrell and Lowell in *Tale of Time* aside from general stylistic similarities. Sister Bernetta Quinn's "Warren and Jarrell: The Remembered Child" highlights the link between the two authors who have "no American superior" in their "celebration of childhood" (40). For Quinn, it is Warren's "Time as Hypnosis" sequence in *Or Else—Poem/Poems 1968-1974* (1974) in which Warren "returns to Kentucky, the scene of his boyhood, to let the child he once was enact the loss of innocence involved in the 'initiation' genre to which the poem belongs" (24). While this is certainly true for "Time as Hypnosis," it is equally true for Warren's earlier poem "The Day Dr. Knox Did It," which parallels Jarrell's "predilection for children, as foci of narration and dramatic characters" (Quinn 32).<sup>61</sup>

Like Jarrell's "The Black Swan," "A Quilt Pattern," "Moving," "90 North," "A Story," the section of *The Complete Poems* called "Children and Civilians,"<sup>62</sup> and most notably "The Lost World"—which Warren had recently deemed "splendid"—Warren's "The Day Dr. Knox Did It" contains a "child as central consciousness" that loses his innocence after hearing the shot of a man committing suicide. Sister Quinn points to the autobiographical nature of "Lost World," a poem in which "Jarrell relives his escape to the Golden West" (32), just as Blotner confirms the autobiographical truth of "Dr. Knox," stating that the poem "draws upon a memory of death" in which "Warren had even heard the shot fired in the barn loft" (Blotner 367). This

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<sup>61</sup> Quinn, notably, chooses to quote Lowell, Jarrell's "intimate friend" on this topic, reporting how Lowell "writes of this fondness, 'Above all, childhood! This subject for many a careless and tarnished cliché was for him [...] a transcendent vision'" (32).

<sup>62</sup> Noted by Quinn, page 32. I add that "The State," "Protocols," and "The Truth" found in the "Children and Civilians" section make particularly effective comparisons to Warren's "The Day Dr. Knox Did It."

technique of drawing directly from the personal memories of childhood is notably similar to Lowell's strategy in *Life Studies*, particularly in much of Part Two and almost all of Part Four.<sup>63</sup>

Both "Lost World" and "Dr. Knox" are told from the point of view of an adult recalling a loss of innocence through his own child-eyes. Both poets switch from present tense to past tense and to present tense once again, shifting between variations of spontaneous experience and recollection. Both poets also insert adult figures—Jarrell's "Mama," "Pop," and "great-grandmother" and Warren's "Grandpa" and the persona of Warren's adult self—in order to guide the child narrator through his new understanding of the world. Jarrell's narrator speaks plainly, stating "It *is* miraculous / To have a great-grandmother: I feel different / From others as, between moves, we discuss / The War Between the States" ("A Street off Sunset" l. 81-84). Learning about the Civil War makes Jarrell's narrator feel *different*, more mature than his playmates, and Warren's narrator experiences a similar shift in consciousness after learning about death (specifically suicide) from his "Confederate Veteran" Grandpa:

"But what made him do it?" I said, again.  
Then wished I hadn't, for he stared at me.  
He stared at me as though I weren't there,  
or as though I were dead, or had never been born,

and I felt like dandelion fuzz blown away,  
or a word you'd once heard but never could spell,  
or only an empty hole in the air.  
From the cedar shade his eyes burned red.

Darker than shade, his mouth opened then.  
Spit was pink on his lips, I saw the tongue move  
beyond the old teeth, in the dark of his head.

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<sup>63</sup> Examples include much of Part Two, "91 Revere Street" and almost all of Part Four: "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," "Dunbarton," "Grandparents," "Commander Lowell," "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms," and "Father's Bedroom."



It moved in that dark. Then, “Son--” the tongue said.

“For some folks the world gets too much,” it said.  
In that dark, the tongue moved. “For some folks,” it said.  
 (“A Confederate Veteran Tries to Explain the Event” l. 29-42)

Though the nine-year-old child depicted in Warren’s poem may not have understood the loaded implications of his Grandpa’s words and facial expressions in that moment, the particular details recollected with such clarity by the adult narrator reveal the significance of this moment in his life, one in which he came to understand the world a little *differently*.

By the close of the 1960s, both Warren and Lowell were turning their attention even more towards history. After Lowell’s *Notebook 1967-68* (1969) was published, he wrote to Alfred Kazin that he had become

“more firmly hooked to the fact and records” and furthermore that though the historian “didn’t quite *make* history” it was equally true that most lived history was “dull, petty, hardly worth preserving, until the great historian” entered the mass of facts to shape them. (qtd. in Mariani 373)

Though Lowell, like Warren, was never interested in becoming purely a “great historian,” both poets were compelled, especially during this time period, to set an artistic hand to the task of rendering history into a form worth preserving. Blotner notes the continuity of Warren’s historical theme in *Incarnations* (1968), arguing that Warren “longs to know his place in [the world], to make sense of the continuum of history, and to know how to live in time” (378).

The title *Incarnations* tips the reader to its unique emphasis on man’s particular struggle with the mortal coil; rather than *The* Incarnation—the embodiment of God in the human form of Jesus—this book explores multiple incarnations of man, who is literally embodied in burdensome flesh. Some poems do refer characteristically to specific people/events/myths in

history. “What Day Is,” for example, alludes to the Phoenicians, Celts, Romans, Monks, Moors, and the English. Furthermore, “Myth on Mediterranean Beach: Aphrodite as Logos” presents a paradoxical depiction (or a “Botticellian parody”) of Aphrodite as an “old hunchback in bikini” with a “gee-string” to “garland the private parts” (l. 54, 12, 19). For the most part, however, the flavor of this book is uniquely sensual, visceral, and centered on the faceless individual.

It is telling that *Incarnations* includes a poem entitled “Paul Valery Stood on the Cliff and Confronted the Furious Energies of Nature” because, though Warren initially learned the techniques associated with French Symbolists from Allen Tate in the 1920s, he did not present their characteristic intermingling of the senses so skillfully until this book. Even Warren’s earliest work presented a more corporeal depiction of the world than many of his contemporaries, but *Incarnations* marks his point of mastery in creating evocative imagery such as:

The air  
Is motionless, and the fig,  
Motionless in that imperial and blunt  
Languor of glut, swells, and inward  
The fibers relax like a sigh in that  
Hot darkness, go soft, the air  
Is gold.

When you  
Split the fig, you will see  
Lifting from the coarse and purple seed, its  
Flesh like flame, purer  
Than blood. (“Where the Slow Fig’s Purple Sloth” l. 11-20);

or much of “Keep That Morphine Moving, Cap”:

And where he sits, while deep inside,  
Inside his gut, inside his gut,

The pumpkin grows and grows, and only  
 In such a posture humped, can he  
 Hold tight his gut, and half believe,  
 Like you or me, like you or me,  
 That the truth will not be true.—Oh, Warden,  
 Keep that morphine moving, for  
 All night beneath that blazing bulb,  
 Bright drop by drop, from the soaked hair, sweat  
 Drips, and each drop, on the gray cement,  
 Explodes like a star. Listen to that  
 Small sound, and let us, too, keep pulling  
 For him (l. 27-40)

Essentially, Warren worked through his final growing pains in *Incarnations* as he achieved expertise in sensual imagery and practiced pushing even harder on flexible aesthetic forms, all while maintaining a complex level of philosophical ponderings on man's place in history.

The path that Warren set out upon alongside Jarrell and Lowell in the late 1940s freed him from many of the conventions from his apprenticeship under Ransom and Tate, and encouraged him to create authentic portrayals of the world that spring to life in dramatic flashes. Though the guidance and constructive criticism of Jarrell and Lowell were invaluable for Warren's growth and maturation as a poet—especially leading up to the debut of his new style in *Brother to Dragons* and *Promises*—from this point forward Warren is chiefly responsible for honing a gripping narrative voice that is all his own. With Jarrell already dead and Lowell battling increasingly difficult manic episodes that often left him hospitalized, the once fertile and productive literary relationships naturally diminished. When pressed to discuss Lowell in a 1980 interview with David Farrell, Warren admitted:

All I can say is that I had a period when I saw a lot of him and I liked his society a lot, and we saw each other out and talked and argued a lot. I loved his poetry; it was

tremendously fine. But I think his last whole phase is just ... self-exploitation, and I think it's pretty crazy. ("Reminiscences" 299-300)

Despite the absence of influence from his once constant companions, Warren carries the techniques and strategies they discovered together into the creation of his next work, *Audubon: A Vision* (1969). This long poem fruitfully achieves the goals set by the influential trio while simultaneously marking the beginning of Warren's late great period in poetry.

### ***Warren's Late Great Period***

A letter to Lowell sent one month before *Audubon* was published shows that Warren's mind was still focused on the trio's shared post-WW II poetic goals. In reference to Lowell's recently published *Notebook, 1967-68*, Warren wrote,

The book you sent has been much appreciated, enjoyed, admired, and thumbed.... This book seems ... to flow in and out of life, to emerge from shadow and then slip back into it, to extend itself without any thing more than a heightening from life and at the same time illuminates the area it came from. All with magnificent ease.... Here the reader has the sense of poetry not made and offered him, but of witnessing poetry growing—not poems already made.... one thing I have enjoyed is the constant flash and coruscation of language and image, the sense of existence as poetry, all the range and athleticism of the mind. (*Selected Letters of RPW, Vol. Five* 77-78)

An echo of what all three authors admired in Frost and in each other's transitional poems, Warren praised Lowell's ability to capture real *life* and the spontaneous process of the poet's mind, as well as the dramatic *flashes* of imagery and the nontraditional range of his well-crafted art. These same characteristics are all woven into the enthralling narrative of Warren's *Audubon*, arguably one of the greatest American poems of the twentieth century. The poem's success has drawn more critical attention than almost all of his other works, with the exception of *All the*

*King's Men*.<sup>64</sup> Though much can be made of this highly original poem, it is most essential to demonstrate how this seminal work represents the culmination of Warren's ripening period and the inauguration of his poetic golden era—replete with the lingering influence of Jarrell and Lowell—in which all his mid-century stylistic changes achieve unity and cohesion.

In an interview with Peter Stitt, Warren revealed that though he originally conceived the germ for *Audubon* while researching *World Enough and Time* in the 1940s, he “couldn't find the frame for it, the narrative line” (244) and was forced to “set it aside” for twenty years. Considering the absence of measured meter, the lack of rhyme scheme, and the abundance of irregular stanza / line lengths in *Audubon*, it is clear why Warren was only able to return to this poem after undergoing major stylistic changes—most significantly, his loosening of forms and divergence from traditional formalism. Also reflecting the goals Warren shared with Jarrell and Lowell, Warren told Richard B. Sale that his aim was to capture an authentic portrayal of life in this poem: “It's about Audubon's life as a kind of focus for a lot of things about humans. *I hope it's the way life is*. It's about his heroic solution of his problems and the problem of being a man” (emphasis added, 119).

By centering the poem on the historical figure Jean Jacques Audubon, a naturalist and ornithologist, Warren employs a historical backdrop in order to consider the American individual's place in history—a method that characterizes much of his late poetry. Warren confirms, “The poem is about a man and his fate—all along, Audubon resisted his fate and

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<sup>64</sup> Some examples include A. L. Clements, “Sacramental Vision: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren”; Daniel Duane, “Of Herons, Hags and History: Rethinking Robert Penn Warren's *Audubon*”; Mark Jarman, “A Story of Deep Delight”; James H. Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*; Dave Smith, “Warren's Ventriloquist: J.J. Audubon”; and Victor H. Strandberg, “Robert Penn Warren and the 'New Paradigm.'”

thought it was evil—a man is supposed to support his family, and so forth. But now he accepts his fate” (Stitt 244). The harrowing tale of Audubon, who nearly faces death at the hands of a filthy country woman and her equally offensive sons, gives way to peace and acceptance for the narrator when he realizes, “he was, / In the end, himself and not what / He had known he ought to be. The blessedness!” (“The Sign Whereby He Knew,” [A], l. 3-5). This theme of coming to know one’s self and consequently accepting one’s fate is often repeated throughout Warren’s late great period.

In addition to the larger structural format and content of the poem, the secondary elements of *Audubon* equally reveal Warren’s entrance into a mature stage of mastery over even the finer points of aesthetics. For example, the sensual imagery that Warren perfected in *Incarnations* intensifies crucial moments in *Audubon*, such as when the reader is first introduced to Jean Jacques contemplating “his passion”; the narrator:

Saw,  
Eastward and over the cypress swamp, the dawn,  
Redder than meat, break;  
And the large bird,  
Long neck outthrust, wings crooked to scull air, moved  
In a slow calligraphy, crank, flat, and black against  
The color of God’s blood spilt, as though  
Pulled by a string. (I. Was Not the Lost Dauphin, [A], l. 5-12)

Or when Audubon forces himself into action after witnessing the strange beauty of the old woman who hangs with dignity “And is what she is.” The narrator is frozen in time, in contemplation, until he realizes that he must leave the scene before he will “Hear the infinitesimal stridor of the frozen rope / As wind shifts its burden, or when / The weight of the crow first comes to rest on a rigid shoulder” (II. The Dream He Never Knew the End Of, [M], l.

18-20). Just as such skillful imagery heightens these sections of *Audubon*, Warren's unique approach to integrating autobiographical material serves to bring satisfying closure to the poem and raises its significance to the universal level.

Similar to the technique used in *Brother to Dragons*, Warren inserts his own persona to narrate the last section of *Audubon*. More refined and subtle than the loquacious, didactic R.P.W. character in *Dragons*, Warren's voice serves as a reminder of the connection Audubon's character has to the rest of humanity. In lines reminiscent of both Jarrell and Lowell, Warren introduces himself as one who—like Audubon—was early fascinated with birds: “Long ago, in Kentucky, I, a boy, stood / By a dirt road, in first dark, and heard / The great geese hoot northward.” He then ends with the frequently quoted lines:

Tell me a story.

In this century, and moment, of mania,  
Tell me a story.

Make it a story of great distances, and starlight.

The name of the story will be Time,  
But you must not pronounce its name.

Tell me a story of deep delight. (VII. “Tell Me a Story,” [A], l. 1-3; [B], l. 1-7)

Warren's words etch deeply the message that in these tumultuous times of “mania” in America, a tale about a man who accepts his fate can, indeed, be “a story of deep delight.” Without the shaping forces of Jarrell and Lowell, *Audubon* would have been a very different poem in the 1940s—it is safe to say, a far inferior poem to the masterpiece at hand.

After the milestone work of *Audubon*, Warren took a short hiatus from poetry to focus on his role as influential literary critic with works such as *Homage to Theodore Dreiser* (1971) and *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1973). He also turned his attention even more critically to U.S. current events and their impact on American society, a trend also identifiable in the late years of Jarrell's and Lowell's lives. In 1974, Warren gave two lectures on Thomas Jefferson as part of the National Endowment for the Humanities Program that were later transformed into his book, *Democracy and Poetry* (1975). At this time, Richard Nixon was still in the White House denying involvement in the Watergate scandal. As America questioned its government, Warren's timely response called attention to the damaging effects of poor national leadership. The Jefferson lectures prompt the question: "How are the arts to fare, then, in an America that has moved this far from the leadership afforded by a figure like Jefferson himself?" Not immune from judgment, however, the forefathers are also criticized for their idealistic vision of democracy. This sentiment, of course, is in line with Warren's (and Jarrell's and Lowell's) increasing concern with presenting history truthfully. Paul Mariani, who explores this same concept while writing as Lowell's biographer, explains that for Warren, the "decay of the concept of self" is a result of the "unfolding of our democratic experiment over the past two centuries" ("RPW" 212-213). For Warren, part of how "the arts are to fare" relies on the artist's ability to alert Americans to these issues.

Continuing with his call-to-action for society, Warren's influential 1977 essay, "The Use of the Past," takes advantage of the bicentennial as an opportunity to comment on the self-imposed selective blindness that most Americans have for history—a complaint he shared with



Jarrell and Lowell. Warren quips: “Americans, by and large, have had little use for the past except for purposes of interior decorating, personal vanity, or pietistic and self-congratulatory celebrations.” This observation leads Warren to encourage Americans to see the bicentennial not as merely a date for prideful and shallow national sentiment, but as an occasion for reflecting on the past. He questions: “Are we ready to learn from our past that ... there is such a thing as ‘the irony of history’? For what was once our future has now become our past—and that is the deepest irony of all” (“Use of the Past” 31, 36). “The Use of the Past” is essentially the fully formed argument of the underlying assumptions in poems like “Two Studies in Idealism” or prose works such as *The Legacy of the Civil War* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Its concepts also serve as regular themes within Warren’s late poetic works.

Though a preoccupation with history is a constant thread in Warren’s poetry, prose, and nonfiction throughout his career, the structure and stylistics of his later poetry afford him the opportunity to use historical backdrops even more effectively in order to consider the individual’s place in modern America. It is telling that Warren needed a twenty year gestation period to discover the appropriate frame for *Audubon*. In a sense, once that flood gate was opened, his poetry of the 1970s and 1980s flowed freely in an expression of the meditations on history and identity—and the relationship between the two—that consumed his thoughts.

Warren believed:

[Poetry] may trigger the energy necessary to effect a change, in ourselves and in the world in which we live. Poetry might thus serve to renew the democratic impulse, even in post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America. (Clark, *American Vision* 126)

As evidence of this desired trigger effect, within *Or Else: Poem/Poems 1968-1974* (1974) through *Altitudes and Extensions: 1980-1984* (1985) readers are not merely instructed to acknowledge their past, but instead are drawn in through poetic devices to participate in Warren's vision for an aware America. In particular, his mature poetic style—with its loose forms, evocative imagery, and informal diction—allows Warren to create a conversational, open colloquy with his readers, encouraging them to “return ... to a scrutiny of our own experience of our own world” in order to discover selfhood and therefore understand how to fit into America (*Democracy and Poetry* 41).

Hummer notes that “the most completely characteristic fact about Warren's poetry from *Promises* onward is its unwillingness to rest in any achieved style. Warren's poetry *is* a dialectic of change” (“Christ” 39). Particularly for this reason, a brief overview of Warren's poetry from the 1970s and 1980s does not do justice to the richly textured and individually unique bodies of work. While Hummer is correct to assert that Warren experimented with elements of aesthetic form and content until his death, much like Lowell, there are some underlying consistencies from that fully developed, mature poetic voice in *Audubon*. By continuing to engage readers with innovative techniques, Warren presents additional narrators who face their fate by reckoning with the past.

For Warren, an understanding of the self comes from obtaining knowledge of all parts of an individual's past—not only personal and familial, but also regional and national.<sup>65</sup> For

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<sup>65</sup> Before demonstrating how these ideas are at work within these books of poetry, it is important to make a distinction between Warren's definitions of *history* and the *past*. Moore once observed that defining Warren's philosophy of history “represents perhaps the greatest challenge for the critic attempting to study Warren's thought” (64). While it does pose significant challenges, Warren makes clear enough distinctions between *history* and the

example, in *Or Else*'s poem "*Interjection #1: The Need for Re-evaluation*," the poet literally "interjects" into another poem in order to pose the insistent question and subsequent command: "*Is this really me? Of course not, for Time / Is only a mirror in the fun-house. // You must re-evaluate the whole question*" (l. 1-3). As in Warren's earlier works, he contemplates the concept of identity, but here his inclusive "you" provokes readers to re-evaluate *their* whole question of the self. The same may be said for "Ah, Anima!" in *Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978* (1978), in which the narrator implores: "Can you locate yourself / On the great chart of history?" (l. 10-11); or in "How to Tell a Love Story," which plainly states: "Christ, / If there is no history there is no story. / And no Time, no world" (l. 7-9). Over and over, Warren champions the necessity for understanding the past—and therefore one's personal history—in these modern ages. "Dreaming in Daylight" in *Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980* (1980) also captures this sentiment:

Do you  
Know your own name? Do you feel that  
  
You barely escape the last flicker of foam  
Just behind, up the beach of  
  
History—indeed, that you are  
The last glint of consciousness before  
  
You are caught by the grind, bulge, and beat of

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*past*. In the most general of terms, the word *history* refers to events that have been filtered through the self, while the *past* is a broader, more objective term for the composite list of all events that have occurred in time. Other critics have observed this delineation of terms; for example, Ruppensburg notes, "History for Warren is always perceived, experienced, and acted out by the individual" (21). Similarly, Moore claims that Warren uses the term history "in relation to the individual's personal past and his family heritage" (15). On the other hand, the past may be seen as something more fixed, something that can provide relative meaning to the present and the future. Knowledge of the past is necessary for understanding where and how we fit into the greater scope of our personal, regional, and national progress. Warren's poetic works render *history* and *the past* indefinitely connected. One may clearly see this theory at work in all of Warren's late poetry, from *Or Else* through *Altitudes and Extensions*, as the narrators are often in the process of coming to terms with the *past* and subsequently filtering this knowledge through the self to inform their sense of personal *history*.

*What has been?* Indeed, by

The heaving ocean of pastness? (l. 13-21)

Once again, identity—or knowing your own name—is contingent upon an awareness of what has been.

A logical correlation with Warren's emphasis on knowing one's past is his augmented desire to present a truthful version of history. Just as Lowell had become "more firmly hooked to the fact and records" in 1969, Warren moved towards presenting a less abstract and idealistic, more concrete and realistic version of history in his later works (Mariani *Lost Puritan* 373). In 1979, Warren even printed an edited version of his long poem, *Brother to Dragons*, originally published in 1953, in order to make it more historically accurate. It is worth noting that Lowell's original review of Warren's poem found fault precisely with the historical elements of the work.

Lowell argued: "Warren's spirit of history has a rough time: occasionally it maunders in a void, sometimes it sounds like the spirit of Seneca's rhetoric, again it just enjoys the show. The difficulties are great" ("RPW's *Brother to Dragons*" 69). Lowell's criticism must have registered in some part with Warren because straightening the line of history is one of the major changes made to Warren's new volume. By introducing Meriwether Lewis earlier and allowing Jefferson to see his own involvement in the "surrogate son's tragic suicide," Warren emphasizes the "awareness of human culpability rather than perfectibility" (Blotner 448). In this revised edition, Warren's characters acknowledge and take more responsibility for the past, therefore demonstrating the moral awareness that Warren increasingly advocated for Americans.

Considering the fact that Warren became increasingly insistent about reckoning with the past—whether as a result of aging, or mounting concern for his country, or a combination of both—it is worth examining the embodiment of this philosophy in his last works in relation to his mature poetic style. Readers need not look any further than the first page of *Rumor Verified: Poems 1979-1980* (1981) to see how prominently Warren’s philosophy of the past informs this late period. Warren was highly familiar with Dante’s *Inferno* after spending each day at lunch reading Dante with Lowell at LSU, so it is significant that he selects the last lines of the last canto of this epic poem for the epigraph of *Rumor Verified*. In canto XXXIV, from which the epigraph is derived, Dante and Virgil are in the Fourth Ring of the Ninth Circle of hell, the deepest point and, most significantly, the representative pinnacle of mankind’s hierarchy of sins.

Dante and Virgil, finally at the end of their long journey, come across a three-headed Lucifer chewing on the three most evil traitors in history, Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius. Directly after witnessing this vile form of evil, Virgil tells Dante, “‘tis time that we depart, / for we have seen the whole” (XXXIV, l. 68-69). With Dante clinging to his back, Virgil climbs the hairy body of Lucifer to reach the center of the Earth and then both follow the path through the hemisphere to escape from hell. Once they emerge, Warren’s chosen lines from Dante are presented: “... i’ vidi de le cose belle / Che porta il ciel, per un pertugio tondo, / E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle,” which translate to, “I beheld through a round aperture / Some of the beauteous things that Heaven doth bear; / Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars” (XXXIV, l. 136-139). These lines not only reflect Warren’s philosophy of the past, they also encapsulate a pattern established in *Or Else* that continues through the remainder of his work.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the narrator is exposed to humanity's immorality as he encounters the minor and major sinners in history, and those in between. Only after Dante has witnessed this realistic portrayal of the past, horrors included, is he able to emerge from hell, return to the world, and behold the stars with new vision. While the narrators of Warren's poems do not end up in heaven, they are often awakened to a more enlightened understanding of themselves and of the world after confronting the past. Moore explains that for Warren:

Knowledge even of the evil history, of horrible events like the gory butchering of a slave, has value. Such horrible facts, first, help the individual confront his own sinful nature. And, second, optimistic illusions perish in the fire of history, for the facts of the past will correct any such delusions. (Moore, *RPW and History* 14)

In Warren's late poems, just as in canto XXXIV of Dante's *Inferno*, "such horrible facts" as "Black face, eyes white-bulging, mouth shaped like an *O*"<sup>66</sup> and "the gargle of blood on bronze blade"<sup>67</sup> force the narrator to "confront his own sinful nature," and/or that of his country. Reminiscent of the journey of Dante and Virgil, a reader of Warren's late poetry figuratively accompanies the narrator through his confrontation with the past and the self.

Throughout this poetic period, dream-like delusions are often shattered and replaced by stark, realistic images once the narrator has "awakened." As the title poem of *Rumor Verified* tells us, the "rumor verified" is "that you are simply a man, with a man's dead reckoning, nothing more" (l. 34). Warren illustrates the destruction of "optimistic illusions" by the "fire of history" through rich, symbolic imagery in his poems. For example, the first poem of the

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<sup>66</sup> "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home From Party in the Back Country," *Can I See Arcturus From Where I Stand?* l. 74.

<sup>67</sup> "Looking Northward, Aegeanward," *Rumor Verified* l. 27.

Prologue, “Chthonian Revelation: A Myth,” contains a narrator who appears to be leaving a dream and entering a new reality:

On the soft sand he is sure  
 Of the track. Then looks back  
 Just once through the dwindling aperture  
 To the world of light-tangled detail  
 Where once life was led that now seems illusion of life  
 And swings in the distance with no more identity than  
 A dream half-remembered. He turns. (l. 21-27)

The “dwindling aperture” harkens back to Dante, as does much of the imagery and word choice within these works. However, while Dante gazes at Heaven through the aperture, this narrator looks back to a life that seemed real but is now recognized as illusion (Runyon 92).<sup>68</sup> In these later poems, the narrator often experiences a moment of awakening after reckoning with the past, only to realize that his former self had no identity since it was formed in a world of illusion; as for this narrator, it is merely “a dream half-remembered.”

In “Going West,” as in the Prologue, the narrator’s abstract view of the past is replaced with a concrete, aware vision for the future. This poem may serve as a model for how Warren uses historical backdrops to employ his larger philosophy that Americans must know and understand the past in order to develop their sense of self. “Going West” confirms Warren’s overarching message found in the poetry, fiction, and nonfiction alike: “We live in the world, and our understanding of it is of crucial importance to us. Only by trying to know our role in the world can we, in the end, come to know ourselves” (“Use of the Past” 42).

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<sup>68</sup> Runyon suggests, “Only at the end of ‘Chthonian Revelation,’ in the very last word, does what Dante saw become what Warren’s protagonists see, through the arch (of sea cave and swimming stroke) that is the equivalent here of his *portugio*, a framed, glorified, fragment of heaven” (92).

Warren has argued that the westward expansion and the resulting brutality to Native Americans was a frightening consequence of when Americans were blinded by their self-righteous quest to fulfill the Manifest Destiny. He saw this move westward as a false liberation, an irresponsible attempt to escape the historical implications for the future. In “The Use of the Past,” Warren concedes that America’s “mission to make all things new” resulted in “an unquenchable optimism” and laments that along with this rebirth came the belief that Americans were “a Chosen People” who felt that “God’s will and their own were miraculously identical” (“Use of the Past” 32). It is precisely this kind of blindness that Warren’s late poems strive to bring into the light.

In a 1984 interview, Warren refers to the poem “Going West” as “the bloody story of the West ... one of the most murderous stories we can think of” (qtd. in Ruppensburg, *American Imagination* 113). This poem exemplifies Warren’s attempt for poetry to “[fulfill] its function of bringing us face to face with our nature and our fate” (“Use of the Past” 31). A seemingly pleasant road trip westward takes an unexpected twist when a man is faced with his nation’s sordid past. Quite literally, “Going West” is a poem with a narrator “driving toward” his illusion of the Promised West, only to be faced “directly” with the literal blood and guts of a pheasant and the figurative blood and guts of America’s past. Warren points to the false, dreamlike illusion of the West and the shocking destruction of this ideal, while drawing the audience into the poem in an attempt to encourage personal self-reflection. The poetic devices of Warren’s mature style that function to create this interactive experience in “Going West”—such as the significant integration of “you” to address the reader; tense changes; vivid imagery; notably



loosened structure choices involving varied line/stanza lengths and speech-like rhythms created by timely line breaks, enjambment, spacing, and other pacing techniques—can all be found achieving similar ends throughout his late poetry. To once again quote Warren’s “Pure and Impure Poetry,” Warren explains: “a good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must ... make the reader into ‘an active creative being’” (25).

“Going West” carries a similar message to Warren’s “wake-up call” in his prose from this period, but the poetry creates a more powerful participatory experience for readers. The first section of twelve lines describes the dreamlike ride into the west. The poem begins: “Westward the Great Plains are lifting, as you / Can tell from the slight additional pressure / The accelerator requires” (1-3). Warren believed that “resistance” was a necessary element for successful poetry. His play with language and pacing in this poem, and especially in these three lines, represents the “tension between the rhythm of the poem and the rhythm of speech” that Warren credits for enhancing poetry (“Pure and Impure Poetry” 24). Along with the pressure on the gas pedal, the reader also experiences some extra strain while chugging through the dense, nonpoetic language of “the slight additional pressure the accelerator requires.”

Moving on, the sun, as with much of the natural imagery in *Rumor Verified*, is personified as possessing a certain wisdom;<sup>69</sup> most likely Warren is pointing to the truth that natural elements—sun, water, earth, etc.—have an advantage over humans in knowing all of the past since the beginning of time. Here, “The sun, / Man to man, stares you straight in the eye” (l. 3-4), in a nonverbal challenge to the narrator’s vision. The presence of the engaging “you” also

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<sup>69</sup> Other examples include: the “time-polished facet” of the “sand-grain” (l. 42, 44) in “Law of Attrition”; “stones wise with suffering” (l. 21) and “the sea” that can “tell us of the blind depth of groan out yonder” (l. 34) in “If”; and the “stream” with “murmurous wisdom there uttered” (l. 6) in “What Voice at Moth-Hour.”

challenges the reader's vision and makes him question his understanding of the past. As the car presses along, the solid imagery of "wheat stubble" (l. 6) melts away into increasingly less tangible, less defined descriptions of "nothing but range land" (l. 7) and the "Blur of burnt goldness" (l. 9). The shift in imagery here signals "tension between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract" that Warren praised for bringing texture and richness to poetry ("Pure and Impure Poetry" 24). It also reaffirms the trend in Warren's imagery that began alongside Jarrell and Lowell: reality is associated with palpable details while illusions are aligned with abstract images.

Next, there is a long, lazy line to lure readers into a lifeless dream state, rife with nonsensical combinations of words, reminiscent of that state between awake and dreaming: "With tire song lulling like love, gaze riding white ribbon, forward / You plunge" (l. 8-9). The lack of an end-stop in that long line makes us linger even longer on the primary stressed word, "plunge" that finally ends the sentence in line nine. Those two simple words, "You plunge," in line nine slow the reader down to a complete stop before shooting forth once again into a "blur of burnt goldness / Past eye-edge on each / Side back-whirling, you arrow / Into the heart of hypnosis" (l. 9-12). The significant shift from the long, lazy line to a series of three short, abrupt lines with alliteration, near rhymes, and word play of "eye," "edge," and "each" gives readers a sense of the experience of "back-whirling" and "hypnosis" as a state of mild confusion and excitement. This energetic description of "arrow[ing] into the heart of hypnosis" may hearken back to the blind "sense of being freed from the past" that Warren warns Americans against ("Use of the Past" 32).

The next line, which demands attention by standing on its own, reveals Warren's commentary on this young man's dreamlike drive west: "This is one way to write the history of America" (l. 13). Since Warren's views on the false escape and illusion of the west are evident, readers may rest assured that this is not the way *he* would wish to write America's history, with eyes half shut, blinded by the sun, and hypnotized by the winding road and bogus promises of new beginnings. As the narrator soon discovers, man may only live undisturbed in this mindset with his eyes half-closed, because as soon as his eyes are forced open, he cannot return to the blissful ignorance of that hypnotic dream.<sup>70</sup> The tense next shifts to reveal that those first twelve lines are the retelling of a memory and Warren presents a current working through of the narrator's thought process as he realizes the impact this event had on him. The all-inclusive "you" switches to "I" as readers join the narrator's personal self reflection and his experience of gaining understanding from the nation's past. The narrator remembers being lured even deeper into that hypnotic state: "I had to slap / The back of my neck to stay awake, / Eyes westward in challenge to sun-gaze, lids / Slitted for sight" (l. 15-18). His eyes, his vision, have decreased to mere "slits" as he boldly continues into the false dream of the West. This may be seen as a metaphor for the Americans who blindly pushed westward, unencumbered by the death and destruction they were causing for the Native Americans on the way.

The next few lines, "The land, / Beyond miles of distance, fled / Backward to whatever had been" (l. 18-21) capture Warren's frustration with Americans who attempted to escape the reality of time by running west into untouched land, "as though space were time." Grimshaw

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<sup>70</sup> An echo of "Bad Year, Bad War: A New Year's Card, 1969" (1969).

explains: “Warren suggests that time *does* exist and that it is the responsibility of those who pass through it to use it wisely, learning from the past and leaving for following generations the lessons gained from time” (Grimshaw, *Understanding RPW* 15). And so, Warren describes the West’s free space as simulating the effects of a time machine, flying “backward to whatever had been” (l. 20). This attempt was, of course, ultimately irresponsible and ineffective. There is a hard break after this line, followed by a space, another tense change back to the present time of the accident, and then three lines, three dreamy questions, standing by themselves as a stanza: “Now do I see the first blue shadow of foothills? / Or is that a cloud line? / When will snow, like a vision, lift?” (l. 22-24). The narrator is tricked into false excitement by “shadows,” “clouds,” and “visions.” The questions reveal a naïve, confused narrator hopeful for the prize of the West, until—splat—the narrator is forced to face the true reality of the illusory dream.

The narrator describes his moment of realization: “I do not see ... / the wing burst. See only / The bloody explosion, right in my face” (l. 25-30). Suddenly the blurry, dreamlike imagery is replaced by vivid, shocking details of impact and blood. The next line reveals that it is nothing more than a “fool pheasant” (l. 31) that flew into his windshield, but the narrator’s reaction proves that he understands this event on a much deeper level. So, as he sees the land “all washed in blood, in feathers, in gut-scrawl” he is coming to terms with the fact that the very dream he was chasing in this westward drive is the same illusion that lured frontiersmen and led to the “intoxicated,” blinded, falsely justified mass murder of Native Americans. The poetic description of the land, “forward, forever” reveals the thought process of the narrator. This experience has “forever” changed the way he will view the West; his illusion has exploded, just

like the bird's body on his windshield. With an understanding of the past, however, comes new vision and preparedness for the future.

The narrator is forced to drive off the road, literally and figuratively: "Hands clamping the wheel with a death grip / To hold straight while brakes scream, I, / With no breath, at the blood stare. The ditch / Is shallow enough when the car, in the end, rolls in" (l.32-35). All movement in the poem comes to a "screaming" halt and the readers are forced to stop along with the narrator to "stare" at the blood on the page and contemplate its significance. As Warren argues: "the tensions in the poetry are what force the reader to be involved and actually make this act of self reflection" ("The Use of the Past" 34). This moment, when movement ceases altogether, is one of those moments of tension that invite readers' personal self- reflection. Later, once the car is moving westward again, the narrator uses "handfuls of dry dirt" and "water at a gas station" to remove the "fried blood" (l. 42-43) from his windshield. Masked by the illusion of progress, Americans were able to wash away the blood of the Native Americans with their modern, divine justification of destined growth and expansion.

For the narrator, the experience of directly coming to terms with the truth of the West contributes to an understanding of the past, and therefore of himself. The tense shifts again to a second reflection on that event; the line stands alone: "Even now, long afterward, the dream" (l. 44). The narrator contemplates the moment when he was wakened from the dream, from the illusion of the idealized West. The poem ends with a three line reflection: "I have seen blood explode, blotting out sun, blotting/ Out land, white ribbon of road, the imagined/ Vision of snowcaps" (l. 45-47). As the narrator realizes that the white, pure, "vision of snowcaps" in the

West is nothing more than an illusion, nothing more than “the illusions of our national infancy—the illusion of our innocence, virtue, and omnipotence,” his dream is replaced by the blood red reality of the past (“Use of the Past” 34).

The new understanding of America’s past birthed a fuller development and awareness of self for the narrator in this poem. While readers do not see whether or not this new awareness changes the way the narrator acts in history, the fact that he is still reflecting back on this incident years later at least proves the deep impact that it had on his thought process and on his understanding of the past. Many of Warren’s late poems are characterized by a similar invitation for readers to join the narrator’s reckoning. Whether the narrator is coming to terms with man’s insignificance on the larger scale of history, coping with the alienation and dehumanization that result from the Industrial Revolution, or realizing the profound ramifications of the atomic bomb, Warren’s poetry encourages personal self-reflection for the reader that will result in an awareness and knowledge of how to fit into this modern world. That is, of course, to not only identify one’s place in history, but also to actively influence history for the best.

As in “Going West,” there is a strong push for cutting through illusions to gain a realistic picture of the past within most of the poetry and prose of this time period. In line with Warren’s thinking behind the more historically accurate revised version of *Brother to Dragons*, *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (1980) explains the relationship between “current conditions and their genesis in past events” and promotes the idea of one’s “moral duty ... to confront responsibility for the problems of modern day” (Ruppersburg, *American Imagination* 129). These “problems” include everything from the Civil Rights issue to the potential threat of

nuclear war that faced modern American society. Once again, Warren argues that obtaining a realistic understanding of the past is the first step toward developing a constructive conception for positive change in these matters and for America's future. A similar philosophy shapes *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* (1982), in which Warren—quite literally—teaches his readers a history lesson about the federal government's seizure of American Indian land.

Ruppersburg outlines the didactic function of *Chief Joseph*: “it places the Nez Perce war in the larger context of post-Civil War materialism; corrects the historical record; and suggests that the forces which led to the war remain evident in America today” (76). From the three epigraphs on the introduction page, readers immediately sense that Warren will expose all sides of this historical event, from Sherman's ignorant opinion: “the more I see of these Indians, the more convinced I am that they will all have to be killed or be maintained as a species of paupers” to the open-minded, yet somewhat naïve voice of Thomas Jefferson, and finally to the haunting words of Chief Sealth. Warren frequently inserts real history—from battlefield markers, to interviews, to the American Sculpture Catalogue—in order to emphasize the truthful elements in the tale of Chief Joseph. Warren often employs these bits in order to juxtapose popular American history—often lies and exaggeration—with the unflattering truth about the bloody battle fought and lost by the victimized Native Americans.

In part IX, the more abstract tale of honor, pain, and sacred land switches abruptly to the concrete details of “O'Hare airport,” “the Honda,” and “shouts of friends” as Warren's persona enters the poem in present time (l.9). Through Warren's autobiographical meditation, an echo of

*Audubon's* end, readers are challenged to enter their own epistemological journey. Warren wonders:

if when the traffic light  
Rings green, some stranger may pause and thus miss  
His own mob's rush to go where the light  
Says go, and pausing, may look,  
Not into a deepening shade of canyon,  
Nor, head now up, toward ice peak in moonlight white,  
But, standing paralyzed in his momentary eternity, into  
His own heart look while he asks  
From what undefinable distance, years, and direction,  
Eyes of fathers are suddenly fixed on him. To know. (l. 155-164)

Clearly, "some stranger" is meant to apply to all readers, as Warren provokes them to challenge their own understanding of the American past and to awaken their desire *to know*.

*Altitudes and Extensions 1980-1984*, Warren's collection of new poems in his last book of poetry, *New and Selected Poems: 1923-1985* (1985), creates a similar interactive experience for the reader through the poetic devices of his mature style. "New Dawn," Part Three of this nine-part volume, reflects the furthest departure from his earliest poetic phase. Long gone are the classicist tendencies and meticulously constructed meter; here Warren invokes the loosest of forms to engage his audience. In 1983, as Warren's role as spokesperson for national affairs reached its peak, John Heresy asked Warren for a poem to serve as a preface to a deluxe edition of his book, *Hiroshima*. Warren consented and produced "New Dawn," a series of poems that trace everything from the *Enola Gay's* departure to the bomb's explosion over Hiroshima.<sup>71</sup> "In the same way that "Going West" responds to the brutality committed against Native Americans,

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<sup>71</sup> In *Warren after Audubon*, Millichap argues that "because 'New Dawn' was written for much different purposes, it somewhat disturbs the order and effect of *Altitudes and Extensions*" (155). Though this section may not fully adhere to Millichap's prevailing themes of age-work, life review, and transcendence, it perfectly exemplifies how Warren succeeds in shaping U.S. history into a highly interactive experience for readers through unique aesthetic forms.



“New Dawn” responds to the epochal event of the atomic bomb. This segmented poem is characterized by an unusual straightforwardness combined with the inclusion of a chart, a numbered list, and plentiful dialogue, somewhat of an amplified version of his technique in *Chief Joseph*. The narrative voice is disembodied in this section, as if Warren wants the horror of the event to speak for itself, yet he still aims to make readers reflect on this major event in America’s past.

In “Self and Non-Self,” Warren provides an imaginary account of Paul Tibbets directly after dropping the bomb when he “sees / The slow, gray coiling of clouds” and “For an instant, / He shuts his eyes” (l. 1-2, 6-7). At this point, the poem shifts to imperative commands:

Shut  
Your own eyes, and in timelessness you are  
Alone with yourself. You are  
Not certain of identity.  
Has that non-self lived forever? (l. 8-12)

In line with all late poems examined thus far, this poem contains a narrator in a moment of realization as he reckons with a significant piece of the past while questioning his identity.

The strategic line breaks leave the reader breathless at the end of each line, highly anticipating what will come next, and the direct orders in this poem force readers to envision this moment in America’s history and experience this reflection along with Tibbets. The poem ends: “There / Is the world” (l. 13-14), and these words ring out as a wake-up call for not only Tibbets but also for Warren’s readers. This phrase, “There is the world” doubles as an appropriate synopsis for what Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell achieved in their post-WW II poetry. *There is the world*, presented authentically, infused with *life*, yet artfully crafted by these artists’ brilliant minds. To quote once more from Warren’s “The Use of the Past”:

if literature does anything for us, it stirs up in us a sense of existential yearning.... The truth we want to come to is the truth of ourselves, of our common humanity, available in the projected self of art. ("Use of the Past" 48)

Essentially, with every stylistic progression—whether while under the tutelage of Ransom and Tate, or alongside Jarrell and Lowell, or while drawing from his own core—Warren came to fulfill literature's intended purpose with ever greater skill. When Warren died on September 15, 1989, he left an unparalleled legacy that will continue to stir up a sense of existential yearning for years to come.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RANDALL JARRELL

*Chapter four conducts a similar examination of Jarrell's post-WW II work, returning briefly to Seven-League Crutches before exploring The Woman at the Washington Zoo (1960) through the The Lost World (1965) in relation to Poetry and the Age (1953), Pictures from an Institution (1954), and A Sad Heart at the Supermarket (1962). This chapter aims to draw attention to Jarrell as a highly significant literary figure while carefully tracing similarities to Warren and Lowell in their shared vision for American poetry.*

### ***Jarrell's Legacy: Misunderstood and Overlooked***

Contrary to the noticeable lack of critical attention he receives, Randall Jarrell was, and is, a mighty force to be reckoned with in American literature. Stephen Burt's *Randall Jarrell and His Age* (2002) is a major work that aims to bring awareness to Jarrell's legacy, but he is still a sorely neglected literary figure overall. Jarrell was conspicuous among his peers from his induction into academia. Robert Penn Warren's impression of Jarrell as a precocious freshman is unforgettable and well known: "He was so gifted that he terrorized my bright group of sophomores" (qtd. in Blotner 123). Despite Warren's best efforts to temper Jarrell's natural, and sometimes unintentional, inclination to intimidate others, his devastating and caustic observations jarred his peers throughout his career. At age twenty-one, Jarrell's first essay for *The Southern Review* (Autumn 1935) lauded and lambasted Ellen Glasgow and Erskine Caldwell and other established writers. Jarrell's scathing remarks and jabbing quips quickly became

known and feared by his contemporaries; yet the distinctive insight and wisdom in his criticism also earned him an almost unparalleled respect within the literary community.

In a tribute to Jarrell after his death, Robert Watson revealed a combination of trepidation and admiration for Jarrell that was common among his colleagues: “Writing about Randall Jarrell, I can only think how much better he would have written this essay than I. I imagine him looking over my shoulder and sighing, You call *that* prose” (“The Last Years” 257). Even Robert Lowell, who had benefited from Jarrell’s comprehensive critiques, joked to Elizabeth Bishop: “I think of [Jarrell] as a fencer who has defeated and scarred all his opponents ... Randall stands leaning on his foil, ... unchallenged, invulnerable, deadly” (*Letters of Lowell* 247). Despite the high level of respect Jarrell enjoyed from those closest to him, he never—in life nor after death—received the recognition his talent earned. In a published homage to Jarrell, Lowell points to Jarrell’s literary greatness and the additional public acclaim he felt his friend so rightly deserved:

In his own life, he had much public acclaim and more private. The public, at least, fell cruelly short of what he deserved. Now that he is gone, I see clearly that the spark from heaven really struck and irradiated the lines and being of my dear old friend—his noble, difficult and beautiful soul. (“Randall Jarrell” 98)

Jarrell’s difficult and beautiful soul made him an equally difficult and beautiful poet; though it is arguably the complexity of the man and the artist that make him difficult to classify, both personally and professionally.

Lowell observed that Jarrell “blows hot and cold on one,” a fitting portrayal of the writer’s personality (*Letters of Lowell* 247). Jarrell famously described the poetry of Oscar Williams as giving “the impression of having been written on a typewriter by a typewriter,” and

Lowell reportedly found Jarrell's talk on "The Obscurity of the Poet" (1950) to be so "rude" that it caused the only temporary break in their lifelong friendship (Mariani 193). On the other hand, Jarrell is also known for his tender portrayals of women and children in poetry; his charismatic and attentive teaching, particularly during his extended tenure at the Women's College of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; and for the unselfish attention he lavished upon the work of his friends. Lowell captures a sense of Jarrell's overwhelming generosity: "Randall was the only man I have ever met who could make other writers feel that their work was more important to him than his own" ("Randall Jarrell" 106). Warren shared a similar appreciation for Jarrell even in their earliest years at Vanderbilt. He recalls that as Jarrell critiqued his poems: "I would listen carefully. He was often right and more often amusing, so amusing that it didn't matter much that it was at my expense" (Blotner 123). From the beginning, Warren and Lowell were both able to appreciate the value in Jarrell's tenacious criticism, though it may have been somewhat off-putting to others.

In addition to the "hot and cold" dichotomy Lowell points out, Jarrell has been considered something of a paradoxical manchild. Seemingly innocent and occasionally referred to as naïve, he is often described as childlike due to his indulgence in poetic representations of fantasy, children, and animals; his abstinence from alcohol; and his abhorrence of profanity and lewdness. His close friends Warren and Lowell were not only accepting of these characteristics, but also somewhat captivated by them. In a letter to Sister Bernetta Quinn, Warren relates an anecdote:

John Ransom once, amused, told me how Randall, for the first time on skis, cried out in his excitement, "God meant me to be a great skier!" Well, God was late beginning the

job. That was the rather charming streak of babyishness in Randall—not like adult vanity.... I was so fond of him. And so admiring.  
(*Letters of Warren*, Vol. V 809, 811)

Jarrell's second wife recalls how Lowell was also attentive to and considerate of Jarrell's boyishness: "[Lowell] took care not to quarrel with [Jarrell] as he did with Taylor; and took care not to use the fashionable four-letter words with Jarrell that he used with others, even to the point of refining *bullshit* to *bull*" (*Jarrell's Letters* 477).

Unfortunately for his reputation as a poet, some critics were/are not as accepting of Jarrell's childlike nature. Burt reports: "[Jarrell's] literary enemies called him childish," and his suspected innocence came to inspire some disparaging readings of his work (S. Burt xiii). In a review of Jarrell's *Selected Poems* (1955), for example, Karl Shapiro critiques Jarrell's overreliance on the subject of childhood for the purposes of exploring the human psyche:

The world of the child is his chief area of symbolism—Jarrell is practically the only living poet who insists on this world—and his almost obsessive return to the great childhood myths is sometimes as painful as a psychoanalysis. (31)

In 2005, Adam Kirsch argued that "naiveté" is the "cornerstone of [Jarrell's] poetics," thereby faulting his supposed childishness for the inadequacies in Jarrell's work:

such sympathy can all too easily slip into sentimentality, which is the besetting sin of Jarrell's poetry. In his style, too, Jarrell's desire to assume a plain, feeling voice comes at a price, often threatening to lead him into banality. (Kirsch 154)

To be sure, Jarrell is guilty of including bits of ineffective, contrived sentiment in his earliest work; however, Kirsch fails to acknowledge that once Jarrell finds his mature poetic voice in *Seven-League Crutches* (1951), his genuine "sympathy" succeeds in infusing authenticity into his work through believable human emotions and characters. Furthermore, the "plain, feeling

voice” that offends Kirsch is the same voice that aids in presenting vivid, authentic portrayals of life in Jarrell’s later work. As will be explored in this chapter, it is not a coincidence that these same techniques earned recognition in Warren’s and Lowell’s later work.

The perceived oddities in both Jarrell’s persona and poetry are contributing factors for why he is often not considered a major figure in American literature. Thomas Travisano effectively argues, “this difficulty of classifying Jarrell has hurt his reputation as a poet” (14). Perhaps an impediment for his legacy, one cannot learn Jarrell’s name by rote as linked to a particular movement or school, such as Ransom the formalist, Tate the high modernist, Warren the southern poet, or Lowell the confessional writer.<sup>72</sup> Jarrell’s creative practice never resulted in a quick and easy label.<sup>73</sup> Even his earliest years as a writer are defined by individuality. Jarrell echoed some aesthetic elements of his early mentors; however, even then he was less willing than Warren and Lowell to emulate Ransom and Tate, and quicker to abandon his loyalties to them. While Warren and Lowell both initially imitated Tate’s (and Eliot’s, by way of Tate) dense, tangled metaphors and erudite diction, Jarrell opted instead for the realistic speech that he admired in William Wordsworth’s verse. Despite his invaluable support, Jarrell also cut personal ties, for the most part, with Tate by the early forties.

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<sup>72</sup> Of course, even these labels are problematic when presented as one-to-one relationships without accompanying nuances and qualifications, particularly for Lowell. This simplification is for the argument’s sake. See Travisano’s chapter “The Confessional Paradigm Revisited” in *Midcentury Quartet* and Frank Bidart’s “On Confessional Poetry” for detailed arguments on the flaws and inadequacies of the term “confessional” in relation to Lowell; this subject is also discussed in chapter five.

<sup>73</sup> Jarrell did not consider himself a “Southern Poet,” though scholars are beginning to group him as such. He would, however, come to have a strong influence on the next generation of southern authors, including James Dickey and Eleanor Ross Taylor. Along with Warren’s and the transplant “southerner” Lowell’s influence, Jarrell’s example encouraged southern poets to move towards a more personal, less formal poetic style that emphasizes the exploration of the self.

Ransom's "Constellation of Five Young Poets" (1941) reveals that Ransom was aware, and somewhat critical, of Jarrell's divergence from his poetic practice:

In the prose conclusion, as in the poetic sequel, Jarrell forbids us to say yet that he is a post-modernist. But probably he will be. It is self-consciousness which stops the young poets from their own graces; too much thinking about all the technical possibilities at once, as well as too much attention to changes in the fashion. (16)

By paying "too much attention to changes in the fashion," Jarrell was distancing himself from the teachings of his formalist mentor. Ransom's contribution to *Randall Jarrell, 1914-1965* once again draws attention to Jarrell's differences from his own line on American poetry. The technique of infusing prose-like characteristics into poetry is one of the representative changes in the post-WW II poetry of Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell alike. Ransom's critique of this practice separates them further from their once shared mentor: "I don't know if the combination of prose properties and poetic properties in the same piece is as good as either prose or poetry by itself; the prose and the poetry seem to adulterate one another" ("Rugged" 170). It is significant to note that Ransom credits Jarrell for this poetic technique, though Warren and especially Lowell are more often acknowledged for shaping this innovative strategy. Burt acknowledges: "Some of Jarrell's best interpreters were his contemporaries," and those who knew him well (xvi). Though Warren and Lowell did have a large part in developing this style—Warren in *Brother to Dragons* (1953) and Lowell in *Life Studies* (1959)—Jarrell's poetry in the 1940s already contained conversational, prose-like elements.

In line with eschewing elements of his Fugitive roots, J. A. Bryant, Jr. acknowledges that "Jarrell's natural inclination to go his own way was discernible to acquaintances long before his Vanderbilt days" (5). It is for this reason that his lasting connections with Warren and Lowell



are particularly significant. There are few others—Peter Taylor, Hannah Arendt, and Elizabeth Bishop among them—with whom Jarrell maintained lifelong literary relationships, but arguably no others who parallel Jarrell's poetic trajectory as closely as Warren and Lowell. One can trace multiple influences in Jarrell's poetry including W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marcel Proust, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and the philosophies of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Yet, other than his early fascination with Auden, it is rare to identify instances in which any one of these figures overpowers Jarrell's own voice. Neither Warren nor Lowell overshadows Jarrell, but their influence is apparent within the entire body of his work, just as his influence is evident in theirs.

Jarrell's integral role in the transformation of Lowell's *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) to *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) is well known; though aside from this instance, Jarrell is more often famed for his published criticism than his direct influence on the creative process of other artists. Kirsch's argument serves as a potential reason for why Jarrell does not receive more recognition for his influence on Warren and Lowell, nor as a poet in general:

If he was not aggressively ambitious as some of his peers, neither was he as commanding as an artist. (Kirsch 154)

Kirsch's interpretation of Jarrell's intellectual generosity as a dearth of ambition signals a point for reexamination. The same may be argued for his brusque disregard for the significance of Jarrell's position among his peers. Jarrell proved to be instrumental in the American tradition with his prophetic lamentations on the country, such as *Poetry and the Age* (1953) and *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* (1962), and through his influential recasting of major poets, including Walt Whitman and Robert Frost; but he also made significant contributions to literary history

through the example of his poetic practice. It is necessary to consider the whole person of Jarrell in order to appreciate the depth and richness of his work, which is precisely why Burt's *Randall Jarrell and His Age* serves as one of the most important recent works in Jarrell scholarship.

The tendency in Jarrell studies is to focus on a small slice of his career—his war poems, his literary criticism, or his prose works, for example. Burt's ambitious study, however, aims to answer the loaded question: "Who was Randall Jarrell?" The first line of his book addresses the key issue in current Jarrellian scholarship: "Randall Jarrell showed us how to read his contemporaries; we do not yet know how to read him" (xi). Burt's book moves scholars forward in that task by offering a thoughtful, engaging analysis that convincingly argues for Jarrell's deserving place as a major force in American poetry—not only, as he is often credited—as a prominent critic, but also as a highly skilled poet who continues to influence younger writers today.

In the same way that contemporary scholars are inspired to produce new readings of Emily Dickinson as a feminist, or a modernist, or even a postmodernist, Burt points to the fact that literary criticism may, in sense, only now be catching up with Jarrell. He argues that Jarrell's "literary practice anticipated discoveries in Continental philosophy, in feminist psychology, even in political theory" (xi). In exploring the complex underlying philosophies and structural layers in Jarrell's work, Burt demands that Jarrell be seen as much more than the author of the frequently anthologized, uncharacteristically short "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner." This poem is a particularly remarkable example of Jarrell's originality, but his larger body of work deserves equal critical attention and praise.

This chapter will leave the more theoretically based analyses in the capable hands of Stephen Burt, but his underlying thread is essential to this study: Jarrell deserves a position among the leaders of twentieth-century American poetry, alongside Warren and Lowell. One of Burt's overarching themes points to a significant commonality among the work of these three authors:

[Jarrell's] poems and prose describe the distances between the self and the world, the self and history, the self and the social givens within which it is asked to behave. (xii)

After World War II, Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell experimented with new aesthetic forms in order to explore the relationship of the self within the modern world. Jarrell served as the linchpin of the group throughout this journey; in a sense, he was the glue among these three authors. In particular, their shared goal—often mentioned by Jarrell—to define and capture a new sense of authenticity in their writing after WW II, drew constant attention in their correspondences and reviews as they continued to encourage one another on this path throughout their careers.

### ***The 1950s: Turning Point & Turning (Temporarily) to Other Projects***

Though Warren and Lowell would come to follow Jarrell's lead in the fifties, it was Jarrell who first made the shift to explore the narrator's psyche with more authentic, conversational verse. Chapters one and two elucidate why / how Jarrell honed his content and poetic techniques for the aesthetic and thematic shifts in *The Seven-League Crutches*. This chapter builds on that change by exploring the influence of Warren and Lowell on the development of Jarrell's style throughout the fifties and to the end of his life. Jarrell first signaled "The End of the Line" in 1942, but Warren's and Lowell's influence was crucial for

rounding out Jarrell's aesthetic principles. Warren and Jarrell were mutually interested in the issues of selfhood, loosening the poetic line, and experimenting with forms, but Warren further directed Jarrell's attention to the desirable authenticity in Frost and the dramatic value of a well-developed narrative poem. Lowell and Jarrell reciprocally encouraged one another to capture the element of *life* in verse, yet it was the politically active Lowell who fueled Jarrell's concern for the cultural crisis in America and pointed him to the merit in addressing current events. After Jarrell published *The Seven-League Crutches*, the turning point works of Warren and Lowell—*Brother to Dragons* (1953) and *Promises* (1957), and *Life Studies* (1959), respectively—further inspired Jarrell to explore new territory in his late works, *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* (1960) and *The Lost World* (1965), while continuing on that search for authenticity.

Though Jarrell rebelled more noticeably against the influence of Ransom and Tate, like Warren and Lowell he never shed the heightened attention to aesthetic effects of language instilled within him by his formalist training, nor did he abstain from the aesthetic experimentation of high modernism. *Crutches* is therefore marked by flexible forms that still maintain elements of structure. A mixture of equal parts dramatic monologue, polivocality, and direct address to an inferred listener, this book demonstrates the start of Jarrell's mature poetry. "A Soul," a lesser known poem, serves as exemplary for this format, with its regular quatrains, multiple voices, and integration of the "you address":

It is evening. One bat dances  
 Alone, where there were swallows.  
 The waterlilies are shadowed  
 With cattails, the cattails with willows.

The moon sets; after a little

The reeds sigh from the shore.  
Then silence. There is a whisper,  
“Thou art here once more.”

In the castle someone is singing.  
“Thou art warm and dry as the sun.”  
You whisper, and laugh with joy.  
“Yes, here is one,

“Here is the other ... *Legs* ...  
Are they move so?”  
I stroke the scales of your breast, and answer:  
“Yes, as you know.”

But you murmur, “How many years  
Thou hast wandered there above!  
Many times I had thought thee lost  
Forever, my poor love.

“How many years, how many years  
Thou hast wandered in air, thin air!  
Many times I had thought thee lost,  
My poor soul, forever.”

After honing his poetic voice, “a mode that was distinctly his,” it was almost a decade before his next book of poetry was published<sup>74</sup> (Bryant 16). During this time, he maintained close friendships with Warren and Lowell while continuing to write poems and work on other projects. A letter written by Jarrell on May 20, 1952 to his soon-to-be second wife and constant companion Mary is representative of the anecdotes he shared about his time with “Red” Warren:

I’m on the train to New York. I certainly had a good time! Red was as gay as could be.... We read some Hardy poems after that [softball game], Red and Cleanth and I are all crazy about his poetry.... Red’s almost finished a very long poem—a narrative several thousands of lines about Jefferson. (*Jarrell’s Letters* 351)

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<sup>74</sup> Warren and Lowell also took lengthy hiatuses from poetry around the point of their style shifts. Warren went ten years between “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943) and *Brother to Dragons* (1953) and Lowell went eight years between *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951) and *Life Studies* (1959).

As in their earliest days together, visits entailed a combination of entertainment, poetry, and discussions about their own work. Mary Jarrell recalls a similar gathering between Jarrell and Lowell in June 1953 in which the two authors reunited after being apart for some time:

[The reunion] was fond and playful.... Driving or walking on campus, they talked about Mallarme, Williams, Eliot, and Whitman, and quietly seated at home, they continued. Lowell spoke in long, halting sentences that Jarrell darted in and out of but that Lowell, unperturbed, perfected as he went along, choosing just the right, most exact, precisely descriptive word. (*Jarrell's Letters* 381)

These get-togethers were always marked by a meeting of the minds, a fruitful breeding ground for new advancements in American letters.

When Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* was published in 1953, it served as yet another confirmation that his thoughts were in harmony with those of Warren and Lowell. In the introduction to a recent edition of Jarrell's book, William Logan states: "I once heard a poet say that poets in the fifties were afraid of three things: Randall Jarrell's reviews, Robert Lowell's poetry, and the atomic bomb" (xi). Though Jarrell's reputation as a fierce and accurate critic had already been building from the reviews he published in literary magazines, *Poetry and the Age* propelled him to a new level of critical acclaim among his contemporaries. John Berryman's review in *The New Republic* proclaims: "A salient truth about Jarrell, for the present reader, is that he is seldom wrong.... Everybody interested in modern poetry ought to be grateful to him" (12-13). This level of success inspired Logan's assessment: "When we read the poems, we hear a man trying to be a poet, trying with great skill and intelligence; when we read the criticism, we hear a man born to the trade" (Logan xix). When *Complete Poems* was published after Jarrell's death, Helen Vendler added a similar response: "Jarrell, who was 51 when he died ... can be said

to have put his genius into his criticism and his talent into his poetry” (“The Complete Poems” 37-38). There is much to be mined in the insightful, frequently quoted collection, but for this study it is most constructive to note points in which Jarrell’s views mirror those of Warren and Lowell. Essays such as “The Obscurity of the Poet,” “The Age of Criticism,” and ““Is American Poetry American?”” demonstrate how Jarrell’s increasing interest in cultural issues matched that of his colleagues, and the rest of the essays provide insight into Jarrell’s stance on American poetry at mid-century.

As observed in chapter two, Frost’s influence played a significant role in the parallel stylistic changes of Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell in the late forties; Jarrell’s views are collected in *Poetry and the Age* in “The Other Frost” and “To the Laodiceans.” In addition to Frost, however, Jarrell’s comments on poets such as Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams reveal his dedication to stylistic shifts he envisioned for himself after World War II—shifts that are also evident in the work of Warren and Lowell. For example, in “Some Lines from Whitman,” Jarrell comments:

But if we compare Whitman with that very beautiful poet Alfred Tennyson, the most skillful of all Whitman’s contemporaries, we are at once aware of how limiting Tennyson’s forms have been, of how much Tennyson has had to leave out.... Whitman’s poems *represent* his world and himself much more satisfactorily than Tennyson’s do his.... few poets have shown more of the tears of things, and the joy of things, and of the reality beneath either tears or joy. (128, 124)

One might as well replace “Tennyson” with “Ransom” in this quotation in order to read Jarrell’s opinion on the deficiencies of his former mentor’s strict formalism and his resulting appreciation of the opportunities inherent in utilizing looser forms. More than anything, Jarrell embraces

more flexible forms in order to fit authentic *life*—“the tears of things, and the joy of things, and the *reality*” in between—into his poetry.

In another essay that showcases his aesthetic principles, Jarrell critiques Wallace Stevens’ poetic practice:

he often treats things or lives so that they seem no more than generalizations of an unprecedentedly low order. But surely a poet *has* to treat the concrete as primary, as something far more than an instance. (“Reflections on Wallace Stevens” 140)

Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell increasingly aimed to capture concrete particulars in their poetry, leaving behind the generalizations and stereotypical characters that populate some of their early verse. Rounding out this argument on particularization vs. generalization, Jarrell argues in “An Introduction to the Selected Poems of William Carlos Williams”:

Williams’ imagist-objectivist background and bias have helped his poems by their emphasis on truthfulness, exactness, concrete “presentation”; but they have harmed the poems by their underemphasis on organization, logic, narrative, generalization. (244)

Essentially, Jarrell calls for a balance between the over-generalization of Stevens and the superficiality of Williams. Jarrell criticizes verse inspired by Williams’ “no ideas but in things” for the absence of greater context, and points to the lacking coherence and depth necessary for timeless poems that bear a wider resonance for mankind.

Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell worked towards a median point between particularization and generalization in which they could create concrete illustrations of the world that could also be magnified and appreciated on a universal level. After Jarrell’s *Selected Poems* was published in 1955, James Dickey praised Jarrell for precisely this ability:

Through poems about what has happened to this man (or this child) in this time, we get, in an extremely detailed, moving, and “true” way, the experience of our time defined....



This world is so real that the experienced world is transfigured and intensified, through the poem, into itself, a deeper *itself*, a more characteristic *itself*. (“Randall Jarrell” 37)

This unique balance, skillfully exemplified in the later work of Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell, is one which various contemporary southern poets—Dave Smith and David Bottoms, for example—still strive to emulate. *Poetry and the Age* serves as a snapshot of the literary and cultural issues of the mid-twentieth century. Thanks to Jarrell’s foresight, it also foretells the future of American poetry: an effective way to write in the post-WW II era is to employ looser forms, concrete details, and historical context in order to create “a world so real that the experienced world is transfigured and intensified.”

After articulating his views in *Poetry and the Age* on the need for creating authenticity in art, he tried his hand at embodying this practice in his first and last “novel,” *Pictures from an Institution* (1954). The book was so clearly based on autobiographical truth that even Jarrell was hesitant to refer to the book as a “novel.” He instead described it to Lowell as “well, not really a novel, but a prose comedy” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 285). Most critics agree with Jarrell’s assessment of his own work. Far from Warren’s masterpiece *All the King’s Men* and other works of fiction, *Pictures* is, more than anything, a collection of Jarrell’s humorous musings on academia. Bryant confirms: “The voice and mind of the narrator—as in the poetry and the essays—are unmistakably those of Randall Jarrell” (118). The narrator’s wit and insight are delivered distinctly in Jarrell’s voice, from the snarky critiques of life at Benton to the highly authentic character sketches of Gertrude Johnson and President Robbins, whom, the narrator observes with disdain, “‘did not have his Ph.D.’—but had that bothered one administrator upon this earth?” (*Pictures* 23).

In light of their shared quest for authenticity, it is telling to read the reactions of Lowell and Warren to Jarrell's prose work. Jarrell's biographer acknowledges:

Jarrell's mixed feelings about what he had done in *Pictures* came out in letters he wrote to Lowell as the book was nearing publication in the spring of 1954, and to Warren after its publication a year later. (Pritchard 243-244)

Despite Jarrell's hesitations, his colleagues supported it for the most part. In response to Lowell's flattering letter, Jarrell gushed with gratitude: "Your comparisons and nice sayings for *Pictures from an Institution* were as winning as comparisons well could be—I love being compared to Pope and Arnold and now Cocteau, by you" (*Jarrell's Letters* 377). Most significant for this study, in Lowell's letter to Bishop he observes: "Fiction or not, it's rather terrific writing" (qtd. in Mariani 228). After Jarrell's death, Lowell again praised *Pictures* despite "its fictional oddities" for being "a unique and serious joke-book" (qtd. in Angus 266). Lowell realized that despite its hybrid form between fiction and autobiography, it was still "terrific writing." Lowell once stated, "if a poem is autobiographical—and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing—you want the reader to say, this is true" (Seidel "An Interview" 272). This very element of being "true," of being authentic, is precisely what Lowell appreciated in Jarrell's work.

Warren had a similar reaction to Lowell's. Jarrell admitted to Warren the difficulty he had creating a work "in which the main structure isn't a plot or story," thereby admitting that these were truly "pictures," or snapshots from his real-life experience (qtd. in Pritchard 243-244). Warren responded:

I'm very keen about it. You really make the characters come over, with fullness, and make their world credible.... The only criticism I have has to do with the way some of the first part of the book is done.... It is, at times, a little too essayistic in the beginning. And sometimes the wit is 'set-up'—doesn't spring right out of things.... It's a very impressive book, a really fascinating book, and nobody but you could have written it. (*Selected Letters of Warren, Vol. IV* 51)

Essentially, this note demonstrates how Warren continued to encourage Jarrell towards the objective they, along with Lowell, identified in the late forties: to achieve authenticity in their writing. Warren praises Jarrell's rounded characters and the realistic portrayal of "their world," yet he critiques the artificial moments in which the scene seems manufactured rather than natural. It is as if Warren echoes the advice Jarrell himself gave to Lowell in 1945, in which Jarrell condemned the "too-mannered, mechanical, wonderfully contrived" and encouraged Lowell to "start from a real point of departure in contemporary real life" (*Jarrell's Letters* 139). Jarrell's response to Warren's criticism is also typical. He first characteristically jumps to defend his work, but then yields to Warren's sage advice: "Your letter about *Pictures* was such a joy to me.... About the first part: I see what you mean and you may be right, ... maybe it's too superficial and essayistic" (*Jarrell's Letters* 399). Though Jarrell spent most of the fifties exploring other genres, his projects—and Warren's and Lowell's reactions to them—confirm that they maintained a unified vision for American literature.

### ***The 1960s: Addressing an Audience with Warren and Lowell***

By the time *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* was published in 1960, Jarrell's two-year term as the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (1956-1958) had further heightened his awareness of America's cultural crisis. Pritchard reports: "the more he saw of [America] the

more appalled he was at what he saw” (267). Along with Lowell’s public political statements and Warren’s growing involvement in national issues, Jarrell felt an increasing responsibility to publically address these matters in both poetry and prose. On March 15, 1959, Lowell reported to Berryman:

I am just back from Greensboro, where Randall and [I] enjoyed (?) ourselves lamenting the times. It seems there’s been something curious twisted and against the grain about the world poets of our generation have had to live in. (*Letters of Lowell* 338)

Clearly, there was a sense that poets were in this struggle together: a grand effort to discover, interpret, and expose that *something curious* which plagued Lowell, Jarrell, and their contemporaries.

Through the mid to late fifties, Jarrell produced essays for his second book of literary criticism and social commentary, *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*, while learning from Warren and Lowell how to address these issues in verse without destroying the integrity of the art form. From published reviews and personal correspondences, many of which have already been discussed, there is no question that Jarrell praised and supported both Warren’s and Lowell’s turning point works from the late fifties. When Warren was awarded the National Book Award in 1958 for *Promises: Poems 1954-1956*, Jarrell presented the address on behalf of the committee. In his speech, Jarrell refers to Warren’s works as examples of particularly worthy literature. After claiming that it is Warren’s “superego, or muse, or demon, that makes him write poems like *Brother to Dragons* and *Promises*,” Jarrell concludes, “we are safe as long as Warren’s superego survives” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 429).

Around the same time, Jarrell wrote to Lowell: “It certainly was fun talking to you for so long.... I was delighted that you’re writing some new poems, just as I’ve been delighted (for about six weeks) to be writing one myself” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 429, 428). As Jarrell turned his full energy back to poetry, his attention lingered predictably on the most recent works of Warren and Lowell. In particular, Jarrell praised “the pathos of the local color of the past” in *Life Studies*, and pointed to the “largeness and grandeur” in Lowell’s poems which “exist on a scale that is unique today” (qtd. in Pritchard 287). Essentially, Jarrell admires Lowell’s ability to write poems on topical, local subjects that can also be raised to a scale of “largeness and grandeur”—a characteristic common to the mature poetry of Jarrell and Warren alike. These writers, in tapping into the shared human experience through integrating autobiographical material, created personal poetry that simultaneously resonates on a universal level.

In response to the reviews of Lowell’s *Life Studies*, Jarrell approvingly professed to Lowell: “they were good—they hardly *could* have been better. I hope you get all the prizes this spring to wind it up properly” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 443). Lowell did, in fact, win the National Book Award in 1960 and Jarrell followed him in 1961 with the same award for *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*. Much like when Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell were all awarded Guggenheim Fellowships between 1946 and 1947, the back-to-back National Book Awards again established these three authors as forerunners in American literature, and publically linked them to one another during times of great literary success.

In assessing the stylistic changes involved in the transformation from Jarrell’s early to late work, Bryant observes that “the best” of Jarrell’s poetry is:

deeply personal ... whether he was employing the device of monologue or that of the you-address favored by his friend and early mentor Robert Penn Warren. (9)

Essentially, Bryant attributes Jarrell's poetic achievement to the techniques he honed alongside Warren and Lowell. Though Warren successfully integrates autobiographical material in *Promises* and beyond, Lowell is most closely associated with the phrase "deeply personal" poetry; and while Lowell is equally concerned with communicating directly with his audience in *Life Studies* and after, Bryant specifically names Warren and his particular "you-address" technique as responsible for advancing Jarrell's style. As much as Jarrell was an innovator in this literary circle, he was also an insightful scholar who drew from his colleagues for guidance when prudent.

Warren's "you-address" is indicative of a larger initiative that encompasses the later work of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell. As discussed in chapter three, Warren sought for his poetry to "[fulfill] its function of bringing us face to face with our nature and our fate" ("Use of the Past" 31). Similarly, Jarrell argues "that poetry is a crucial human activity to which attention must be paid," and further: "Human life without some form of poetry is not human life but animal existence" (Monroe 264, "Obscurity of the Poet" 16). Moreover, perhaps partly due to their Fugitive roots, both Warren and Jarrell believe that facing one's fate and developing one's selfhood are directly tied to obtaining a true understanding of the past and a greater awareness of the surrounding world. Jarrell names "one of the more frightening things about our age" as the fact that "much of the body of common knowledge that educated people ... once had, has disappeared or is rapidly disappearing." For Jarrell, history is "the ground on which the people

of the past came together” and mankind needs this body of knowledge to be “human beings” and not “human animals” (“Taste of the Age” 32).

Burt explains how Jarrell:

insisted that some sense of our presence in our own history, and of our inward difference from the rest of the world, remained prerequisite for our life with other people, for aesthetic experience, and even ethical action. (S. Burt xii)

Warren articulates an identical ideology in later works, such as *Democracy and Poetry* and “The Use of the Past,” but this theory also underlies parts of his earlier work—poetry, fiction, and prose alike. In *Legacy of the Civil War* (1961), Warren credits “history” for giving man “a program for the future” and “a fuller understanding of ourselves” (*Legacy* 100); *Who Speaks for the Negro* (1965) links an awareness of history to ethical action, as Jarrell did. Long after Jarrell’s death, Warren continues in this vein, passionately insisting:

The past is ... the great pantheon where we can all find the bearers of the values by which we could live. It gives us the image of a community and of a role, an identity, within that community, the image of a self to be achieved. (“Use of the Past” 50)

By employing Warren’s “you-address” in his later poetry, Jarrell is not merely imitating a rhetorical flourish; he is adopting Warren’s technique—and underlying principles—in order to urgently encourage readers towards locating their place in history.

Burt’s chapter on Jarrell’s “Interpersonal Style” attributes his practice mainly to “readings of modernism, of literary history, and of Wordsworth” (23). Indeed, as discussed throughout this study, Jarrell’s sense of “The End of the Line” and his realization that “poets after Pound and Eliot would have to reconnect themselves to the outside world” had a large role in shaping Jarrell’s post WW II style: a mode that “would describe, and try to alleviate, the

isolation of the modern poet.” However, Burt argues that most of all, “Jarrell found models for such poems in Wordsworth,” thereby failing to take into account the equally powerful examples of his contemporaries (26-27). There is no question that Jarrell looked early to Wordsworth while developing his practice of emulating idiomatic speech; nor is it difficult to identify Jarrell’s replication of the technique in which Wordsworth’s narrators interact with an imagined listener. However, to overlook the role of Jarrell’s closest contemporaries within the development of this “interpersonal style” seems a significant omission. Not to discredit the struggles that faced Wordsworth and his fellow Englishmen in the early nineteenth-century, but for Jarrell, the urge to reconnect to the outside world stemmed from the particular sense of isolation that plagued modern Americans—a point Burt acknowledges. It is therefore important to consider Jarrell’s interpersonal style within the context of his connection to Warren and Lowell, writers who similarly faced the unique anxiety and modern loneliness characteristically felt by Americans at mid-century.

Even early intimations of Warren’s “you-address” encourage readers to engage in self-reflection. In “Terror” for example, Warren employs the you-address while his narrator contemplates that human emotion, terror, in situations such as this illustration of German Nazis:

Blood splashed on the terrorless intellect creates  
 Corrosive fizzles like the spattered lime,  
 And its enseamed stew but satiates  
 Itself, in that lewd and faceless pantomime.  
 You know, by radio, how hotly the world repeats,  
 When the brute crowd roars or the blunt boot-heels resound  
 In the Piazza or the Wilhelmsplatz,  
 The crime of Onan, spilled upon the ground;  
 You know, a whose dear hope Alexis Carrel kept  
 Alive in a test tube, where it monstrously grew, and slept. (l. 51-60)



With the pointed words “you know,” and the authentic presentation of history, Warren inserts his reader—willingly or unwillingly—into the action of the poem. Even if the reader does not in fact “know” first-hand of the violence and bloodshed tied to Nazi Germany, Warren implores him to bear witness to these significant moments in the history of humanity. In adopting Warren’s technique, Jarrell also creates poetry that demands the participation of his reader.

Burt points out how Jarrell’s “later poems seek to establish a nexus of recognition between reader and speaker, speaker and listener, actor and observer” (29); this technique is reminiscent of Warren’s implementation of the “you-address” in *Eleven Poems*, “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” and especially *Promises*, in which Warren begins to employ the you-address more frequently, whether to address his daughter, Rosanna, his son, Gabriel, or that other “you” who can be interpreted as Warren’s own psyche or that of an intelligent reader. In Jarrell’s turning point work, *Crutches*, he also begins experimenting more with the you-address, as can be seen in the poem “A Soul” quoted above.<sup>75</sup> At this point, Jarrell most often addresses a specific character within the poem, such as the great-grandmother in “A Rhapsody on Irish Themes,” the devil in “A Conversation with the Devil,” or the woman’s reflection in “The Face”:

Then something goes wrong.  
You are, and you say: I am—  
And you were ... I’ve been too long.

I know, there’s no saying no,  
But just the same you say it. No.  
I’ll point to myself and say: I’m not like this. (l. 13-18)

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<sup>75</sup> Other examples in which Jarrell employs the you-address include: “The Face,” “The Contrary Poet,” “A Rhapsody on Irish Themes,” “A Conversation with the Devil,” “The Black Swan,” and “Afterwards.”

As demonstrated in the lines above, Jarrell also frequently leaves lines half-finished, a stylistic choice that forces the reader to actively fill in the unspoken words of the conversation. Though these techniques demand reader participation, the you-address in Jarrell's *Crutches* does not implicate a wider audience as strongly as the "you" in poems like Warren's "Terror" or "Infant Boy at Midcentury":

When the century dragged, like a great wheel stuck at dead center;  
When the wind that had hurled us our half-century sagged now,  
And only velleity of air somewhat snidely nagged now,  
With no certain commitment to compass, or quarter: you chose to enter.  
(“When the Century Dragged” l. 1-4)

To return to the previously mentioned debate between particularization and generalization, Jarrell's "you" is originally much more particularized, whereas Warren strives to weight his direct address, "you," with an additional layer of "generalized" meaning, one more universal and applicable to his readers.

By the time *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* is published, Jarrell's you-address is decidedly more Warrenesque. Russell Fowler's argument adds support to this assessment: "The poems of [Jarrell's] late period, the products of endless technical experimentation and revision, are intended as psychic 'catalysts'" ("Jarrell's 'Eland'" 189). Similar to Warren's later work, *Washington Zoo* contains poems that intentionally provoke readers to engage in self reflection, not merely to produce answers for the anticipated response of Jarrell's characters, but instead to produce their own answers after contemplating the metaphysical dilemma at hand. Burt adds: "Jarrell and his personae turn at climactic moments to projected or imagined listeners, to a 'you,'

to receive or confirm the experience in the poem” (28); both Warren and Jarrell harness this act of communication to create opportunities for art to be a potent force in society.

The way Jarrell intensifies the impact of the you-address in *Washington Zoo* indicates his development as a poet since *The Seven-League Crutches*. Like *Crutches*, this book is a mixture of dramatic monologue, dialogue, and direct address to the reader. However, after Jarrell’s nine year hiatus, one may note the improvement of his poetic skills in enduring works such as the widely acclaimed title poem, the well-crafted narrative “Nestus Gurley,” the philosophically complex and intellectually satisfying “Jerome,” and the closing poem notable for its skillful imagery, “The Bronze David of Donatello.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, like Warren in his transition from *Promises to Audubon*, *Washington Zoo* demonstrates Jarrell’s lingering growing pains after *Crutches*. For example, “The Girl Dreams That She Is Giselle” ends in forced lines reminiscent of those in “Orestes at Tauris”: “And, piercing, whirls *Remember* / Till my limbs catch. Life, life! I dance” (l. 15-16). Another example, the entertaining “Deutsch Durch Freud” closes with a predictable joke that fuels the poem’s overall impression of being trite and somewhat artless:

The thought of *knowing* German terrifies me.  
 --But surely, this way, no one could learn German?  
 And yet....  
                   It’s difficult; is it impossible?  
 I’m hopeful that it is, but I can’t say  
 For certain: I don’t know enough German.

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<sup>76</sup> In the late fifties, Warren and Cleanth Brooks were editing a new version of *Understanding Poetry* which contains several of Jarrell’s poems. On August 24, 1959, Warren wrote to Jarrell to request an essay to accompany “The Woman at the Washington Zoo” that would “indicat[e] something of the relation of a poem to the poet’s experience.” He included, “I can’t think of anyone who would do a better piece than you” (*Selected Letters of Warren*, Vol. IV 260). Warren was not alone in his appreciation of Jarrell’s title poem nor in his assumption that readers would want to know more about its tale of creation.

Despite these small missteps, Bryant's earlier assertion proves to be true: especially when Jarrell's voice is in line with the stylistic attributes of Warren and Lowell, his poetry is highly successful.

Jarrell's "Jamestown," for example, is particularly reminiscent of Warren's content and style. A first-person narrator contemplates "The True Historie" of Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in America. A mirror of Warren's technique, Jarrell's narrator invokes prominent historical figures—John Smith and Pocahontas—in order to contemplate the validity of American history, and man's place within it:

--Is nothing here American?  
 John Smith is squashed  
 Beneath the breasts of Pocahontas: some true Christian,  
 Engraving all, has made the captain Man,  
 The maiden the most voluptuous of newts.  
 Met in a wood and lain with, this red demon,  
 The mother of us all, lies lovingly  
 Upon the breastplate of our father: the First Family  
 Of Jamestown trembles beneath the stone  
 Axe—then Powhatan, smiling, gives the pair his blessing  
 And nymphs and satyrs foot it at their wedding.  
 ...

The two lived happily  
 Forever after.... And I only am escaped alone  
 To tell the story. But how shall I tell the story?  
 The settlers died? All settlers die. The colony  
 Was a Lost Colony? All colonies are lost.  
 ...  
 Powhatan,  
 Smiling at that red witch, red wraith, his daughter,  
 Said to the father of us all, John Smith:  
 'American,  
 To thyself be enough!...' He was enough—  
 Enough, or too much. The True Historie  
 Of the Colony of Jamestown is a wish. (l. 4-14, 19-23, 28-34)

Though the elements of fantasy—nymphs, satyrs, and witches—are distinctly Jarrellian, his narrator’s consideration of and desire for righting the True Historie is conspicuously Warrenesque. The questions—“how should I tell the story?”—and later:

No world, there is only you. But what are you?  
 The world has become you. But what are you?  
 Ask;  
 Ask, while the time to ask remains to you. (l. 45-48)

conduct the same metaphysical investigation that is often at the heart of Warren’s poems. The narrator implores “you,” the reader, to also consider his own essence in the context of the world surrounding him. Jarrell’s “what are you?” directly echoes Warren’s line from “The Ballad of Billie Potts”: “Think of yourself at dawn: Which are you? What?” (l. 144). Arguably, Jarrell’s “interpersonal style,” though shaped partly by Wordsworth, is also a reflection of his connection to and admiration for Warren.

Just as there are multiple factors involved in the development of Jarrell’s interpersonal style, there are also several contributing causes that led to the more personal poetry Jarrell generated in his last years. Vendler observes how in “The End of the Line,” Jarrell associated “idiosyncratic individualism” with modernism, and therefore: “This sense led early to a growing drift from the personal that was not reversed until *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* and *The Lost World*” (“The Complete Poems” 98). In light of literary history, Vendler’s comment highlights the fact that the late fifties and early sixties, in general, marked a reversal from the disdain and contempt temporarily reserved for personal, intimate poetry. The success of the Beat poets and other writers who included private subject matter—such as W.D. Snodgrass, John

Berryman, and, of course, Lowell—reintroduced an opportunity for writers to explore autobiographical material in artful ways.

Though some reviewers criticize the autobiographical nature of Jarrell's title poems, several critics—including Lowell—have deemed Jarrell's last book as his finest (Bryant 153). Burt, for example, observes: "Jarrell seems to have been developing quietly a new direction for his poetic talent that would not bear its fruit until the year of his death, when he published *The Lost World*" (131). Part of this "new direction" entails the occasional break from his guarded dramatic monologues in favor of the first-person Jarrellian narrator. The poems in *Lost World* most clearly demonstrate the direct influence Lowell had on Jarrell's personal poetry, but *Washington Zoo* also contains evidence of this impact. Readers get a glimpse of the future narrator of "The Lost World" in several places in *Washington Zoo*. "In Those Days," for example, includes lines of an adult narrator reflecting on childhood memories: "How poor and miserable we were, / How seldom together! / And yet after so long one thinks: / In those days everything was better" (l. 13-16). "The Elementary Scene," "Windows," "Aging," and, a fitting title for Jarrell, "The Lonely Man," similarly present a point of view that—like Lowell's voice in *Life Studies*—is unmistakably inspired by Jarrell's biography.

Another element of Jarrell's work that can be attributed partly to Lowell's influence is his inclusion of twelve translations in *Washington Zoo*.<sup>77</sup> Jarrell's letters reveal that, more than anyone else, Lowell was his main point of contact regarding the subject of translating poetry. It

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<sup>77</sup> These translations fit naturally into Jarrell's body of work since they contain parallel themes of childhood, isolation, and loneliness. The female narrator in Jarrell's title poem even bears a remarkable similarity to the weary, desperate narrator in his translation of Rilke's "The Grown-Up."

is further evident that Jarrell drew encouragement and inspiration for this pursuit from Lowell, whose *Phaedra* translation was published the same year as *Washington Zoo*, with *Imitations* just one year later. In a characteristic chain of correspondences, Jarrell reported to Lowell in early 1960: “I’m translating too, just like you” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 442). Lowell, in turn, wrote to Jarrell: “I have read your bunch of translations with increased wonder. It’s amazing how close you are, and yet the solemnity and vibrance remain. I think I even prefer you at times to the original” (*Letters of Lowell* 359). Perhaps one reason Lowell took such a liking to Jarrell’s translations is because their personal tone and style of highly accessible verse happens to closely resemble Lowell’s own style in *Life Studies*.

One last notable issue in *Washington Zoo* that ties Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell together is a factor that also shapes Jarrell’s next book of prose, *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*. Each chapter of this study mentions the influential role of the American cultural crisis in the work of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell alike. Chapter two notes specifically how all three poets shared an almost crippling fear of “the big bomb” throughout the post WW II era. Nelson Hathcock reports that for Jarrell specifically, “The existential terror of the arms race was indeed a reality for Jarrell, ‘the bomb’ its overarching trope” (“Standardizing” 125). Around the time Jarrell was writing poems for *The Washington Zoo*, Mary Jarrell reported:

Cal Lowell’s letters at this time were full of the grim realities of the bomb and mass death, and they stuck in Randall’s mind and made him sad. “But Cal is right,” he said and wouldn’t be comforted. “What an age to be part of!” (“Group of Two” 289)

A poetic manifestation of this shared fear—in addition to the previously discussed “Jerome”—is Jarrell’s poem, “The End of the Rainbow,” which directly echoes, responds to, and borrows from Lowell’s “Where the Rainbow Ends,” the closing poem of *Lord Weary’s Castle*.

Jeffrey Meyers also draws a connection between Lowell’s and Jarrell’s poems, but he attributes a vicious competition between the artists as the reason Jarrell chooses to implicate Lowell’s work:

As the poets [Jarrell and Lowell] measured each other’s faults as well as strengths, Jarrell began to reveal his poetic debts to Lowell. The influence was obvious to both poets, who began to mock each other publically, if not in print. The Title of Lowell’s “Where the Rainbow Ends” (1946) reappeared in Jarrell’s “The End of the Rainbow” (1954). (Meyers 44)

As often happens among this trio, Jarrell completes the literary circle by writing to Warren about his poem in July 1954, excitedly reporting: “I’ve just finished a long poem [“The End of the Rainbow”] I wrote for my first six weeks out here—I think it’s one of the best I’ve ever written so, as you can imagine, I really feel good” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 399). Contrary to Meyers’ account, these do not sound like the words of a poet who crafted a poem with the specific intention to “mock” Lowell. Instead, Lowell appears to have inspired Jarrell to create a poem that greatly pleased him.

At first glance, Lowell’s and Jarrell’s poems are quite different from each other in both style and content. Lowell’s poem, written in the mode of his early style, is constructed into three ten-line stanzas of iambic pentameter with a repeating ‘abcbcadeed’ rhyme scheme. Jarrell’s poem, on the other hand, defies traditional formulas. A mixture of narrative, dialogue, dream sequence, and spontaneous interjections, his chaotic form resembles the underlying apocalyptic



theme that unites his work with Lowell's. Jarrell's first lines reference Lowell's poem while simultaneously establishing distance (literal and figurative) from it. Lowell begins: "I saw the sky descending, black and white, / Not blue, on Boston where the winters wore," thereby setting the scene in his hometown of Boston. Jarrell starts: "Far from the clams and fogs and bogs / -- The cranberry bogs—of Ipswich," purposely pointing to the fact that his "rainbow ends" far from Lowell's Massachusetts (where the female character is from) and instead in a place connected to *his* childhood, in "The sun of Southern California" (l. 9).

Just as Lowell's poem follows a traditional format, it also satisfies the typical conventions of apocalyptic literature. The description of apocalypse formulated by M.H. Abrams will serve as the definition for the purposes of this study:

Revelation (or in the Greek derivative, Apocalypse) is the concluding book of the biblical canon which presents, in the mode of symbolic visions, a series of events, even now beginning, which will culminate in the abrupt end of the present, evil world-order and its replacement by a regenerate mankind in a new and perfected condition of life (343).

A quick scan of the apocalyptic imagery in Lowell's poem reveals a faithful representation of this traditional literary representation of apocalypse: "Hunger," "worms will eat the deadwood," "scythers, Time and Death," "locusts," "scorched-earth," "judgment rising and descending," "dead leaves char the air," "Revelations," "serpent-Time," "serpents," "victim," "lion, lamb, and beast," "furnace-face," "marriage feast," "exile," "dove has brought an olive branch." Lowell's poem moves from desperate end-times to an abrupt abolishment of evil, as the narrator describes:

I saw my city in the Scales, the pans  
Of judgment rising and descending. Piles  
Of dead leaves char the air—  
And I am a red arrow on this graph  
Of Revelations. (l. 14-18)

Finally, “the dove of Jesus,” or the Second Coming, brings “an olive branch,” a symbol for peace and a “new and perfected condition of life.”

Jarrell’s poem also follows the formula for apocalyptic literature, but—like his aesthetic form—his poem is far less conventional in fulfilling the checklist of necessary characteristics. As with Lowell’s poem, a scan of Jarrell’s apocalyptic imagery reveals the pattern of end-times, followed by an abrupt end to “evil,” and finally, the creation of a new peaceful world: “tadpoles feathering,” “burnt hands,” “face is masked,” “seals are barking,” “Death,” “darkness,” “Proverbs,” “evil communications,” “a detour of the path / Of righteousness,” “God,” “soul,” “praise Heaven!” “Scriptures,” “the earth / Lies light upon the old, and they are wakeful,” “wakeful,” “wakeful,” “wakes,” “Father,” “colors,” “warm,” and “safe.” Far from the traditional biblical tone of Lowell’s poem, Jarrell’s poem centers on a woman, named “Content,” who has much in common with the despairing female in the title poem who longs to “change,” who craves a “new and perfected condition of life.” Content is unmarried and without children (other than her beloved pet dog, Su-Su IV), and through a series of memories of a past lover, surreal dream sequences, and an imagined conversation with Death, she comes—in the end—to accept her life as “a success.” Ultimately, Jarrell transforms Lowell’s biblical apocalypse into a psychological apocalypse that results in newfound peace for Content’s soul at the end of the rainbow.

***“A Real Point of Departure in Contemporary Real Life”: Jarrell’s Last Works***

Jarrell’s fear of the “modern” apocalypse—the end of the world via atomic bomb—fuels his next prose book, *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*. Hathcock identifies that though Jarrell’s terror was stirred by the bomb, “his revulsion was just as powerfully triggered by the cultural apocalypse” (“Standardizing” 125). Like in Warren’s *Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (1961) and in Lowell’s increasing concern for society demonstrated in poems such as “For the Union Dead,” Jarrell turned his attention in the early sixties to the distressing reality of modern America:

The climate of our culture is changing. Under these new rains, new suns, small things grow great and what was great grows small; whole species disappear and are replaced. The American present is very different from the American past: so different that our awareness of the extent of the changes has been repressed. (“Sad Heart” 86)

All three poets, more than ever, lamented in unison publically and privately to one another about America’s reverence for money and material things. Jarrell bewails: “The act of buying something is at the root of our world”—and the resulting disregard for history and intellectualism (“Sad Heart” 75).

The following instances reveal a similar attitude among Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell towards society, history, and the need to address both in writing. In March 1961, Jarrell wrote to Warren commending his “live” and authentic portrayal of the Civil War:

I have wanted to write you about your Civil War piece in *Life* ... The amount of knowledge in it, the amount of attention you paid to the noblest and basest things in the war, and the thoroughly live and thoroughly dignified style were all just extraordinary.

Furthermore, in November 1961, Jarrell wrote to Lowell addressing the current state of the world: “I feel about the world, now, just as you do: it’s heartbreaking. Who would believe even

people could get things to this point?” Finally, in October 1961, Warren addressed an audience of two thousand in a tribute to Jarrell and praised him thusly:

his severe passion for high standards of intelligence and reason have turned inward into a self-demanding scrupulosity in his own writing that is seasoned by humor with an undertone of piety for human failing and human feeling (*Jarrell's Letters* 448, 451, 449).

Clearly, all three artists were inspired to capture the issues of the world—and man's struggle within it—in their writing.

Jarrell, Warren, and Lowell understood poetry to be both a healing salve and a potent force through which to enact change; however, they were realistic about the difficulties involved. In wise words often quoted, Jarrell observes: “When we look at the age in which we live—no matter what age it happens to be—it is hard for us not to be depressed by it. The taste of the age is, always, a bitter one” (“Taste of the Age” 16). Almost twenty years prior, Jarrell declared that one must write about the world to make it “bearable” (*Jarrell's Letters* 65). Amid growing grief over the ills of society and an increasing battle with depression, the last few years of Jarrell's life found him still doing just that.

After Jarrell's death, Warren and Lowell continued to publish poetry for many years, steadily maturing into styles that were ever more distinctly their own. In the same way that Warren reached his turning point in *Promises* but found his voice in *Audubon*, Jarrell's *Lost World* marks his first fully mature book of poems; it is highly unfortunate that it would also be his last. Mary Jarrell reported how Jarrell was in a particularly gloomy disposition right before *Sad Heart* was published:

until he found a sentence of Luther's that seemed to ward it off: *And even if the world should end tomorrow I still would plant my little apple-tree*. He quoted this to Cal, and to

classes, and put it in the front of his book *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*.” (“Group of Two” 289)

Though the prophetic essays and wise criticism in *Sad Heart* prove to be influential and lasting in the world of American letters, the term “little apple-tree” seems more appropriate for Jarrell’s final book of poetry, *The Lost World*. Lowell says it best: “In his last and best book, *The Lost World*, [Jarrell] used subjects and methods he had been developing and improving for almost twenty years” (“Randall Jarrell” 96). Indeed, *Lost World* is a culmination of what Jarrell had been working towards since his initial quest for “what comes next” that began in the 1940s. Warren’s “you-address” and Lowell’s personal poetry continue to be hallmarks of this final work, yet the openness, vitality, and earthy quality—the “perverse savage” feature, in Lowell’s words—of this work, combine effectively to earn the title, Jarrell’s “best book.”

As stated earlier, private reviews are often more telling than public ones; therefore Lowell’s letter to Elizabeth Bishop on February 25, 1965 grants a fuller sense of his true reaction to Jarrell’s work:

[Jarrell’s] worst fault is the repetition of a style and subject.... Endless women, done with a slightly mannered directness, repeated verbal and syntactical tricks, and an often perverse and sadistic tenderness—but I am getting into clichés in describing. I like him better than any of us except you when he is good. (*Letters of Lowell* 456)

Indeed, one does get a sense of déjà vu after reading so many dramatic monologues from the point of view of unhappy, aging female narrators:

When I was young and miserable and pretty  
And poor, I’d wish  
What all girls wish: to have a husband,  
A house and children. Now that I’m old, my wish  
Is womanish:  
That the boy putting groceries in my car

See me. It bewilders me he doesn't see me. ("Next Day" l. 13-19)

However, even with the repetition in subject and perspective, these poems come alive in a way that Jarrell's earlier poems do not. After almost twenty years had passed, Jarrell finally takes his own advice to "start from a real point of departure in contemporary real life" (*Jarrell's Letters* 139). Lowell is correct: "when he is good," he is among the best. Along with the superior title poem, almost the entire book—save "Woman" and "In Nature There is Neither Right nor Left nor Wrong"—captures glimpses, if not entire poems' worth of *real life*, vivid and engaging. Though Jarrell had been encouraging Warren and Lowell towards "authenticity" for over twenty years, this work captures that quality most convincingly.

Though several of these poems deserve close attention merely for their poetic achievement, it is most fruitful for this study to point to the places in which Jarrell chooses to emulate Warren and Lowell. As in *Washington Zoo*, Jarrell continues to develop Warren's technique of the you-address in order to engage his readers in meaningful acts of self-reflection. "In Galleries" is a particularly fine example of how—similar to Warren's work—the themes of Jarrell's prose are rendered into poetic form. In Jarrell's "The Taste of the Age," he observes:

Nothing is as dead as day-before-yesterday's newspaper.... Yet the novelist or poet or dramatist, when he moves a great audience, depends upon the deep feelings, the living knowledge, that the people of that audience share; if so much has become contingent, superficial, ephemeral, it is disastrous for him. (75)

Essentially, Jarrell points to the power of archetypes—which slowly fades along with society's fading knowledge—upon which the artist must draw in order to move an audience. Jarrell

glorifies, not only the role of the novelist, poet, or dramatist, but also the ability of audience members to comprehend such a power.

In “In Galleries,” Jarrell similarly exalts not only art, but those who facilitate and grasp the necessary appreciation for that art. Jarrell focuses on the stereotype of the often-ignored American gallery guard who “has no one to make him human” by noticing his presence (l. 6). He then paints an Italian version of this unlikely hero in high regard: a champion of the arts, rare amid the current society’s lack of appreciation for anything other than the “superficial” and “ephemeral.” Jarrell describes:

But in Italy, sometimes, a guard is different.  
 He is poorer than a guard would be at home—  
 How cheap his old uniform is, how dirty!  
 He is a fountain of Italian:  
 He pulls back a curtain, shows you where to stand,  
 Cajoles you back to the Ludovisi Throne  
 To show you the side people forget to look at—  
 And exclaiming hopefully, vivaciously,  
*Bellissima!* he shows you that in the smashed  
 Head of the crouching Venus the untouched lips  
 Are still parted hopefully, vivaciously,  
 In a girl’s clear smile. He speaks and smiles;  
 And whether or not you understand Italian,  
 You understand he is human, and still hopes—  
 And, smiling, repeating his *Bellissima!*  
 You give him a dime’s worth of aluminum.

You may even see a guard who is dumb, ...

...

His gestures are full of faith in—of faith.  
 When at last he takes a magnifying glass  
 From the shiny pocket of his uniform  
 And shows you that in the painting of a woman  
 Who holds in her arms the death of the world  
 The something on the man’s arm is the woman’s  
 Tear, you and the man and the woman and the guard

Are dumbly one. You say *Bellissima!*  
*Bellissima!* and give him his own rapt,  
 Dumb, human smile, convinced he guards  
 A miracle. Leaving, you hand the man  
 A quarter's worth of nickel and aluminum. (l. 16-32, 36-47)

The word “you” is used thirteen times in this poem—a high ratio for Jarrell—always in the further reaching, universalizing address of “you” that is characteristic of Warren’s work. In this poem, appreciating art is what renders someone *human*; even the “dumb” guard has the ability to bring about a spiritually moving moment in which “you and the man and the woman and the guard / Are dumbly one.” In a final reference to his views on American culture, he paints *you* as “*you* give him a dime” and “*you* hand the man / A quarter’s worth of nickel and aluminum.” Jarrell is, ultimately, saying to *you*, his audience, *this* is what *you* should value: the power of art that transcends language, faith, and even intelligence. Art is what makes *us* one.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to Warren’s influence, Jarrell draws heavily from Lowell’s example in this last book. Much has already been written on how Jarrell emulates Lowell’s deeply personal style, particularly in the title poem’s sequence. Critics like Watson note: “For the first time he wrote extensively about his own life, a subject that had seldom entered his poems directly” (“Last Years” 267). Some lines from “Children’s Arms” reveal how different this poem is from Jarrell’s typical dramatic monologue:

My grandfather and I sit there in oneness  
 As the Sunset bus, lit by the lavender  
 And rose of sunrise, takes us to the dark  
 Echoing cavern where Pop, a worker,  
 Works for our living. (page 285)

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<sup>78</sup> Jarrell’s utilizes the “you-address” in a similar fashion in “Well Water,” “The Lost Children,” “Hope,” “The One Who Was Different,” and “Field and Forest,” to name a few.



It is no wonder why Lowell reported to Bishop on May 8, 1963: “Randall has written an awfully good nineteen page terza rima poem on his childhood in Hollywood ‘The Lost World’” (*Letters of Lowell* 422). Lowell most likely acknowledged the similarities of Jarrell’s personal style to his own.

Jarrell’s lines blend almost seamlessly with those of Lowell’s in “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” a poem that Jarrell praised to Lowell in a letter: “I like the poem *very* much. The motion has changed and it is much clearer and easier” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 427). In other words, in being “clearer and easier,” it is more colloquial, conversational, and similar to regular speech:

Nowhere was anywhere after a summer  
at my Grandfather’s farm.  
...  
One of my hands was cool on a pile  
of black earth, the other warm  
on a pile of lime. All about me  
were the works of my Grandfather’s hands: (l. 6-7, 20-23)

Though Warren naturally had more warmth, earthiness, and life in his writing from the start, Jarrell had, at this point, finally began to capture the quality of vitality he had been striving towards. Watson says of Jarrell—which may also be said of the work of Warren and Lowell in this period—“Certainly ‘The Lost World’ is a poem that speaks directly to us in mid-twentieth century America, to our lives” (“Last Years” 270).

In addition to the intimate first-person narration technique that Jarrell borrows from Lowell, there are also several places in which Jarrell echoes Lowell’s particular themes and diction. Lowell commented on this phenomenon to Bishop while privately reviewing Jarrell’s

work: “Most of the opening poems I think for the long ‘Lost World’ are good and I found *I was underlying a lot of lines in poems I didn’t entirely like*” (emphasis added, *Letters of Lowell* 456).

Whether Lowell noticed it or not, he was also underlying a lot of lines in poems he *did* like, those poems of the “The Lost World” in particular. Jarrell frequently echoes language from “For the Union Dead,” one of Lowell’s poems that he held in highest regard. For example, Jarrell’s last four lines of “Children’s Arms” depict the following image from the narrator’s recollection of childhood:

We press our noses  
To the glass and wish: the angel- and devilfish  
Floating by on Vine, on Sunset, shut their eyes  
And press their noses to the glass and wish. (page 287)

These lines are almost identical, in tone, diction, and imagery, to the second stanza of Lowell’s “For the Union Dead,” in which the narrator—also recalling a childhood memory—relates his experience at the old South Boston Aquarium:

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;  
my hand tingled  
to burst the bubbles  
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish. (l. 5-8)

Both narrators are frozen in eternity, noses pressed to glass, longing to interact with literal and figurative “fish.” In Lowell’s poem, after these lines, the narrator breaks from his reverie and returns to present day, catching himself reaching out while reliving that childhood memory. In response, he reports: “My hand draws back” (l. 9). Jarrell echoes this line in “Thinking of the Lost World,” as his narrator recalls: “Standing there empty-handed; I reach out to it / Empty-

handed, my hand comes back empty” (page 338). Again, a reader naturally connects this image to the one already illustrated by Lowell.

Perhaps one of Jarrell’s poems that Lowell “didn’t entirely like,” Jarrell also emulates the themes and language of “For the Union Dead” in “The Old and the New Masters.” Lowell’s apocalyptic “Union Dead” expresses grief over a modern society that, instead of worshipping Christ and revering war heroes, pays their utmost reverence to commercialism:

The ditch is nearer.  
There are no statues for the last war here;  
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph  
shows Hiroshima boiling  
  
over a Mosler Safe, the “Rock of Ages”  
that survived the blast. Space is nearer. (l. 53-58)

In a similar fashion, Jarrell first describes “the old masters” who: “When someone suffers, no one else eats” (l. 1-2). This is a community of the faithful who suffer together: “The taste of vinegar ... on every tongue,” and who believe “everything / That was or will be in the world is fixed / On its small, helpless, human center,” Jesus Christ (l. 19, 47-49). Though Jarrell, unlike Lowell, is not particularly known for his religiosity, he—like Lowell—was concerned by the shift of the “new masters” of American society who strayed far from the grounding center of Christ. In the end, Jarrell’s observation echoes that of Lowell’s:

For the dogs playing at the feet of Christ,  
The earth is a planet among galaxies.  
Later Christ disappears, the dogs disappear: in abstract  
Understanding, without adoration, the last master puts  
Colors on canvas, a picture of the universe  
In which a bright spot somewhere in the corner  
Is the small radioactive planet men called Earth. (l. 55-61)

Similar to Lowell's poem, Jarrell's apocalyptic vision paints the Earth as doomed for men who "come to see / What is important [and] see that it is not important" (l. 51-52).

A final example that demonstrates the link between Lowell and Jarrell, is Jarrell's subtle likeness in "X-Ray Waiting Room in the Hospital" to Lowell's "Waking in the Blue." Beneath the lines of these poems is a biographical connection between the two poets. Lowell's first acute manic episode was in 1949. After that first trip to the hospital, he was in and out of hospitals and sanatoriums for the rest of his life. Jarrell, on the other hand, only began to suffer seriously from depression in 1963. After Jarrell cut his wrist in April 1965, he too began the cycle of medication and hospitalization. Lowell wrote to console him:

I must say that I am heart-broken to hear that you have been sick. Your courage, brilliance and generosity should have saved you from this, but I suppose all good qualities are unavailing. I have been through this sort of thing so often myself that I suppose there's little in your experience that I haven't had over and over. What's worst, I think, is the groveling, low as dirt purgatorial feelings with which one emerges. If you have such feelings, let me promise you that they are temporary.... Please let me tell you how much I admire you and your work and thank you for the many times when you have given me the strength to continue. Let me know if there's anything I can do. And courage, old Friend! (*Letters of Lowell* 458)

This touching, sincere letter embodies their commiseration over common struggles and also demonstrates how they drew closer to one another at the end of Jarrell's life.

Returning to the poetry, Jarrell's "X-Ray Waiting Room" appears to be a nod to Lowell's "Waking in the Blue." Unlike Lowell, who openly admits, "(This is the house for the 'mentally ill.')" (l. 10), Jarrell transforms the purpose of his narrator's hospital visit into a "myelogram" for his spine. Despite this thin veil to cover the truth of his personal life, Jarrell establishes a tie to Lowell's poem immediately:

I am dressed in my big shoes and wrinkled socks  
 And one of the light blue, much-laundered smocks  
 The men and women of this country wear.  
 All of us miss our own underwear  
 And the old days. These new, plain, mean  
 Days of pain and care, this routine  
 Misery has made us into cases... (l. 1-7)

Though Jarrell is ostensibly complaining about inadequacies of “modern” health care, it is difficult not to read more deeply into lines such as “All of us miss our own underwear / And the old days.” The great leap from under garments to a desperate longing in general for past times hints to the fact that the “misery” Jarrell describes is derived from much more than a blue smock. It is that blue smock, however, that readers of Lowell connect instinctively to “Waking in the Blue.” Lowell’s narrator complains: the “Azure day / makes my agonized blue window bleaker” (l. 5-6). These men were equally connected to one another in the “blue-ness” of their hospital visits and even more so in the greater misery of the world that haunted Jarrell to his untimely death that same year.

After Jarrell’s accidental death / suicide, Lowell wrote letters to Bishop in which he contemplated his friend’s state of mind and the details of his death. In the end, Lowell concludes: “Oh but he was an absolutely gifted, and noble man, poisoned and killed, though I can’t prove it, by our tasteless, superficial, brutal culture” (*Letters of Lowell* 465-466). Lowell felt especially tied to Jarrell in the end through their lamentations on American culture. Throughout the rest of his life, Lowell spared no opportunity to express an outpouring of appreciation for Jarrell and his invaluable presence in the literary world.

Warren, also deeply grieved by the loss of his friend, took a slightly different though characteristic approach to handling Jarrell's death. Unlike Lowell, who mourned by writing lengthy, emotional letters to friends, Warren turned his sorrow into action. More than anyone else, Warren took charge in planning Jarrell's memorial—from the larger points to the smaller details of logistics. He wrote to Jarrell's widow:

Three people would speak for some 15 minutes, and a number of others some 5 or 6 minutes, the whole program lasting a little under an hour and a half. This would be followed by a reception, or something of the sort. We—the people who are making the arrangements—are very anxious to have you come. Would you be willing? ... Please know that [this letter] represents something of the affection and admiration in which Randall was held by many, man people. I have always regarded him as a bright and particular spot in my own life, and, as you know, have held him as a prized and special friend. (*Selected Letters of Warren, Vol. IV* 445)

Warren penned similar letters to Ransom and Tate, and also took a lead role alongside Lowell as editor in the tribute book, *Randall Jarrell: 1914-1965*. Lowell and Warren equally mourned the loss of this significant figure in their lives—their mentor, colleague, and dear friend. A line from Jarrell's "The Intellectual in America" is a fitting conclusion to his life and to this chapter:

The man who will make us see what we haven't seen, feel what we haven't felt, understand what we haven't understood—he *is* our best friend. (15)

Not only does this quotation describe the relationships among Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell—each equally bringing one another constantly to new levels of understanding—it also serves as an appropriate description for the role Jarrell played, and continues to play, in the lives of his readers.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ROBERT LOWELL

*Chapter five similarly explores Lowell's work in relation to Warren and Jarrell. More specifically, it aims to reconsider Lowell's place in literary history, questioning the "confessional" label while pointing to Warren's and Jarrell's influence on his turning point work, Life Studies, and from Imitations (1961) to Last Poems (1977).*

### ***Joining the Conversation on Lowell's Place in Literary History***

One of the overarching goals of this study is to add complexity to some generally accepted views of literary history through a close, sustained examination of the significant relationships among Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell. Of this trio, the sheer volume of critical studies on Lowell outweighs that of Warren and Jarrell combined. Lowell's ancestry alone elicits critical attention, especially after it became the subject matter of his work. William Doeski notes: "Any good writer can excite an interest in any character, but a subject who is already famous gives the literary work an additional impetus" ("Gallant" 118). Lowell's personal battle with manic depression also inspired a great number of critical works.<sup>79</sup> Not only are critics fascinated by the supposed relationship between Lowell's mental state and his creative process, they also point to the sensationalistic nature of Lowell's behavior as he, in his own words, "sped up" before each mental break.

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<sup>79</sup> Lowell's illness serves as a narrative thread for the following works: Steven Gould Axelrod, "Lowell's *The Dolphin* as a 'Book of Life'" (1977); Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (1978); Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell, A Biography* (1982); Alan Holder, "Going Back, Going Down, Breaking: *Day by Day*" (1986) Jeffrey Meyers, *Manic Power: Robert Lowell and His Circle* (1987); and Christian Sisack, "Lowell's 'Confessional' Subjectivities and Compulsory Confessional Moments" (2003), to name a few.

Paul Mariani and Doreski relate the alleged, likely exaggerated, incident when Lowell “picked up Tate, dangled him out the window, and recited ‘Ode to the Confederate Dead’ to him” (Mariani 182, Doreski, *Years* 89); and Ian Hamilton recounts Lowell’s disastrous visit to Argentina during which he drunkenly insulted the future President and generally wreaked havoc everywhere he went. Lowell’s conduct was purportedly so intolerable that his guide, Keith Botsford, abandoned him after five difficult days only for Elizabeth Bishop to shame him into returning to retrieve the ailing poet (Hamilton 299-303). These are merely highlights in a long string of colorful episodes that create the backdrop of Lowell’s prestigious literary career.

Another point of interest for critics is Lowell’s love life, which he mined extensively for his poetic works of the 1970s. Before the controversially public split from second wife Elizabeth Hardwick for his “dolphin” Caroline Blackwood in 1972, Lowell’s manic phases were marked by a pattern of courting young women and promising them marriage and a “new start” together. These affairs were difficult for his wife and his friends. Lowell’s second acute manic episode in 1952 resulted in a passionate love affair with an Italian woman named Giovanna Madonia with whom, as he complained to Bishop, Jarrell was forced to “do quite a bit of difficult corresponding with ... since [Lowell had] named me, in letters, as the American friend to correspond with” (*Jarrell’s Letters* 414). Several years later, a newly infatuated Lowell dedicated “Waking in the Blue” to Ann Adden. The same lover served as muse for four poems in *History* (1973), with intimate lines such as:

Remember standing with me in the dark,  
Ann Adden? In the mad house? Everything—  
I mad, you mad for me? (lines 1-3, “For Ann Adden 1. 1958”)



The scandalous nature of Lowell's trysts continues to draw attention even today. As recently as March 3, 2013, the *New York Times* critic Claudia La Rocco glowingly reviewed Carlene Bauer's recent publication, *Frances and Bernard*, a fictional work based on an imagined love affair between Lowell and Flannery O'Connor.

Adding to the coverage on his family, mental illness, and courtships, Lowell's political activity attracted further public attention—equal parts approval and reproach—as he often blurred the line between art and politics. Due to its reference in “Memories of West Street and Lepke,”<sup>80</sup> Lowell's role as a conscientious objector to World War II is often recounted; his anti-war stance is immortalized in a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in which he denounces the war's objectives.<sup>81</sup> Lowell was subsequently censured with a year-long sentence for which he served five months imprisoned, performing moderate manual labor—such as mopping floors—while intermittently working on his poetry “proofs.” Lowell presents a less than torturous account of his time in prison:

I slept among eighty men, a foot apart, and grew congenial with other idealist felons, who had homemade faiths. I was thankful to find jail gentler than boarding school or college—an adult fraternity.  
(“A Conversation with Ian Hamilton” 279, Mariani 106, Meyers 39)

Just six years later, Lowell again made headlines when he accused Agnes Smedley, a revolutionary journalist, and Elizabeth Ames, the director of the Yaddo writing institute, of being Soviet spies (Doreski, *Years* 85, Mariani 177). Even though these claims were deemed bogus,

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<sup>80</sup> “These are the tranquilized *Fifties*, / and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime? / I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O., / and made my manic statement, / telling off the state and president, and then / sat waiting sentence in the bull pen” (“Memories of West Street and Lepke,” lines 12-17).

<sup>81</sup> September 7, 1943: “The war has entered on an unforeseen phase; one that can by no possible extension of the meaning of the words be called defensive. By demanding unconditional surrender we reveal our complete confidence in the outcome, and declare that we are prepared to wage a war without quarter or principles, to the permanent destruction of Germany and Japan” (*Letters of Lowell* 39).

Lowell's meddling proved to be devastating to Yaddo. Malcolm Cowley recalls, "Ames went to a nursing home. Her secretary resigned. Yaddo was left like a stricken battlefield" (qtd. in Mariani 178). Not surprisingly, this incident precipitated Lowell's first serious manic episode in 1949. Yaddo was where Lowell enjoyed collegial support and where he developed a relationship with his second wife of over twenty years; his public attack on Smedley and Ames serves as another example of the destructive manic behavior that often plagued Lowell and those surrounding him.

In a political move more favorably received by his colleagues, Lowell later wrote a public letter to Lyndon B. Johnson refusing his White House invitation as an act of protest against the president's policy on Vietnam. Lowell explained that while he supported Johnson's domestic choices, he "can only follow our present foreign policy with the greatest dismay and distrust" (*Letters of Lowell* 459). In an act that solidified their shared political views, Warren joined eighteen other influential writers and artists in signing Lowell's published letter. He explained to Lon Cheney:

Yes, I did associate myself with Cal Lowell's statement.... I was for anything that would get the issue in the open.... I also recognize a distinction between the arts and politics, but it is not an air-tight distinction: I don't think that Cal's position is the only one but I did—and do—think that it is a tenable one. (*Letters of Warren, Vol. IV* 450-451)

Another highly visible instance of taking political action, in October of 1967, Lowell marched with Norman Mailer to the Washington steps of the Department of Justice in order to address a crowd of Vietnam protesters. Mailer provides a memorable depiction of Lowell's rapt audience: "They adored [Lowell]—for his talent, his modesty, his superiority, his melancholy, his

petulance, his weakness, his painful, almost stammering shyness, his noble strength—there was the string behind other strings” (“from *The Steps*” 252).

Aside from these more inflammatory incidents, Lowell also garnered attention for speaking at the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace (1949), the Boston Arts Festival (1960)—at which he read his highly political poem, “For the Union Dead”—and at the Library of Congress, where he delivered a short speech on the Gettysburg Address (1964). Lowell sounded off in a 1962 issue of the *Partisan Review* on the “Cold War and the West”: “No nation should possess, use or retaliate with its bombs. I believe we should rather die than drop our own bombs” (qtd. in Hamilton 295). Furthermore, the provocative statements in Lowell’s last prose piece serve as a final barb to the American government: “Politics? We live in the sunset of Capitalism. We have thundered nobly against its bad record all our years, yet we still cling to its vestiges” (“After Enjoying” 991). As will be explored, similar to the works of the politically conscious Warren and Jarrell, Lowell’s impassioned views on national affairs and American culture often serve as underlying themes in his later poetry.

Though the combination of Lowell’s undeniable poetic talent and these captivating biographical elements is enough to ignite curiosity in readers, a more conceptual reason prompts scholars to focus heavily on Lowell. Ultimately, he serves as an exemplary figure for the “breakthrough” narrative of literary history that was created and upheld by critics who were working to classify poetic trends of the late twentieth-century. James Longenbach, author of *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (1997), summarizes the main argument:

Reduced to its barest outline, the story goes like this: after writing several books of highly praised New Critical well-wrought urns (objective and impersonal), Robert Lowell

understood that poetry could be fragmentary, subjective, personal, and the result was *Life Studies*, a watershed in twentieth-century poetry. (5)

Though there is substantial validity in this viewpoint, it does not account for the gradual changes in Lowell's work, nor does it present the entire scope of Lowell's career. Stripped of complexity, this argument works primarily to fit Lowell, and other poets like him, into a neat category.

James E. B. Breslin in *From Modern to Contemporary* (1985) and David Perkins in *A History of Modern Poetry* (1987) develop arguments from this slightly reductive point of view in their respective texts, as does Sandra M. Gilbert (1986):

*Life Studies* is famous for two things: First, it marked a decisive break with the formal verse patterns and dense, metaphorical rhetoric of the early poetry that had established Robert Lowell as a leading poet in the high Modernist mode. Second, it repudiated the key Modernist ideal of authorial impersonality on behalf of what seemed at the time to be barefaced self-revelation, thus ushering in the "confessional" mode that dominated American poetry in the 1960s. ("Mephistophilis in Maine" 80)

Essentially, critics initially understood Lowell's career as being cut in two distinct halves: first, the pre-*Life Studies* works, replete with identifiable influences of formalism, high modernism, and New Criticism; and second, works including *Life Studies* and after, which eschew all previous influences in favor of a raw, confessional mode. Perkins offers, "As these poets [Lowell included] changed their styles, they did not abandon their rigorous artistry, but merely concealed it" (348). As time passes, and the invaluable gift of hindsight presents itself, recent critics are questioning these originally hard-drawn lines and—in the words of Lawrence Kramer—aiming "to fray the edges of" the "orthodox understanding" of Lowell and *Life Studies* ("Freud and the Skunks" 81).

As previously mentioned, the basic premises of these established arguments are to some extent accurate. Chapters one and two point specifically to the clear distinction between Lowell's early work—tight forms with classical characteristics—and that of *Life Studies* and beyond—more conversational verse with a less rigid aesthetic. However, as recent critics have begun to recognize, it is problematic to espouse the arc of Lowell's work as merely a chronological shift between mutually exclusive binaries: closed to open, formal to free, rigorous to loose, impersonal to raw, and objective to subjective. Not only does this stance preclude an understanding of the overlap in Lowell's work—for example, in the ways that *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951) serves as a bridge to *Life Studies*—it also presents a mistaken depiction of Lowell's development as a poet.

Breslin, for example, tells the story of Lowell's career by:

emphasizing its implicit equation of modernism with formalism, mere craft, and stultifying hierarchy—to account for the “breakthrough” of American poetry at large.... [He tends] to focus on Williams because it's easier to contrast his values with the New Criticism, telling the story of Lowell's career as a linear trajectory rather than as an attractively circuitous muddle. (Longenbach 9)

Longenbach points to how Breslin and other critics frequently ignore the early and late points of Lowell's career in order for him to fit more precisely into the category of previously “stilted” poets—Adrienne Rich, W. S. Merwin, John Berryman, and Theodore Roethke among them—who were able to break free from the chains of the “anxiety of influence”<sup>82</sup> that once bound them. This narrative is particularly inadequate for Lowell.

In an interview with Frederick Seidel, Lowell reveals that before he arrived on Allen Tate's doorstep, he was already writing in the style of Williams:

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<sup>82</sup> Reference is to the theories espoused in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973).

I wasn't a very good writer then.... I was trying to write like William Carlos Williams, very simple, free verse, imagistic poems. ("An Interview" 280)

Lowell's comment is reminiscent of Jarrell's critique of Williams' "imagist-objectivist background" which, though it "helped his poems by their emphasis on truthfulness, exactness, concrete 'presentation,'" it had also "harmed the poems by their underemphasis on organization, logic, narrative, generalization" (Jarrell, "An Introduction to Williams" 244). Though Jarrell did not reach this conclusion until later in his career, Lowell recognized at twenty-years-old that his earliest Williams-inspired poetry required additional complexity and depth, such as what he admired in poems by Ransom and Tate.

Therefore, when critics—like Adam Kirsch—argue that 1952 was "around the time Lowell was turning into a Williams disciple," they are overlooking Lowell's original preoccupation with Williams' style. Hamilton astutely asserts that in the 1950s:

Although Lowell was in regular admiring contact with the older poet at this time and had been particularly dazzled by a reading Williams had given at Wellesley in 1956..., he knew that the lessons he could learn from him would always be of the most general kind: loosen meter, abandon rhyme, use of ordinary speech, introduce more characters and so on. Even the very personal poems that Williams was writing in the mid-fifties were of a radiant simplicity that Lowell could marvel at but never think to copy. (Hamilton 232)

A more accurate version of Kirsch's assertion is that Lowell was a true "Williams disciple" in the late thirties. By the fifties, however, he was a wisely discerning author who—though reinvigorated by Williams' freer structures and use of the "American idiom" after his immersion in Ransom's formalism and Tate's high modernism—was also well aware of the limitations of imitating Williams' verse. The last line of Hamilton's quotation further complicates Kirsch's claim and calls into question Perkins' point that Lowell is "conceal[ing]" his "rigorous artistry"

in later work (Perkins 348). Never entirely in line with the “radiant simplicity” of Williams in later years, even Lowell’s seemingly simplistic, “confessional” poems are multi-dimensional and attentive to the implications of language and aesthetics. Plainly stated, Lowell never abandoned Ransom’s principle that form and content are inextricably linked. His artistry was not “concealed”; it was merely taking on a new shape.

Though Kirsch neglects to mention Lowell’s initial encounter with Williams, part of his argument is valuable for fraying the edges of the conventional stance on Lowell’s “breakthrough” at mid-century. Kirsch perceptively acknowledges the significant connections among Lowell, Jarrell, and Williams in the fifties; in particular, he highlights how Lowell’s (reawakened) appreciation of Williams coincides with Jarrell’s influential essay on the author. Furthermore, Kirsch points to the fact that Jarrell praises Williams “for being ‘spontaneous, open, impulsive, emotional, observant,’” which, Kirsch notes, are “just the qualities that would distinguish *Life Studies* from *Lord Weary’s Castle*” (18). Support for a main tenet of this study, Kirsch recognizes that Jarrell’s understanding of Williams had an indirect impact on Lowell’s style that was as influential as the direct impact Williams had on Lowell’s work. In the same way that Warren’s renewed interest in Robert Frost in 1947 inspired Jarrell to see Frost’s work in an inspiring new light, Jarrell’s essay on Williams encouraged Lowell to return to that poet’s work with newly eager eyes. In this way, Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell gradually came to develop a mode that was distinctly their own: a mode that was not born from a violent “breakthrough,” but instead from innovative collaboration paired with a painstakingly deliberate mining of the giants in American poetry—Ransom, Tate, Williams, and Frost among them.

### Rethinking the “Confessional” Paradigm

In conventional views on Lowell’s place in literary history, critics often focus disproportionately on *Life Studies*; comparisons to *Lord Weary’s Castle* are most often deployed merely in service of upholding the traditional breakthrough narrative. This approach again purports mutually exclusive binaries that prohibit an understanding of the shades of grey in Lowell’s career. The sense is that pre-*Life Studies* work is intellectually complex, abstract, and obscure, while *Life Studies* is simple, emotional, and accessible. Richard J. Fein, for example, articulates a common viewpoint:

*Life Studies* ... not only takes its place along the route of American poetry, it helps establish the terrain.... Lowell’s career measures the development of modern poetry from the hard surface, the intellectually brilliant writing ... to a poetry that does not exactly deny this tendency but that is low-keyed, approaching the informalities and laxities of prose. (68-69)

Fein is not exaggerating the lasting impact of Lowell’s *Life Studies* on contemporary American poetry; nor is he mistaken in his description of the prose-like elements in Lowell’s book. However, the subtext of Fein’s purposely vague language regarding the “brilliance” of Lowell’s book—“a poetry that *does not exactly deny* this tendency”—implies a lesser degree of intellectual rigor in *Life Studies*. M. L. Rosenthal does not bother hedging in his critique of *Life Studies*, describing this work as “impure art ... unpleasantly egocentric.... Since its self-



therapeutic motive is so obvious and persistent, something of this impression sticks all the way” (“Poetry as Confession” 51).

This type of criticism continues to affect Lowell’s legacy negatively in two ways. First, the overemphasis on *Life Studies* and relative neglect of Lowell’s subsequent works leads the less conscientious reader to believe that this work is essentially the end of the line for Lowell. To quote Longenbach, such a viewpoint prevents readers from understanding Lowell’s career accordingly, as “an attractively circuitous muddle” (9). Like Jarrell after *The Seven League Crutches* (1951) and Warren in the works that follow *Promises* (1957), Lowell continues to experiment with style after *Life Studies*. In an interview with Seidel late in Lowell’s life, he admits:

there’s another point about this mysterious business of prose and poetry, form and content, and the reasons for breaking forms. I don’t think there’s any very satisfactory answer. I seesaw back and forth between something highly metrical and something highly free; there isn’t any one way to write. (“An Interview” 269)

Just as critics often overlook the role of Williams’ influence on Lowell’s earliest work, they also tend to ignore that *Life Studies* is the furthest point in the swing of the pendulum on Lowell’s line of “closed” to “open.” In the works after *Life Studies*, Lowell “seesaws” between the freer forms that marked his influential book and more conventional forms, such as the fourteen-line structure to which he adheres throughout *Notebook 1967-68* (1970) *History*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin* (all 1973). A glance at these later poems reveals that Lowell never returned to his pre-*Life Studies* style, but instead—like Jarrell and Warren after their seminal works—continued a search for authenticity in whatever form seemed appropriate for the content.

Second, Fein's implication that *Life Studies* is somehow inferior in intellect and Rosenthal's interpretation of the book as self-therapy are two claims against which Lowell's reputation still struggles. In fact, recent critics have pointed to the ways in which these two misconceptions have contributed to the perpetration of the woefully inadequate term "confessional" to describe Lowell's work. Frank Bidart<sup>83</sup> reports that when Rosenthal coined the label "confessional," Lowell "winced at the term," aware of its damaging implications. Bidart does a particularly fine job of reconceptualizing this term, arguing against its connotation of "helpless outpouring, secrets whispered with an artlessness that is their badge of authenticity, the uncontrolled admission of guilt that attempts to wash away guilt" and instead favoring an interpretation of "Lowell's candor" as "an illusion created by art" ("On 'Confessional' Poetry" 997). Steven Gould Axelrod, Longenbach, Thomas Travisano, and Christian Sisack similarly identify the integral role of artistry in even Lowell's most personal, intimate poetry.<sup>84</sup> Now that critics realize "Lowell's [late] poetry is too highly crafted, sophisticatedly ironic, and explicitly heterogeneous to be considered 'raw,'" it is time to interpret Lowell's *Life Studies*—and the works that follow—as evidence of Lowell's continuation on the path alongside Warren and Jarrell, rather than as a radical break from everything that had come before (Sisack 270).

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<sup>83</sup> Frank Bidart was a close friend of Lowell's and is one of the editors of Lowell's *Complete Poems* (2003).

<sup>84</sup> Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (1978); Longenbach, *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (1997); Travisano, "The Confessional Paradigm Revisited" in *Midcentury Quartet* (1999); and Sisack, "Lowell's 'Confessional' Subjective and Compulsory Confessional Moments" (2003).

***Leading up to Life Studies: The Influence of Warren and Jarrell***

By examining the years between *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* and *Life Studies*, one may identify contributing factors to Lowell's style change aside from the over-emphasized influence of Williams, the frequently discussed connection to Elizabeth Bishop, or the often referenced 1957 West Coast reading tour during which Lowell gained exposure to the Beat poets and proclaimed:

I became sorely aware of how few poems I had written, and that these few had been finished at the latest three or four years earlier. Their style seemed distant, symbol-ridden, and willfully difficult. I began to paraphrase my Latin quotations, and to add extra syllables to a line to make it clearer and more colloquial. I felt my old poems hid what they were really about, and many times offered a stiff, humorless, and even impenetrable surface. ("On 'Skunk Hour'" 227)

As explored in chapter two, part of what inspired Lowell—along with Warren and Jarrell—towards more colloquial, conversational verse in the fifties was a desire to enter an accessible colloquy with readers (or here, listeners). Rosenthal condemns the poems in *Life Studies* for being merely self-therapeutic, and Tate wrote to Lowell in 1957 warning him: “*all* the poems about your family... are definitely *bad*.... Quite bluntly, these details ... are of interest only to you.... they have no public or literary interest” (qtd. in Hamilton 237). Whereas Rosenthal and Tate saw these ostensibly self-centered poems as the negative result of a poet turning too far inward, Lowell deemed his looser forms and increased autobiographical content as the result of shedding his “prehistoric monsters” in order to bring his poems more in line with an authentic portrayal of real life (“On 'Skunk Hour'" 227).

Lowell remarks that while his reading tour pushed him even further from dense classical references and difficult diction—a path he had already begun treading in *Lord Weary's Castle*

and *Mills of the Kavanaughs* as a result of Jarrell's suggestions—he was “no convert to the ‘beats.’” In his 1960 acceptance speech for the National Book Award, he made a thinly disguised reference to Ginsberg, claiming that contemporary verse was “often like an unscored libretto by some bearded but vegetarian Castro.” In fact, Lowell attributes his style changes to another factor that draws him in line with Warren and Jarrell at this time. Lowell observes: “What influenced me more than San Francisco and reading aloud was that for some time I had been writing prose” (“On ‘Skunk Hour’” 227). Perhaps not a coincidence, Lowell began writing prose shortly after both the publication of Warren's *Brother to Dragons* (1953), which Lowell reviewed as “prose genius in verse,” and Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), which Lowell praised: “Fiction or not, it's rather terrific writing” (Lowell, “Warren's *Brother to Dragons*” 73, *Letters of Lowell* 201). It is difficult to gauge how much Jarrell actually pushed Lowell towards prose writing. Jarrell did write to Lowell after *Pictures* encouraging him to also “write a prose book of some length,” adding, “I still don't want to say *novel*” (*Jarrell's Letters* 285); and Lowell did, soon after, begin writing autobiographical prose similar to the personal mode of Jarrell's book.<sup>85</sup> While it is *possible* that Jarrell's *Pictures* had an effect on the production of Lowell's “91 Revere Street,”<sup>86</sup> it is *likely* that Warren's *Brother to Dragons* had an impact on Lowell's style shift in *Life Studies* and beyond.

In the early fifties, the relationship between Warren and Lowell was strongly grounded in a mutual respect for one another's literary opinions and work. In a telling letter from March 10,

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<sup>85</sup> Paul Mariani notes that in 1954, Lowell started writing an “‘autobiographical monster,’ only to learn that writing prose is hell” (235).

<sup>86</sup> “91 Revere Street” was first published in a 1956 issue of the *Partisan Review* and later published in its entirety as Part Two of *Life Studies*.

1950, Lowell wrote to Warren after reading poems at the University of Minnesota, where Warren was teaching at the time:

Your hospitality leaves one rather breathless and gasping, and I almost forgot to thank you, and tell you I enjoyed it all tremendously—particularly talking with you.... Your section on the sources of poems covers more than I would have imagined possible in the space.<sup>87</sup> One thing that might be added would be translations—prose originals of Shakespeare and Jonson; Pound's "Seafarer" with a literal translation—some of Wyatt; ... then Valery's idea of revision as both improvement and change.... Wish we could move the restaurant where I had the double martini and you, no longer on the wagon, here next week for Dylan Thomas's reading. (*Letters of Lowell* 154-155)

The tone and content of this letter reveals the genuine friendship between the poets, which is strengthened by long talks, mutual interests, and shared martinis. It also depicts both men on an equal playing field, with Lowell providing thoughtful advice for Warren's current literary project. Some years later, Warren wrote to Lowell: "I wish you had been with Peter [Taylor] and me when we had our trip to Naples.... I'm glad you like some of the poems.... I enclose one begun last summer and just now finished" (*Letters of Warren, Vol. IV* 249). Lowell remained a sounding board for Warren, for both his works in criticism and poetry.<sup>88</sup> It is therefore with an invested, carefully attentive eye with which Lowell read and reviewed Warren's long, experimental poem, *Brother to Dragons*.

Lowell's review of *Dragons* reveals sincere admiration for Warren's unique ability to blend poetry and prose in order to create a dramatic narrative poem that is desirably "alive."

Lowell extols Warren's new approach:

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<sup>87</sup> Lowell is referring to a section in "How Poems Come About: Intention and Meaning," *Understanding Poetry*, revised edition.

<sup>88</sup> Warren even trusted Lowell's judgment in matters of academia. On August 26, 1959, Warren wrote to Bruce Dearing: "You ask about a writer who might be brought to your university [University of Delaware]. Certainly Snodgrass is a poet of high quality. I know nothing about him as a teacher, but I hear from my friend Cal Lowell that he is a fine person. I am sure that would be a good appointment" (*Letters of Warren, Vol. IV* 261).

I feel not only that Warren has written a successful poem but that in this work he most truly seems to approach the power of those writers one has always felt hovering about him, those poetic geniuses of prose, Melville and Faulkner. In Warren's case, it is the prose genius in verse which is so startling. ("Warren's *Brother to Dragons*" 73)

Warren's distinctive hybrid form would have seemed all the more "startling" to Lowell, who at this point was still reeling from his struggles with the long poem "The Mills of the Kavanaughs," and, in his words, was "finding that your old style won't say any of the things that you want to" (Hamilton 196). Mariani reflects on this period for Lowell:

The essential element missing..., he'd come to see, was a sense of lived experience... a poetry that went beyond poetry to incorporate the living river of voices, rich and diverse in its sources, that made up this construct called America. (243)

Mariani might as well be referring directly to the particular elements Lowell admired in Warren's *Brother to Dragons*: the "sense of lived experience" that Lowell celebrated in his review; the "poetry that went beyond poetry" into the less exclusive, more inclusive realm of prose; and the "living river of voices, rich and diverse," which is a pinpoint perfect description of the literal voices—in dialogue—of the characters in Warren's long poem. From the earthy, honest vernacular of Laetitia, to the intellectual, idealistic Jefferson, and especially the prophetic, autobiographical R. P. W., one may easily recognize what inspired Lowell in Warren's work.

To return to a reconsideration of the confessional paradigm, the influence of Warren's *Brother to Dragons* deserves more recognition for Lowell's autobiographical turn in *Life Studies*.

James H. Justus points to this very element in Warren's work:

The use of himself, both as a persona and as a fully developed character, is one aspect of *Brother to Dragons* that justifies the frequent observation that it marks a watershed in Warren's career, that it is the enabling work that allowed the later poetry to develop in a more open and confessional manner. (61)

In other words, though *Life Studies* earned Lowell the position as poster boy for the confessionals, Warren had already made notable strides in this genre six years prior. Recall Fein's quotation above in which he points to the "low-keyed" nature of Lowell's *Life Studies*, as it "approach[es] the informalities and laxities of prose" (68-69). It is difficult to ignore the similarities between Lowell's "laxities of prose" and those in the "unfaltering, untitled blank verse" of Warren's *Brother to Dragons*, which Lowell enthusiastically admired ("Warren's *BTD*" 67). Warren draws on memories of his family for many passages of R.P.W.'s dialogue; for example:

It was remembering my father that flushed these thoughts.  
 But now speculation settles like the dust  
 When wind stops, and there is only the great quiet of the  
sunlit space,

For I recall one Sunday afternoon,  
 How, after the chicken dinner and ice cream,  
 Amid the comics and word of the world's disaster,  
 I saw him sit and with grave patience teach  
 Some small last Latin to a little child (page 30)

...

The grave of my father's father is lost in the woods.  
 The oak-root has heaved down the headstone.  
 I should not know how to come there. Who knows now?  
 My father himself has, no doubt, lost that orientation.  
 He says: "About this time, about December,  
 I recollect my father, how he'd take  
 Some yellow percoon, just the root, and mash it,  
 And bark of prickly ash, and do the same,  
 And cram it in a gallon jug, with whisky."  
 "What for," I said, "—to make a kind of drink?"  
 "Why, no," he said, "it's medicine to take.  
 He'd set the jug near three months on a shelf.  
 To wait and make the medicine come true.  
 And spring came on, and then he'd call us boys—  
 All boys, we were a house of boys he had—

And line us up and give it, morn and night.”  
 “What for?” I said. And he: “Why, Son, I reckon  
 It’s old-folks talk, but then they held it true,  
 How in the spring you had to thin the blood. (pages 204-205)

Though Lowell’s portrayal of his prominent New England family differs in content and tone from the country tales of Warren’s South, both speakers draw on autobiography and insert bits of dialogue to create authentic, yet artistic, images of life. The similarities are most obvious in Lowell’s “91 Revere Street,” which—as Part Two of *Life Studies*—is most notable for its prosaic characteristics:

I used to sit through the Sunday dinners absorbing cold and anxiety from the table. I imagined myself hemmed in by our new, inherited Victorian Myers furniture. (p 147)

...

My father had been born two months after his own father’s death. At each stage of his life, he was to be forlornly fatherless. He was a deep boy brought up entirely by a mild widowed mother and an intense widowed grandmother. (p 126)

...

“A penny for your thoughts, Schopenhauer,” my mother would say.  
 “I am thinking about pennies,” I’d answer.  
 “When *I* was a child I used to love telling Mama everything I had done,” Mother would say.  
 “But you’re not a child,” I would answer. (p 128)

Reminiscent of Warren’s lines, Lowell’s memories of Sunday dinners, faded recollections of grandparents, and snippets of remembered conversation with his parents characterize the supposedly revolutionary and “confessional” style of this major work in *Life Studies*.

In addition to the more obvious link between *Dragons* and “91 Revere Street,” each poem in Part Four of *Life Studies*, which bears the name of the book’s title, maintains the same Warrenesque blend of autobiography, poetry, and prose-like characteristics. From the more



eminent “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” “Sailing Home From Rapallo,” “Waking in the Blue,” “Memories of West Street and Lepke,” and “Skunk Hour,” to the lesser known “Dunbarton,” “Grandparents,” and “Terminal Days at Beverly Farms,” these dramatic narrative poems—with their “laxities of prose”—are remarkably similar to Warren’s style.

Though Lowell’s diction reveals him, the content, tone, and style of “Dunbarton” exemplifies some parallels of Lowell’s narrator to R. P. W.’s voice in *Brother to Dragons*:

He was my Father. I was his son.  
On our yearly autumn get-aways from Boston  
to the family graveyard in Dunbarton,  
he took the wheel himself—  
like an admiral at the helm.

...

Grandfather and I  
raked leaves from our dead forebears,  
defied the dank weather  
with “dragon” bonfires.

...

In the mornings I cuddled like a paramour  
in my Grandfather’s bed,  
while he scouted about the chattering greenwood stove. (lines 10-14, 35-38, 58-60)

Both poets depict their narrators discussing and visiting family grave sites with their fathers while engaging in explorations of the self amid both familial and regional history—a metaphysical journey that becomes ever more important in the later poetry of both authors.

Jarrell’s later poems also join seamlessly with these more autobiographical, metaphysical ponderings of Warren and Lowell. In fact, around the time that Lowell was crafting new poems for *Life Studies*, he wrote to Jarrell: “I’ve been writing poems lately again.... [and] loosening up the meter ... I am heavily in your debt. I’ve been going through your selected poems quite a lot,

and marvel again how supple ... and personal they are” (*Letters of Lowell* 295-296).

Consequently, both Warren’s *Brother to Dragons* and Jarrell’s *Selected Poems* (1955) deserve a more celebrated role in Lowell’s style change. A passage from Lowell’s “91 Revere Street” perfectly encapsulates what all three authors worked to achieve in their simultaneous move towards looser, more autobiographical poetry:

There, the vast number of remembered *things* remains rocklike. Each is in its place, each has its function, its history, its drama.... The things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning—because finished, they are endurable and perfect. (p 122)

Once rendered into poetic form, the “things” of their individual and collective pasts are crystallized into art forms, capable of being magnified and raised to the universal level. Purely retold memories are merely “confessions,” but once arranged with a skillful, artistic eye, they become finished works of art with the urgency of *life* that all three authors admired in Frost in the late 1940s and forevermore strived to recreate in their own work.

In the same way that Warren’s *Brother to Dragons* deserves more credit for influencing Lowell’s autobiographical turn in *Life Studies*, his *Promises: Poems 1954-1956* (1957) should also be referenced in context of the praise Lowell received for organizing his poems into intricately plotted sequences. Upon the publication of *Life Studies*, Rosenthal remarked:

the completed *Life Studies* is a sequence in which interrelationships create a larger context that deepens the impact of the individual poems. Lowell’s achievement, critics have generally agreed, is complex in that he broke new ground, not only in the individual poems, but in the group as a whole by further extending the modern concept of the poetic sequence. (qtd. in Doreski, *Years* 120)

While other contemporary poets were also experimenting with the powerful effect of creating these interrelationships, scholars have established Warren among the most successful in the art of

the poetic sequence. Randolph Runyon's *The Braided Dream* is a book entirely dedicated to Warren's mastery of the sequence technique, which reportedly surfaces in *Promises* (Runyon 2). James A. Grimshaw similarly marks the sequence as one of the defining characteristics of Warren's mature poetry, claiming: "The years 1953 to 1966 show Warren moving more into his own voice in his poems. His poetry of this period exhibits an increased use of poetic sequences" (123); and Hilton Kramer notes that the books of Warren's later phase "must, indeed, be taken whole, for they trace a particular course of feeling and thought.... The long-breathed utterance that shapes this style does not invite or reward interruption" (15).

In addition to the numerous scholars who confirm Warren's implementation of the poetic sequence before the publication of Lowell's *Life Studies*, there is also proof that this topic was directly addressed between Warren and Lowell. Warren expressed his approval for Lowell's use of the sequence technique in a letter:

One more thing I want to say, out of the many that could be said: it is remarkable how each book of yours gives the impression of a unity, and this one [*Near the Ocean*] most of all, the quality of a long poem rather than a collection.  
(*Letters of Warren, Vol. IV* 501)

There is a hint of teacher's pride for a "pupil" who successfully followed instruction; at the very least, there is evidence that both poets maintained a similar vision for this significant element in contemporary American poetry.

A letter from Lowell to A. Alvarez in 1959 yokes Jarrell into the loop: "Jarrell's is the only criticism I've had that bit in very deep. Of course, it's too favorable probably, but I have other reasons for liking what he says. I take rather his line on American poetry" (*Letters of Lowell* 337). Indeed, as Lowell made waves in literary history with the publication of *Life*

*Studies*, he was remarkably in line with Jarrell's and Warren's views on American verse.

Ironically, perhaps due to the greater critical attention Lowell attracted, scholars often read the situation conversely. After the publication of Jarrell's *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* in 1960, Jarrell was understood as taking *Lowell's* line on American poetry. Helen Vendler remarks that for Jarrell, there was a "growing drift from the personal that was not reversed until *The Woman at the Washington Zoo*.... This reversal ... brings Jarrell into the Confessional School" ("Complete Poems" 98-99). Warren was also deemed as a subscriber to "Lowell's" revolutionary poetic form. Blotner explains:

Warren was caught ... in "a massive shift in national cultural sensibility, away from the ... high Modern period ... and toward the loosely structured, transparently readable, Whitmanesque style of the 'New American Poetry,' whose rising prophets in the 1950s were Beat and Confessional poets." (Blotner 337)

Illuminating the relationships and correspondences between Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell at this time paints a clearer picture: Warren and Jarrell had just as much a part as Lowell in founding the "New American Poetry" of the 1950s.

### ***Lowell After Life Studies: Patterns in "For the Union Dead"***

The following quotation by Ernest J. Smith specifically refers to Lowell and John Berryman, but it also accurately reflects Warren and Jarrell:

by the late fifties and the sixties ... their poetry had become much more nimble and varied that the political or historical element was often intertwined with or at least difficult to distinguish from the focus on the self, even when that self was examined as historical or cultural identity. ("Approaching" 288)

As discussed most specifically in chapters three and four, both Warren and Jarrell implemented new poetic techniques—such as an increased use of the second-person address and a growing reliance on the dramatic narrative over the lyrical form—in order to explore selfhood in the context of American history and current national affairs. Like his colleagues, Lowell's form and content in the late fifties and sixties similarly reflects his increased desire to engage political issues. Just as Warren's "Going West" and Jarrell's "Transient Barracks" serve as models for the changes that characterize their mature poetry, Lowell's "For the Union Dead" embodies the unique formula of Lowell's late work.

On January 30, 1960, Lowell wrote to Jarrell: "I'm deep in translations and have only finished one poem of my own since last winter.... One wants a whole new deck of cards to play with, or at least new rules for the old ones" (*Letters of Lowell* 359). By capturing a blend of private autobiography and public shared history within a carefully organized, complex poem that transcends a strict adherence to conventional forms, Lowell's "For the Union Dead" establishes those "new rules." Hamilton confirms that this poem, "without doubt ... provided a life-line, or at any rate a way forward to the next phase of Lowell's work" (278). Therefore, a close reading of "For the Union Dead" reveals the key characteristics of Lowell's poetry after *Life Studies*.

Aside from being "one of [Lowell's] most characteristic poems," "For the Union Dead" is also generally accepted as Lowell's "most accomplished and critically acclaimed political poem" (Doreski, "Gallant" 30, Smith 293). Even Lowell, who was hesitant to name "Union Dead" as his best poem, ultimately chose it for Whit Burnett's anthology entitled, *This Is My Best* (Doreski, *Years* 47). He also admitted to Tate, "The 'Union Dead' poem took all winter and

I suppose it is the most composed poem I have ever written” (*Letters of Lowell* 373). His selection of the phrase “most composed” is telling. “Union Dead” is free from the stringent and rigorous forms that marked Lowell’s early work; yet it is still crafted in regular quatrains, and the ideas are carefully connected through logical associations. After Warren names Lowell’s “Union Dead” as one of Lowell’s “best” during an interview, Lowell explains his aesthetic choices to Warren:

The parts hold together yet there’s no meter. And the quatrain is, in a certain sense, an artificial one. It’s sometimes kept and sometimes run on and the lines vary greatly in length; they may be three or four syllables for fifteen, yet I feel the quatrain is important. (“Robert Lowell” 47)

Remarkably significant for the works that follow *Life Studies*, Lowell points to how he loosens the conventional form while still relying somewhat on the old tradition to add a semblance of structure to his work.

Like Warren and Jarrell, Lowell never completely abandons the earliest teachings by his fugitive mentors; he instead discovers his own voice by pushing on the boundaries of those conventions. Lowell admitted later in his life:

I think anyone could tell that my free verse was written by someone who’d done a lot of formal verse.... [*Understanding Poetry*] is in my blood very much ... You felt you had to get away from that at all costs. Yet it’s still in one’s blood. We’re trained that way and I admire Tate and Ransom as much as ever. (Alvarez, “Conversation” 82)

Like Lowell’s “Union Dead” and other poems throughout the rest of his career, Warren’s later work is also often marked by some regular poetic conventions, and Jarrell’s “Lost World” even boasts a terza rima format; however, as in Lowell’s poem, the autobiographical threads and

conversational diction imbues a notably “free” quality in these poems despite the regularities in form.

In addition to its formal elements, the content of “Union Dead” is also characteristic of Lowell’s later work. In a letter to Richard Tillinghast, he explains: “‘Union Dead’ ... [is] a public ‘ode’ tho autobiographically truth.... I was trying to give the ‘free verse’ of *Life Studies* greater resonance and rhetoric (sound effects, history)” (*Letters of Lowell* 519). Essentially, Lowell infuses the autobiographical elements of the poem with multiple allusions that resonate deeply with his audience. Lowell once stated to Hamilton in an interview: “You say I have become more overtly concerned with public events, but true public poetry must come as an inevitable accident” (“Conversation with Hamilton” 269). Lowell’s “Union Dead” manifests autobiographical, historical, and cultural layers that are intricately linked to the exploration of man’s place in the modern world; this arguably qualifies as true public poetry rendered inevitable by Lowell’s personal interests and public persona. Some background on each of these layers will provide a richer context for an explication of this complex poem.

First, and most easily recognizable, is the autobiographical plotline of Lowell’s contemplation of the “old South Boston Aquarium” (l. 1), the “Boston Common” (l. 13), and the “Civil War relief” (l. 23) of Colonel Shaw that serve as landmarks of his childhood. Mark Rudman reports that the Boston Common is a ten minute walk from 91 Revere Street, where Lowell lived as a boy, and further asserts: “[Lowell] probably passed it every day. No matter how public a statement the poem makes, its focus is personal and specific” (133). In addition to relying on childhood memories for parts of the poem, the autobiographical element stretches to

the present. “For the Union Dead” is the fifth and final version of the poem that Lowell crafted specifically for the 1960 Boston Arts Festival, for which he was commissioned. The year he read his poem aloud, the Boston Common had actually been partially dug up for construction of a massive underground parking garage (Thurston 97). These details help to create a vision of the prophetic poet delivering his poem to a flesh and blood audience with the backdrop of ugly, mechanized “progress” looming ominously in the background. Lowell was a longtime citizen of Boston and he was drawing upon personal memories to shape this reflective poem; but in addition to these factors, he was also a renowned poet lamenting the current state of modern society.

Second, the historical layer takes into consideration the symbolic values of these civic locations, monuments, and images. For an American reader / listener, it is nearly impossible to split Boston from its greater historical significance as one of the oldest cities in the United States, as the intended “city on a hill” for the first Puritan settlers. Essentially, the Boston Common—which is both the heart of Boston and the focusing point of this poem—is a metonym for the center of America (Rudman 137). The St. Gaudens’ monument of Colonel Shaw also serves to evoke the history of Robert Gould Shaw, a soldier who led the first black battalion of the Civil War into a battle at Fort Wagner that ended in bloody defeat in 1863. The Shaw monument—both in real life and in Lowell’s poem—speaks volumes without words. Lowell draws on this historical figure in order to address contemporary themes of race and misappropriated honor. Finally, Lowell’s references to “Hiroshima boiling” (l. 56) and the “drained faces of Negro



school-children” (l. 60) recall the atomic bomb dropped on Japan and the plight of African Americans before obtaining equal rights. Like much of Warren’s later work, such as *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* (1982) and “New Dawn” (1985), Lowell’s “Union Dead” forces readers to face the difficult truth of America’s history.

Third, Lowell invokes Christian imagery to issue a prophetic warning that is designed to resonate with his audience. The Bible was a large part of Lowell’s early learning. In an interview with Alvarez, Lowell speaks about his upbringing “as an Episcopalian Protestant with a good deal of Bible reading at school,” and further relates that as students, “we were rather saturated” with the Bible (“Conversation” 40). It was somewhat shocking when—the progeny of Puritan, Unitarian, and Episcopalian clergy, the descendent of Jonathan Edwards, the man who “had once told a friend that Catholicism was the religion of Irish servant girls”—Lowell eventually converted to Catholicism.<sup>89</sup> After his baptism in 1941 on LSU’s campus, his first wife, Jean Stafford, recalls how Lowell went to Mass at 6:30 every morning, said grace before and after meals, attended benediction in the evening, and prayed two rosaries a day. Even more, he “read only religious books and talked about nothing but the existence of God” in the years after his conversion (Mariani 93-94). Though he left the Catholic Church only five years later while simultaneously obtaining a divorce from Stafford, he received an inundation of religious knowledge during that time period.

In the 1944 introduction to *Land of Unlikeness*, Tate describes Lowell as a “Catholic poet” whose “Christian symbolism is intellectualized ... it points to the disappearance of the

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<sup>89</sup> Though he later rejoined the Episcopal Church in 1955, many describe him as agnostic in his later life, further distancing himself from his Puritan heritage.

Christian experience from the modern world, and stands, perhaps, for the poet's own effort to recover it" (1). By the time Lowell wrote "Union Dead" in the late 1950s, his religious faith was far less fervent, yet the Christian themes of his younger years remained a potent force in his poetry. Lowell revealed to Seidel:

In many ways [my late poems] seem to me more religious than the early ones .... It seems to me it's clearer to me now than it was then, but it's very much the same sort of thing that went into the religious poems—the same sort of struggle, light and darkness, the flux of experience. The morality seems much the same.  
("Interview with Seidel" 250)

While Lowell does not include paraphrases from Genesis, Exodus, and Matthew as in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," nor adhere to the exact conventions of apocalyptic literature as in "Where the Rainbow Ends," his later poetry still invokes universally accepted Christian symbols. With the Christian symbol of the fish, the Christ-like figure of Colonel Shaw, the imagery of hell, and the Calvinist theology of Boston as "damned," the religious undertones of "Union Dead" provide a deeper, prophetic layer to this poem (Perkins 409). Returning to Tate's quotation, Lowell still points "to the disappearance of the Christian experience," but his aim changes from recovering faith to exposing how his modern audience has replaced religious devotion with a zeal for wealth and commercialism—a message that is unmistakably reminiscent of Jarrell's *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket*.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> In November, 1960, Jarrell wrote to Lowell: "Thanks so much for your letter about the book [*The Woman at the Washington Zoo*].... Did you see a piece of mine in *Daedalus* named 'A Sad Heart at the Supermarket'? It rather goes with your *Atlantic Monthly* poem ['For the Union Dead']. I liked it" (*Jarrell's Letters* 446).

Lowell's artistic hand combines these three layers of autobiography, history, and religion into a powerful, lasting poem that embodies the best qualities of his late poetry; "For the Union Dead" is quoted here in its entirety:<sup>91</sup>

*"Relinquent Omnia Servare Rem Publicam."*

The old South Boston Aquarium  
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.  
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.  
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;  
my hand tingled  
to burst the bubbles  
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sigh still  
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom  
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,  
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized

fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,  
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting  
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass  
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic  
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.  
A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders  
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw  
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry  
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,  
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,  
half the regiment was dead;

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<sup>91</sup> I have discussed this poem in the *Salem Masterplots Series*: Joan A. Romano, "'For the Union Dead.'" *Masterplots II: Christian Literature*. Ed. John K. Roth. Pasadena: Salem Press, Inc., 2008. 650-653.

at the dedication,  
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone  
in the city's throat.  
Its Colonel is as lean  
as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,  
a greyhound's gently tautness;  
he seems to wince at pleasure,  
and suffocate for privacy.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,  
peculiar power to choose life and die—  
when he leads his black soldiers to death,  
he cannot bend his back.

On a thousand small town New England greens,  
the old white churches hold their air  
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags  
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier  
grow slimmer and younger each year—  
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets  
and muse through their sideburns...

Shaw's father wanted no monument  
except the ditch,  
where his son's body was thrown  
and lost with his "niggers."

The ditch is nearer.  
There are no statues for the last war here;  
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph  
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"  
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.  
When I crouch to my television set,  
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw  
 is riding on his bubble,  
 he waits  
 for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,  
 giant finned cars nose forward like fish;  
 a savage servility  
 slides by on grease.

The epigraph, “Relinquant Omnia Servare Rem Publicam,” serves to encapsulate the underlying theme of Lowell’s poem. The statue of Colonel Shaw made by Augustus St. Gaudens bears Charles W. Eliot’s Latin inscription that is translated: “*He* leaves all to serve the state.” Lowell, however, slightly modifies the wording for his epigraph: “*They* leave all to serve the state,” thereby including the African American soldiers who also sacrificed their lives in the Civil War (Rudman 141). By pointing to the Statehouse which “faces Colonel Shaw” as if in combat, Lowell implies that the legislators are opponents to the “They”; this move forces a comparison between the honorable Shaw and his soldiers versus the State lawmakers who prevent the “Negro school-children” from attending the same schools as white children (l. 21, 60). From the context of the rest of the poem, the modification from “He” to “They” also implicates Boston society—which runs on a “savage servility” that “slides by on grease”—as another opponent (l. 67-68). Essentially, Lowell’s modification of the Latin statement reflects “contempt for a society which is violent, cringing and servile in front of money values,” a society that no longer honors Colonel Shaw nor the values of one who leaves all to serve the state (Nelles 640).

Moving into the body of the poem, Lowell's autobiographical underpinning is prominent in the first several stanzas in which the narrator observes the "old South Boston Aquarium" with its windows "broken" and "boarded" (l. 1-2). The second stanza of the poem recalls the childhood excitement and innocence of the young boy as his nose "crawled like a snail on the glass" (l. 5). This line is followed by two short lines that, when read aloud, indicate a quicker pace induced by the excitement of the child as his "hand tingled / to burst the bubbles" (l. 6-7). With a hard break and the start of a new quatrain, the narrator jumps back to the reality of present day. He reports, "My hand draws back" (l. 9), as if while recalling himself as a child he instinctively outstretched his adult hand to burst the bubbles in his recollection. In stanza five, the word "tingled" is deliberately repeated; though instead of describing the innocent child-hand "tingling" with anticipation, it refers to the "tingling Statehouse, / shaking over the excavations," braced for construction of a nearby parking garage. The childlike joy and appreciation for the natural "vegetating kingdom" (l. 10) shifts noticeably to the narrator's focus on the Statehouse.

This building serves as a synecdoche that represents the governing body responsible for choosing to press forward into the progress of "barbed and galvanized" fences, "steamshovels," and endless "parking spaces" that indicate the dehumanizing elements of industrialization (l. 12, 14, 17). The words "grunting," "cropped up," "gouge," and "underworld" produce a sense that digging this parking lot is a physical violation of the city of Boston. Lowell gives this industrial scene symbolic weight by choosing the phrase "Puritan-pumpkin colored girders" to "[brace] the tingling Statehouse" (l. 19-20). He hearkens back to Boston's founders, emphasizing the word "Puritan" with alliterative p's. Clearly, Puritan-pumpkin *colored* support beams are a poor

substitute for Puritan ideals to support the Statehouse. In *Life Studies* Lowell expresses contempt for other historical figures who also maintained “Statehouses.”<sup>92</sup> Through employing the tropes of metonymy and synecdoche, Lowell not only magnifies his personal disdain for disreputable leaders, he also depicts the city of Boston as a symbolic figure for other American cities similarly enduring the negative effects of Statehouses that “tingle” with the double-edged promises of industrialized growth and prosperity.

These first five quatrains are the most autobiographical in nature, but when the figure of “Colonel Shaw” enters in the sixth stanza, the poem turns more heavily towards historical and religious allusions. Though Lowell’s personal faith was not as strong as it once was, he knew that Christian images would resonate profoundly within his American listeners and readers. Almost four hundred years ago, Puritan leaders intended for Boston to be “the founding of the exemplary Kingdom of God ... in the desolation of the Americas” (Sarwar 117). There is clearly an ironic connotation to this history in “Union Dead,” and—as other critics have noticed—to the distinct Calvinist theology of the modern man as “powerless and foredoomed” (Mazzaro 85).<sup>93</sup> It is therefore not a coincidence that “Union Dead” is laden with fish imagery, invoking the Christian symbol of the fish that has represented Christ since the first century AD. The images of the dilapidated aquarium, which was once full of fish, along with the “bronze weathervane cod” that “has lost half its scales” (l. 1, 3) serve as metaphors for a city that has lost its faith, or at least put its faith in something other than Christ. “The airy tanks are dry” without “cowed,” “compliant” followers to fill them (l. 4, 8), and the boy’s experience with the “vegetating

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<sup>92</sup> Mussolini in “Beyond the Alps” and Dwight D. Eisenhower in “Inauguration Day: January 1953,” for example.

<sup>93</sup> Critics including Marius Bewley, Paul Mariani, Jerome Mazzaro, David Perkins, and Selim Sarwar have all acknowledged this point.

kingdom / of the fish and reptile”—a reference to the Garden of Eden—is traded for “press[ing] against the new barbed and galvanized / fence” (l. 10-13). The galvanized steel of enterprise replaces the vegetation of paradise, and the “grunting” “steamshovels”—a synecdoche for the machinery of industrialization—are responsible for creating hell on earth, “their underworld garage” (l. 13, 16).

The emphasis on St. Gaudens’ monument of “Colonel Shaw / and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry” (21-23) adds to the Christian themes. In this poem, the monument of Shaw and his “bronze Negroes” “sticks like a *fishbone* / in the city’s throat” (emphasis added, l. 28-30). On the secular level, a memorial that honors African Americans would have caused some discomfort for the white Boston community during the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement (a cause that both Warren and Lowell actively supported). On a religious level, the fishbone refers to the statue of Colonel Shaw, thereby establishing him as a Christ figure in Lowell’s poem. The descriptions of Shaw’s leadership—“wrenlike vigilance”—the way “he seems to wince at pleasure,” and his ultimate martyrdom all link him to Jesus Christ.

The next section, stanzas 10-13, also has a dual secular and religious meaning. The Colonel “rejoices in man’s lovely, / peculiar power to choose life and die” (l. 37-38). In an interview with Alvarez, Lowell explains, “we’ve always had the ideal of ‘saving the world.’ And that comes close to perhaps destroying the world” (“Lowell in Conversation” 41-42). After atomic warfare was introduced, “saving the world” militarily—like Colonel Shaw and his men aimed to do—runs the risk of nuclear annihilation. This horrifying image contributes to the apocalyptic message of the poem, but also holds further religious significance. When Christ



sacrificed his life, souls could enter Heaven; when the Christ figure Colonel Shaw “rejoices in man’s lovely, / peculiar power to choose life and die,” he affirms mankind’s free will to live and to die for a cause.

Colonel Shaw is drawn twice more in parallel to Christ: “when he leads his black soldiers to death, / he cannot bend his back” (l. 39-40) just as Christ is nailed to a cross when he leads humankind to redemption. Finally, as Colonel Shaw’s “body was thrown / and lost with his ‘niggers’” (l. 51-52), Christ’s body was also thrown in an unmarked tomb after dying nearby society’s outcasts. Boston’s people can no longer appreciate the sacrifice of Colonel Shaw and his men nor do they maintain the Puritan faith their city was founded upon. Fein summarizes, “we can measure our plight by our society’s inability to appreciate and comprehend Shaw and the significance of his statue which barely survives” (114). Along with the “stone statues” that “grow slimmer ... each year” from deterioration, the “flags” that “quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic” become “frayed” (l. 45-46, 43-44), and what Americans once valued is replaced by the “Mosler Safe” which is strong enough to “[survive]” an atomic “blast” (l. 57-58).

Another character who serves a historical and symbolic function in this poem is that of William James.<sup>94</sup> The poem relates, “Two months after marching through Boston, / half the regiment was dead” (l. 25-26). Historically, James performed the dedication of the monument in 1897, and so it rings true that he “could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe” since their memory was still so fresh and alive for the Boston community (l. 28). In addition to this

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<sup>94</sup> William James was also a significant figure for Robert Penn Warren’s work. See John Burt’s *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism* (1988) for further reading—particularly his second chapter: “Neutral Territory: Pragmatism.”

historical grounding, James has also come to represent his philosophy of Pragmatism—arguably the only uniquely American school of philosophy and one often credited for shaping our nation. By invoking the name William James, Lowell inspires listeners and readers to evaluate the role of Pragmatism in their nation's history. One might ask: when did this pragmatic nation transform into a country that would sacrifice anything and everything for the sake of commercialism? When did an advertisement that “shows Hiroshima boiling / over a Mosler safe” (l. 56-58) become something that appealed to “pragmatic” consumers? Indeed, the future looks grim for a society that would use the horror of the atomic bomb for the benefit of advertisement.

By shedding light on America's dangerous path forward, Lowell develops his apocalyptic prophecy. The poem's narrative shift from innocent childhood to the painful awareness of adulthood in a city victimized by greed and commercialism clearly has a more universal significance than a mere personal reflection. Parallel to Warren's mature poetic techniques, Lowell's poetic strategies layer the regional significance of Boston and its surrounding landmarks with metonymic value for the rest of the nation. Furthermore, Boston not only signifies the rest of America, it also becomes the biblical Babylon on the brink of apocalypse. In particular, Lowell invokes Christian symbols and imagery to draw an analogy between Boston and the doomed cities in the Book of Revelation. Chapter four discusses the definition of apocalyptic literature in light of Lowell's earlier work. “For the Union Dead” does not depict complete destruction nor a new world purged of evil, and so it does not fulfill all conventions of the apocalyptic literary tradition; however, there are enough elements of the Last Judgment and

hope for the Second Coming to support a reading of a visionary narrator issuing a prophetic warning to his audience.

The message of this poem, however, is not that citizens should return to zealous religious beliefs. Instead, Lowell draws the conclusion that the people of Boston, and the people of America, have traded their God for wealth and progress much like the biblical cities awaiting an apocalypse. The closing portion of “Union Dead” echoes the judgment of Babylon found in the book of Revelation:

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! . . . Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste! (Rev. 18.2, 18.16-17).

Just as Babylon hoarded its fineries only to be destroyed by the apocalypse, so too does Boston protect its wealth above all things. Mazzaro asserts, “Lowell associates the materialistic exploitation of one’s fellowman with the decay of Christianity and the evils of capitalism” (21). In an apocalyptic tone, Lowell’s poem warns, “The ditch is nearer” as “There are no statues for the last war here” (l. 53-54). The “ditch” of oblivion is close for those who no longer honor the soldiers but instead have found a material substitute for their praise.

In the second-to-last stanza of the poem, “Colonel Shaw / is riding on his bubble, / he waits / for the blessèd break” (l. 61-64). At this point in his life, Lowell most likely did not believe in an impending Second Coming, but he did fear that humans would bring the end of the world upon themselves. This fact makes the Christ figure of Colonel Shaw even sadder and more ironic as his statue slowly wastes away, waiting for the “blessèd break”—a phrase widely accepted as an allusion to a biblical apocalypse and subsequent new world order. The last stanza

returns aptly to fish imagery. “The Aquarium is gone” (l. 65) and just as the “vegetating kingdom”—or Garden of Eden—is replaced by industrialization in the beginning of the poem, the Christ image of the fish is replaced by “giant finned cars” that “nose forward *like* fish” (emphasis added, l. 66). Machinery, “progress,” now reigns “everywhere” (l. 65). Stripped of an appreciation for heroes like Colonel Shaw and Christ, humans are doomed to live according to a barbaric, “savage servility” that “slides by on grease” (l. 67-68). Boston, the community that once stood as a religious beacon, the city on the hill, is reduced to a place of worship for industrialization, commercialism, and prosperity.

### ***The 1960s: Lowell as a Public Figure***

In the same way that Warren, Jarrell, and many of their contemporaries were moved to respond to the provocative national events of the sixties, Lowell naturally gravitated towards his role as poet / prophet / philosopher during this time. His noteworthy political acts listed above were, more significantly, paired with a level of increased cultural awareness in his poetry of this decade. Like “For the Union Dead,” most works from this period—particularly *For the Union Dead* (1964), *The Old Glory* (1965), and *Near the Ocean* (1967)—address historical issues in a style that pointedly engages the reader / listener. To quote Herbert Leibowitz:

[Lowell’s] poetic voice emerged from a talking contest with his ancestral voices: literary, familial, historical; the qualities of his rhetoric ... are frequently the qualities of American rhetoric, just as the private experiences he transcribes are the salient features of American experience. (199)

A quotation that would also suit Warren and Jarrell, Leibowitz's argument highlights the integral role of the past in Lowell's later work, as well as his ability to create personal poetry that doubles as a microcosm of the larger American gestalt.

Lowell's translations from the early sixties demonstrate continuity from *Life Studies* and corroborate the vision Lowell had for American poetry. Highly reminiscent of the explanation Lowell provided Warren on his stylistic choices in "Union Dead," Lowell explains that in *Phaedra—A Verse Translation of Racine's Phedre* (1961):

My couplet is run on, avoids inversions and alliteration, and loosens its rhythm with shifted accents and occasional extra syllables. I gain in naturalness and lose in compactness and extra syllables. ("On 'Skunk Hour'" 230)

In other words, just as in "Union Dead," the format of Lowell's *Phaedra* pushes the boundaries of convention in order to increase authenticity or "naturalness" of speech without abandoning structure altogether. Confirming the additional political impetus that was characteristic of his work from this time, Hamilton notes: "In many reviews [*Phaedra*] was coupled with *Imitations* as further evidence of Lowell's cultural imperialism" (290). Part of defining American poetry for Lowell meant transforming international masterpieces into his own uniquely determined style. Lowell reports that in *Phaedra*: "I have translated as a poet, and tried to give my lines a certain dignity, speed, and flare" ("On 'Skunk Hour'" 231).

With the same promise of originality, Lowell's *Imitations* was also published that year (1961). Unfortunately for Lowell, though this book earned the Bollingen Prize for translation in 1962, it stirred intensified versions of the same critiques drawn by *Life Studies*. Axelrod's words encapsulate this criticism:

the volume became at last nearly as personal a document as *Life Studies*.... The voice, inevitably, was his own. Disguised as a collection of translations, the volume in actuality exposes Lowell's crisis of consciousness resulting from his contemplation of suicide. (*Life and Art* 135)

As the visceral connection of these works to Lowell's personal life fades over time, hopefully critics will begin to acknowledge the high level of skill in at least a handful of these poems that earn merit as fine works of original art.<sup>95</sup> For the purposes of this study, however, it is worth noting that even this book marks a connection to Warren and Jarrell.

Lowell's introduction to *Imitations* announces his desire for this book to "be first read as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities, contrasts and repetitions. I have hoped somehow for a whole" (Lowell, "Introduction" 195). As mentioned above, this technique of creating sustained poetic sequences is one that was notably successful in Warren's *Promises* and one which Warren directly encouraged Lowell to continue. Coming full circle, a letter from Jarrell to Lowell in response to a negative review of *Imitations* reveals his support for Lowell's work:

I saw that stupid review [of *Imitations*] in *Time*—*Time*'s the cheapest magazine in the world and Dudley Fitts the cheapest poetry reviewer.... I certainly did enjoy *Imitations*. It's all live English, a real book to read from beginning to end. (*Jarrell's Letters* 451)

In addition to displaying steadfast loyalty to his friend, Jarrell's specific praise of Lowell's "live English,"—a goal towards which they worked since the 1940s—and of his sequence technique, points to the fact that Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell continued to share the same goals in the early sixties.

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<sup>95</sup> Some examples include, but are not limited to: "To the Reader," "Voyage to Cythera," "The Drunken Boat," and "Hitlerian Spring."

More so than in the translations, Lowell's next work, *For the Union Dead* demonstrates the lingering influence of Warren and Jarrell. In the first half of the decade, all three authors were still in close contact with one another. Lowell recalls a dinner at the White House in honor of the French Minister of Culture at which he and "Red Warren ... had a frantic search for the men's room" (Mariani 306). Aside from this humorous anecdote, Lowell and Warren maintained their relatively frequent correspondence regarding poetry, personal lives, and political issues. Jarrell, always a more constant presence in Lowell's life, also continued to coach Lowell in his work, both privately and publically. At the National Poetry Festival in Washington on October 22, 1962, Jarrell presented a lecture entitled "Fifty Years of American Poetry" in which he spent a disproportionately long time discussing the achievement of Lowell's poetry; in particular, he lauded Lowell's later work in which the author "has allowed facts to lead their own lives, and his poetry accordingly has gone on developing in grandeur and in power" (qtd. in Bryant 95).<sup>96</sup>

Other contemporary critics did not necessarily agree with Jarrell's fervor for Lowell's late work, especially for that created after *Life Studies*. Significant to this study, Lowell's later work is now rightfully being credited as more universally applicable and further-reaching than its original reputation as scribbles of a "megalomaniac" in search of mental therapy (Doreski, "Gallant" 45). More recent scholarship has rescued *For the Union Dead* from the "severe

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<sup>96</sup> Mary Jarrell reported: "To cover fifty years of American poetry in a one-hour speech, Jarrell singled out fifty-seven poets to mention. Who got the most space was significant, and who placed at the finish line was significant. In his conclusion, Jarrell gave Wilbur 230 words, Shapiro 250, and Lowell 700" (*Jarrell's Letters* 457).

attacks” it initially received for what was critiqued as an excessive outpouring of personal emotion; or, as Robert Bly believed, “something rare, a book of poems that is a melodrama” (Rudman 106, Bly 74).<sup>97</sup> Critics arguing from this position often point to Lowell’s final line in “Eye and Tooth” as a case in point; Lowell’s narrator laments: “I am tired. Everyone’s tired of my turmoil.” Now that scholars are rethinking the confessional paradigm, one may return to Lowell’s *Union Dead*—and his other late books—with renewed appreciation. To quote Alicia Ostriker, “Lowell [has] been misread as merely personal, merely self-indulgent, merely sick” (2). Contrary to what critics have argued, Lowell’s late style is not merely the result of manic or melancholic episodes; it is instead further evidence that Lowell continued to pursue the goals initially set alongside Warren and Jarrell.

Similar to the mode of “For the Union Dead,” the poem that serves as the title poem for Lowell’s 1964 book, Lowell frequently returns to the formula of layering autobiographical, historical, and cultural elements within various gradations of “open” to “closed” aesthetic forms in order to address national issues and challenge his modern audience. Axelrod confirms:

In *For the Union Dead* [Lowell] reveals to us a consciousness shaped not just by individual experience and cultural inheritance but by its continuing exposure to our collective social and political ills. (*Life and Art* 144)

Though “Union Dead” is most effective for demonstrating this method, a close examination of other poems in *For the Union Dead* will yield comparable results. “Middle Age,” “Florence,”

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<sup>97</sup> Bly’s harsh critique continues: “Most of the poems in *For the Union Dead* are bad poems.... [the book] has a peculiarly stale and cold air, instantly recognizable. It is the air of too many literary conversations, an exhausting involvement with the Establishment.... Lowell’s ideas are banal and journalistic” (“Lowell’s *FTUD* 74). One cannot ignore that the last part of Bly’s statement strikingly resembles the criticism Jarrell received for his later work, which is also often considered somewhat “banal and journalistic.” Considering the mutual influence on one another’s work, it is not a surprise that the praise and criticism alike would invite similarities.



“Going to and fro,” “Myopia: a Night,” “Beyond the Alps,” and especially “The Public Garden” are similarly based in private, autobiographical experience that can be metonymically and symbolically expanded into a wider public relevance, and further mined for their prophetic messages based on Christian imagery and historical allusions.

“The Public Garden” serves as a particularly important poem for this study considering the direct role Jarrell had in shaping it. When Lowell’s original version of this poem, “David and Bathsheba in the Public Garden” was published in *Mills of the Kavanaghs* (1951), Jarrell’s review attacked its weaknesses:

The organization and whole conception of “David and Bathsheba in the Public Garden” are so mannered and idiosyncratic, so peculiar to Mr. Lowell, that the poem is spoiled, in spite of parts as beautiful as that about the harvest moon.... Someone is sure to say about this poem that you can’t tell David from Bathsheba without a program: they both (like the majority of Mr. Lowell’s characters) talk just like Mr. Lowell. (“Three Books” 254)

It is therefore significant to note that the rewritten edition of this poem follows Jarrell’s advice precisely. Most noticeably, it achieves an authenticity that was severely lacking in the “mannered and idiosyncratic” original.

As with many of Lowell’s re-writes, these two poems are founded on the same basic plotline: a once passionate union between a man and woman fades into impotence and infertility. Whereas Lowell invokes the Hebrew Bible’s intricate plotline of King David and his seduced lover Bathsheba in the original poem, the re-write merely alludes to “Eden” and “Jehovah” while skillfully maintaining the rich tone of desperate longing, loneliness, and nostalgia for what once was. Though the underlying plot remains the same, the form is completely changed. Jarrell complains that one cannot tell the difference between Lowell’s David and Bathsheba without a

program; and so, Lowell eliminates the program altogether. The original poem is comprised of two distinctly labeled sections—I. David to Bathsheba, and II. Bathsheba's Lament in the Garden—each containing three twelve-lined stanzas. The newer version is transformed into a shorter, thirty-lined, free-verse poem; the structuring stanzas and “mannered” dialogue between the characters are noticeably absent.

A comparison of some lines reveals Lowell's choice to trade the original stilted language and diction for a freer, more conversational and contemporary tone:

“David and Bathsheba in the Public Garden”

I. David to Bathsheba

“Worn out of virtue, as the time of year,  
The burning City and its bells surround  
The Public Garden. What is sound  
Past agony is fall:  
The children crowding home from school at five,  
Punting a football in the bricky air—  
You mourn Uriah? If he were alive,  
O Love, my age were nothing but the ball  
Of leaves inside this lion-fountain, left  
For witch and winter.” “Yet the leaves' complaint  
Is the King's fall ... whatever suffers theft.”  
...

II. Bathsheba's Lament in the Garden

...  
The lion frothed into the basin ... all,  
Water to water—water that begets  
A child from water. And the jets  
That washed our bodies drowned  
The curses of Uriah when he died  
For David; ...

The harvest moon, earth's friend, that cared so much  
For us and cared so little, comes again;

Always a stranger! Farther from my touch,  
 The mountains of the moon ... whatever claws  
 The harp-strings chalks the harper's fingers. Cold  
 The eyelid drooping on the lion's eye  
 Of David, child of fortune. I am old;  
 God is ungirded; open! I must surely die. (l. 1-11, 49-54, 65-72)

"The Public Garden"

Burnished, burned-out, still burning as the year  
 you lead me to our stamping ground.  
 The city and its cruising cars surround  
 the Public Garden. All's alive—  
 the children crowding home from school at five,  
 punting a football in the bricky air,  
 ...  
 The park is drying.  
 Dead leaves thicken to a ball  
 inside the basin of a fountain, where  
 the heads of four stone lions stare  
 and suck on empty faucets. Night  
 deepens...  
 ...  
 And now the moon, earth's friend, that cared so much  
 for us, and cared so little, comes again—  
 always a stranger! As we walk,  
 it lies like chalk  
 over the waters. Everything's aground.  
 Remember summer? Bubbles filled  
 the fountain, and we splashed. We drowned  
 in Eden, while Jehovah's grass-green lyre  
 was rustling all about us in the leaves  
 that gurgled by us, turning upside down...  
 The fountain's failing waters flash around  
 the garden. Nothing catches fire. (l. 1-6, 10-15, 19-30)

In addition to the diction change, the mode of address is significantly altered. Instead of indicating dialogue with a traditional employment of quotation marks, Lowell opts for creating an implied listener in his newer poem—just as Warren and Jarrell do in their later work.

Warren's "you-address" and Jarrell's "interpersonal you," discussed in chapters three and four respectively, are replicated here in Lowell's mature poetic voice in lines such as, "you lead me to our stamping ground" and "Remember summer?" Lowell also opts to save the "parts as beautiful as that about the harvest moon" that Jarrell favored, and chooses to add more "beautiful" imagery, such as the evocative depictions of summer, the bubbling fountain, and a "grass-green lyre" that introduces musicality into the scene.

In addition to reflecting Lowell's continued respect for and adherence to Jarrell's suggestions for his work, this poem also serves to bolster the argument that Lowell's title poem is the rule and not the exception in *For the Union Dead*. Though, like "Union Dead," this poem centers on physical landmarks and personal experiences from Lowell's life, it cannot be interpreted merely as a self-involved purge of emotion. Axelrod argues:

it is here [in *Union Dead*] ... that Lowell tests for the first time his fully matured poetic voice.... he here speaks in a voice that will last him a lifetime, a voice capable of transmitting the full range and intensity of his unique sensibility and experience, a voice indebted to Tate and to Williams but ultimately liberated from both. (152)

The voice that is "indebted to Tate and Williams yet liberated from both" is the same mature poetic voice of Warren and Jarrell in the fifties and sixties: all three poets drew from personal experience in order to create poetry that is *alive* and authentic. They discovered a balance between the overburdened complexity of Tate and the superficial simplicity of Williams in order to present the world through the eyes of a narrator whose experience, though personal, is raised to a level that can be considered universal.

Lowell once stated, "if a poem is autobiographical—and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing—you want the reader to say, this is true"

(Seidel “An Interview” 272). One way that Lowell, Warren, and Jarrell achieved this goal is by infusing their personal poetry with realistic, concrete details of the world around them. For example, in Warren’s “A Vision: Circa 1880” (1960), he relates a visit to his father’s hometown:

That scene is Trigg county, and I see it.  
 Trigg County is in Kentucky, and I have been there,  
 But never remember the spring there. I remember  
 A land of cedar-shade, blue, and the purl of limewater,  
 But the pasture parched, and the voice of the lost joree  
 Unrelenting as conscience, and sick, and the afternoon throbs,  
 And the sun’s hot eye on the dry leaf shrivels the aphid,  
 And the sun’s heel does violence in the corn-balk. (l. 19-26)

Jarrell similarly depicts a realistic scene from his memories of Hollywood in “Children’s Arms” (1965):

On my way home I pass a cameraman  
 On a platform on the bumper of a car  
 Inside which, rolling and plunging, a comedian  
 Is working; on one white lot I see a star  
 Stumble to her igloo through the howling gale  
 Of the wind machines. On Melrose a dinosaur (l. 1-6)

Lowell utilizes this technique in “The Public Garden” by including imagery based on what one would actually notice while standing in Boston’s Public Garden, such as: “the jaded flock / of swanboats [that] paddles to its dock,” and “From the arched bridge, we see / the shedding park-bound mallards, how they keep / circling and diving in the lanternlight” (l. 8-10, 16-18). Perhaps lines like these are what inspired critics, like Bly, to describe Lowell’s work as “banal and journalistic”; but taken as a whole, these observations add to the overall sense of authenticity for all three poets (Bly, “Lowell’s *FTUD*” 74). Like some of America’s best fiction writers—Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, and Hemingway included—Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell succeed

in immortalizing their era through a carefully selected, artistically illustrated inclusion of tangible details.

Jarrell, unsurprisingly, expressed support for Lowell's *Union Dead*, and Warren also wrote to Lowell to express his appreciation:

It is a splendid book, truly. "For the Union Dead" is, for me, the big show piece. It is quite wonderful. Close behind—maybe not behind at all but less obviously "big," less "public"—I find "Soft Wood," with its extraordinarily powerful ending created from such simplicity. And "The Severed Head," ... "The Drinker," "The Scream," and "The Old Flame." What a book they make! (*Letters of Warren, Vol. IV* 428)

Warren's letter is noticeably less specific and less lengthy than the praising notes written to Lowell about his previous works, but the favored poems Warren points to are worth noting. It is not surprising that Warren enjoyed the big, public "Union Dead" and the more subtle, simplistic "Soft Wood," especially since he was also honing his political and personal poetry at the time. Less obvious, however, is the fact that he includes "The Scream" in his list of favorites. This poem, Fein notes, "which brings to mind some of Randall Jarrell's moving poems about the plight of childhood, is a touching statement about the child as orphan" (95). Here are some of the heartbreaking lines:

Later, she gave the scream,  
not even loud at first...  
When she went away I thought  
"But you can't love everyone,  
your heart won't let you!"

A scream! But they are all gone,  
those aunts and aunts, a grandfather,  
a grandmother, my mother—  
even her scream—too frail  
for us to hear their voices long. (l. 31-40)

Fein's comparison of Lowell's work to Jarrell's poems is on point, though as Sister Bernetta Quinn argues, "Every critic of Randall Jarrell has noted his predilection for children, as foci of narration and dramatic characters." One must add that, as Quinn articulates in "Warren and Jarrell: The Remembered Child," Lowell's "The Scream"—centered on the "[child] who had the experience and who did not miss the meaning"—is equally reminiscent of the "remembering" child narrators notable in Warren's poems (Quinn 32, 24).

### ***1965: Endings and New Beginnings***

By the end of the sixties, Jarrell's death (1965) and Warren's opinion of Lowell's "last whole phase" as "self-exploitation and ... pretty crazy" (Farrell, "Reminiscences" 298-300) precluded Lowell from exerting any new influence over his friends. In a characteristically straightforward letter to Tate in 1973, Warren cemented his souring take on Lowell's work:

You refer to "confessional poetry." This may be of that genre. It is rather straight. But ordinarily, there's a great deal of fictionalizing and indirection in poetry, even when it takes off a factual base.... There is, however, a lot of straight stuff in *BTB* [*Brother to Dragons*], for better or worse. This reminds me of Cal. I have just read his last three books [*Near the Ocean*; *Notebook, 1967-1968*; and *History*], if that is what I can be said to have been doing. I find them, in fact, just this side of unreadable. Plain dull. When something prospers a little, it gets swallowed up in the general morass. If a change of medication, as I have been told by B[ill] Meredith ... started this notebook stuff, they had better go back to the old bottle. (*Letters of Warren, Vol. V* 339)

Warren's words confirm several things for the aims of this study. First, Warren—like Lowell—immediately recognized the inadequacies of the term "confessional," arguing that the "fictionalizing and indirection in poetry" prevents even factually based material from being truly "confessional." Second, Warren admits that the "straight stuff" in *Brother to Dragons*, which is

previously argued to have inspired Lowell's personal poetry in *Life Studies*, also reminds him of Lowell. Third, this letter reveals that *Union Dead* is the last book of Lowell's poetry that earned Warren's approval. 1965—the year that marks Jarrell's tragic death—also marks the end of these mutually gratifying literary relationships.

That stated, Lowell's play, *The Old Glory*, which premiered on November 1, 1964, is the last of Lowell's works to draw all three authors together in like-mindedness. This play, which is a trilogy crafted from two of Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories—"Endecott and the Red Cross" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"—and Herman Melville's novella—*Benito Cereno*—earned Lowell five Obie Awards for the 1964-1965 season, including Best Off-Broadway Play ("Conversation with Hamilton" 289). Jarrell's support and praise were overwhelming. First, he traveled to New York so that he would not miss the premiere; his wife further reports that he could not contain his enthusiastic reactions during the performance: "Jarrell crossed and uncrossed his legs in excitement, exclaiming in loud whispers, 'Oh, that's so clever!'" Then, Jarrell continued spouting admiration to Lowell all evening, through the night, the next morning, and even "spent the hour before flight time in a telephone booth pouring a torrent of praise and suggestions into Lowell's ear" (*Jarrell's Letters* 495-496). Once he returned home, Jarrell wrote a rave review in the form of a letter to the *Times*, including lines such as: "the play is a masterpiece of imaginative knowledge" (qtd. in Hamilton 315). Finally, he continued to write letters and speak to friends about the marvel of Lowell's work.

Warren, less exuberant though still genuinely appreciative of Lowell's play, wrote to Tate: "Saw Cal's *Cereno* last night. It is a triumph" (*Letters of Warren, Vol. IV* 421). From his



letter above, one knows that Warren would not have minced words to Tate. A likely reason for Warren's high opinion of Lowell's play is the fact that Lowell drew from Warren's *Brother to Dragons* for inspiration. The influence of Warren's *Dragons* on *Life Studies* is discussed above; however, pushing this argument further, Norma Procopiow asserts that when reading *Dragons*, "Lowell was searching for a model which successfully applied a documentary approach to a violent event in American history (an approach later utilized in *The Old Glory*)" (303-304). Not only did Warren's significant book inspire Lowell towards directly addressing sordid events of America's past, it also pushed him "beyond the dramatic monologue to *Old Glory*" (Procopiow 11). Warren's play-like format in *Dragons* that succeeds in blending dialogue, prose, and poetry in a sustained, eventful narrative, served as an example for Lowell who struggled with his previous long narrative, "Mills of the Kavanaughs."

Lowell's review of *Brother to Dragons* hints to the significant role Warren's book played in his future works:

*Brother to Dragons* is a model and an opportunity. It can be imitated without plagiarism, and one hopes its matter and its method will become common property. ("Warren's *BTD*" 68)

Essentially, this is precisely what Lowell did in order to create *Old Glory*, which is thematically and structurally reminiscent of Warren's work. Like Warren's smearing though truthful depiction of America's founding father, Thomas Jefferson, Lowell aims for his play to present a truer sense of American history than is even presented in the original works. He is "careful to expose the wrongs of the dislodged oppressor.... Lowell makes Delano shoot down the leader of the blacks and say, 'This is your future'" (Hamilton 313). By forcing the guilty white characters

into the light amidst the racial issues underlying both works, the real-life passion Warren and Lowell shared for the Civil Rights Movement surfaces in these literary works.

In the same way that Lowell, through his renowned *Life Studies*, seems to steal Warren's credit as the first major poet to blend prose and poetry while drawing from autobiographical material, Lowell's *The Old Glory* once again overshadows Warren and his success. Robert Brustein's review of *Old Glory*, a "cultural-poetic masterpiece," praises Lowell's unique assessment of the "American character at three different points in its historical development"; though perhaps not in a distinct three-part work like *Old Glory*, Warren had been examining the American character set against history since his earliest works of poetry and fiction. Furthermore, Brustein argues, "*The Old Glory*, certainly, is the first American play to utilize historical materials in a compelling theatrical manner" (79). Since Warren's *Dragons* was not originally performed on stage, Brustein may be technically correct. However, Warren scholars know that he presupposed Lowell not only with the theatrical format of *Dragons*, but also in his historically based *All the King's Men* (1946), which premiered as a film version in 1949 and later as a play adaptation in 1960. This study aims not only to trace the influence Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell had on one another, but also to define their roles more accurately in literary history; quite simply, Warren's influence deserves more credit for Lowell's accomplishments.

After 1965, Lowell produced six books of original poetry and three books of translations before his natural death on September 12, 1977. These works, like those of Warren in his later years, deserve a separate study in order to trace Lowell's ongoing experimentation with style and content. However, considering the death of Jarrell and the firmly voiced dissatisfaction Warren

felt for Lowell's *Near the Ocean* and beyond, tracing these relationships further is no longer essential for this study. Though Warren and Lowell undoubtedly continued to draw from earlier lessons learned from each other and from Jarrell, their distinctly unique styles of the seventies—and the eighties for Warren—no longer appear to affect or inspire change in one another's work. Intuitively sensing this shift, Axelrod refers to *Near the Ocean* as marking “a new phase of [Lowell's] life and career” (176).

*Near the Ocean*, the height of Lowell's explicitly political poetry, was published shortly after he publically rejected a White House invitation due to his views on Vietnam. Lowell admits, “This brought more publicity than poems, and I felt miscast, felt burned to write on the great theme, private though almost ‘global’” (“Conversation with Hamilton” 270). Therefore, his book invokes aesthetic forms ranging from Marvel's eight-line stanza to free verse, mostly in an attempt to vocalize his concerns for America, such as:

Blue twinges of mortality  
remind us the theocracy  
drove in its stakes here to command  
the infinite, and gave this land  
a ministry that would have made  
short work of Christ, the Son of God,  
and then exchanged His crucifix,  
hardly our sign, for politics. (“Fourth of July,” l. 25-32)

After *Ocean*, Lowell's *Notebook 1967-68* (1970) takes on a more spontaneous and ostensibly unfinished style as the title “notebook” implies. A letter Warren wrote to Lowell on October 12, 1969 regarding *Notebook* captures its true essence:

The book you sent [*Notebook*] has been much appreciated.... It has a new quality, however.... Your work, in general, has been formed under such pressures and intensities, with every poem hard, sharply outlined, assertive. This book seems, on the contrary, to

flow in and out of life, to emerge from shadow and slip back into it, to extend itself without any thing more than a heightening from life.... All with magnificent ease.... Here the reader has the sense of poetry not made and offered him, but of witnessing poetry growing—not poems already made.  
(*Letters of Warren, Vol. V* 77-78)

A knowing audience will recall the letter Warren wrote to Tate and read between the lines that Lowell's "new quality" which lacks "pressures and intensities" was not necessarily pleasing to Warren. Still, Warren illustrates the organic quality of *Notebook* that overflows into *History*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*. By drawing deeply from his strained relationships with his ex-wife, daughter, and third wife, Lowell captures—as Warren notes—"language rising inevitably from experience rather than language framed to make a poem" (*Letters of Warren, Vol. V* 77-78).

Lowell's last book, *Day by Day*, resembles Warren's latest works in its emphasis on aging and nostalgia for the past. It is touching how often Lowell refers to "the boys in my old gang" ("Homecoming," l. 2) in his late works, even choosing to write one poem for Warren and three poems on Jarrell. Lowell reminisces about Warren at LSU in 1940:

Robert Penn Warren talked three hours  
on Machiavelli ... the tyrannicide  
of princes, Cesare Borgia, Huey Long,  
citing fifty English and Italian sources—  
our dog-eat-dog days in isolationist America,  
devouring Stalin's unmeasured retreats,  
as if we had a conscience to be impartial.

"How can you beat a country  
where every boy of twelve can fix a motorcycle?"  
Red, you could make friends with anyone,  
criminals, or even showy writer giants  
you slaughtered in a review...

...

Your reminiscences have more color than life—  
but because, unlike you, I'm neither novelist  
nor critic, I choose your poetry:  
*Terror, Pursuit, Brother to Dragons, Or Else.*

...

an old master still engaging the dazzled disciple. (l. 7-18, 20-23, 36)

In remembering Warren, Lowell chooses to celebrate his own role as “dazzled disciple,” awed by Warren’s emphasis on history while teaching, his gregarious nature, and his poetry, *Brother to Dragons* included on his short list.

The poems on Jarrell are more pained since they were inspired by his unexpected death, but Lowell still captures glimpses of their close friendship:

I grizzle the embers of our onetime life,  
our first intoxicating disenchantments,  
dipping our hands once, not twice into the newness...  
coming back to Kenyon on the Ohio local— (“Randall Jarrell 2,” l. 1-4)

They come this path, old friends, old buffs of death.  
Tonight it’s Randall, his spark still fire though humble,  
his gnawed wrist cradled like *Kitten*. “What kept you so long,  
racing the cooling grindstone of your ambition?  
You didn’t write, you *rewrote*.... But tell me,  
Cal, why did we live? Why do we die? (“Randall Jarrell,” l. 9-14)

These lines embody not only the lasting significance of their formative years together, but also the intensity of their friendship, fueled by candid discussions on poetry and metaphysics. It is arguable that, out of these three authors, Lowell was the most deeply affected by his relationships with Warren and Jarrell—both for the development of his poetic talent, and in the way he relied personally upon their friendships. Lowell, a man famous for his personal proclivity for extremes, found a necessary balance among Warren and Jarrell.

## AFTERWORD

My methodology for this dissertation was to focus on literary history and aesthetics, thereby developing an historical narrative that includes close-readings of primary texts within a variety of contexts. Exploring the parallel literary development of Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Lowell through this lens, offers a new understanding of the changes their poetry underwent at mid-century. Their relationships with one another served as a catalyst for a simultaneous shift in which they transcend the formalism and high modernism of their mentors with a new poetic mode that, while partly reflective of these traditions, achieves what they considered to be a greater sense of authenticity through innovative stylistic choices. Furthermore, having closely scrutinized the personal exchanges and creative output of all three poets—while also considering current criticism on these authors, relevant historical and aesthetic issues, and the established views of formalism, high modernism, and the New Criticism—I hope to have also provided a better sense of where these authors fit into literary history, and, more specifically, into the tradition of American poetry.

This project joins a host of recent critical works that fray the edges of hard-drawn boundaries that have become generally accepted truths about American literature.<sup>98</sup> My choice to bring together Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell for a sustained analysis may, at first, seem unusual given the way previous conceptions of literary history have depicted the period. Despite the fact

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<sup>98</sup> Some examples include: Ernest Suarez, "Writing the South," chapter in the forthcoming *Cambridge History of American Poetry* (2013); Robert H. Brinkmeyer, *The Fourth Ghost* (2009); Adam Kirsh, *The Wounded Surgeon* (2005); Steven Gould Axelrod, "Lowell's Postmodernity" (2003), Christian Sisack, "Lowell's 'Confessional' Subjectivities" (2003); Stephen Burt, *Randall Jarrell and His Age* (2002); Charlotte Beck, *The Fugitive Legacy* (2001); T. R. Hummer, "Christ, Start Again: Robert Penn Warren, a Poet of the South?" (2000); James Longenbach, *Modern Poetry after Modernism* (1997); William Doeski, *The Years of Our Friendship* (1990); and Lawrence Kramer, "Freud and the Skunks" (1986).

that these three artists enjoyed and benefited professionally from life-long, well-documented literary relationships with one another, previous histories have discouraged scholars from investigating the significance of these connections. Based on a common view of American literature, Warren—the former Agrarian southerner and co-author of New Critical manifestos such as *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*—is traditionally grouped with John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks. Jarrell—somewhat forgotten and often neglected in literary matters save his criticism—does not appear to deserve a spot alongside Warren and Lowell as a major literary figure in American poetry. Lowell—the wealthy Bostonian and father of the Confessional movement—seems least likely of all to be linked in literary history to Warren and Jarrell. However, as this dissertation demonstrates, there is a serious need to reconsider these limited views and categories.

The traditional understanding of American poetry at mid-twentieth-century is thus: after enduring the intolerable pressures of high modernism and the New Critical mode for thirty years, younger poets looked to figures like William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson in order to break free from their predecessors to create what is now defined as “postmodern” poetry. Mid-century poets commonly are grouped in relation to the five major schools of contemporary verse: Black Mountain, New York School, Beat, Confessional, and Deep Image. As with most established patterns in literary history, there is truth in this tidy narrative, but it is also reductive in nature and highly problematic. Some of America’s important poets, including Elizabeth Bishop, Karl Shapiro, Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov, and Louis Simpson—not to mention lesser known female and multicultural writers—are noticeably excluded from these categories.

More importantly for this study, much of the poetry that Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell were creating in the 1950s and 1960s does not entirely align with any one of these schools.<sup>99</sup>

Essentially, the previously unexplored connections among these three poets, and the innovative poetry they encouraged one another to create at mid-century, serves as a case study for an alternative view to the current understanding of literary history. As discussed in chapter five, the “breakthrough narrative”—as espoused by James E. B. Breslin, David Perkins, Sandra M. Gilbert, and others—serves as an inaccurate story of origin for contemporary poetry. Focusing on the poetic development of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell illuminates some misconceptions implicit in the breakthrough narrative. Though they did diverge from a strict adherence to Ransom’s formalism and Tate’s and Eliot’s high modernism, they never completely abandoned the traditions of their mentors. In fact, the looser forms of their new poetic mode are partly based on the aesthetic experimentation of high modernist poets. Furthermore, though they never returned to the strict formalism of their early poetry, each poet drew from these conventions for the rest of their careers. Often, as in Warren’s and Jarrell’s loose quatrains or Lowell’s fourteen-liners, they repurpose the forms to serve innovative functions; but the presence of these structures—even as purposeful placeholders—defy the idea that the poets “broke through” or completely discarded their early teachings.

The poetry that Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell created at mid-century and after fails to be easily categorized as formalist, modernist, or even postmodernist. In 1973, Charles Altieri

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<sup>99</sup> Of course, Robert Lowell’s poetry is typically considered the model for Confessional poets, but see chapter five for the inadequacies of that label.



summarized some widely accepted generalizations about “contemporary poetry,” which have now come to be understood as “postmodern” poetry:

(1) three overlapping modes of contemporary poetry can be distinguished—confessional and less extreme forms of highly personal poetry, poetry based on Olson’s Projectivist aesthetic which ranges from objectivist poems to the fantasies of the New York Poets, and poetry of the deep-image self-consciously utilizing in a controlled fashion a surrealist poetic; (2) contemporary poets prefer the direct, the personal, the local, the anti-formal, and the topical to the traditional modernist emphases on impersonality (i.e formalism, overtly mythical themes and constructs, the use of persona, and a stress on complex and paradoxical statements), literary tradition, historicism, and universal statement; (3) contemporary aesthetic calls for participation far more than interpretation; (4) the custom of poetry readings has become very influential and has led away from complex meditative poetry to a more oral, communal style. (605)

Ultimately, if these attributes were formatted into a checklist, the mature poetry of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell would earn a check in roughly half of the boxes. As previously stated, though their poetry did become more personal, it does not fit squarely into the Confessional category; nor does it suit Olson’s Black Mountain school, nor the New York or Deep Image traditions. Even Altieri’s concession for the “overlapping” of these schools does not succeed in classifying the poetry of these three poets.

While Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell do increasingly prefer the direct, the personal, the local, and the topical, they also maintain echoes of formalism, occasionally implement the use of persona, and continue to harness poetic power through complex and paradoxical statements. Furthermore, through their shared preoccupation with history—and their emphasis on the cyclical nature of humanity’s history in particular—their integration of topical issues does not preclude universal statement. As for points three and four: Warren’s “you-address,” Jarrell’s “interpersonal you,” and Lowell’s integration of relatable personal material purposely aim to

engage reader participation—but their philosophically complex poems also demand interpretation. In a related point, their move towards simpler diction and characteristics of orality does not reduce the intricacy of their meditative poetry. In summation, the mature poetry of Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell seems to defy the currently accepted and broadly purported methods of classifying American poetry.

The purpose of these observations is not to suggest the obliteration of previous literary history; the inherent value of identifying significant trends and movements goes without saying. However, my point is to suggest a need to widen and reevaluate current views of American poetry in the second half of the twentieth-century. The connections among Warren, Jarrell, and Lowell serve as just one example of significant literary relationships that have hitherto been ignored. The question is: how many more of these significant connections are currently being neglected due to the inadequate labels that currently classify American poets? What do these omissions say about the way literary history has been written? This study aims to provoke other scholars to reexamine this important period in literary history so that we may more fully grasp the complexities and origins of contemporary poetry and forge a better understanding of American verse traditions.

## APPENDIX: TIME LINE

### 1905

- April 24 – Robert Penn Warren born

### 1914

- May 6 – Randall Jarrell born

### 1917

- March 1 – Robert Lowell born

### 1921

- Spring – Warren suffers injury to left eye
- Fall – Warren enters Vanderbilt University

### 1922

- April – The Fugitives start the literary magazine, *The Fugitive: A Journal of Poetry*

### 1923

- January – Warren moves into Wesley Hall room with Allen Tate

### 1924

- February – Warren listed on masthead as a member of the Fugitives
- May – Warren attempts suicide

### 1925

- Summer – Warren graduates summa cum laude from Vanderbilt
- August – Warren enters University of California as a graduate student and TA

### 1927

- Spring – Warren receives M.A. from University of California
- Fall – Warren enters Yale University on fellowship for graduate work

### 1928

- October – Warren enters New College at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar

### 1929

- Summer – Warren secretly married to Cinina Brescia in California
- November – Warren's *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* published

### **1930**

- Spring – Warren receives B. Litt. degree
- Fall – Warren accepts assistant professorship at Southwestern College
- September – Lowell begins at St. Mark's
- September – Warren openly married to Cinina Brescia in Marion, Arkansas
- Warren's "The Briar Patch" published in *I'll Take My Stand*

### **1931**

- Winter – Warren's *Prime Leaf* published in *American Caravan IV*
- September – Warren named acting assistant professor at Vanderbilt

### **1932**

- Jarrell starts his B.A. at Vanderbilt University (Fall 1932 – December 1935); studies under Warren, Tate, and Ransom

### **1934**

- February – Warren's left eye removed
- Spring – Warren leaves Vanderbilt and is appointed assistant professor at Louisiana State University starting in the Fall (1934 – 1942)

### **1935**

- Jarrell receives his B.A. from Vanderbilt
- Warren appointed managing editor of *The Southern Review* with Cleanth Brooks
- Lowell attends Harvard University (1935-1937)
- Jarrell begins his M.A. at Vanderbilt (1935-1938)

### **1936**

- February – Warren's *Thirty-Six Poems* published
- March – Warren receives Guggenheim Fellowship

### **1937**

- Summer – Lowell to Benfoly in Clarksville to meet Tate and study with Ransom
- Fall – Lowell transfers from Harvard to Kenyon College (1937-1940)
- Jarrell begins teaching at Kenyon College (1937-1939) and rooms with Lowell

### **1938**

- *Kenyon Review* is founded and edited by John Crowe Ransom
- Warren's *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* published

### **1939**

- Jarrell begins teaching at University of Texas, Austin (1939-1942)

## **1940**

- Lowell graduates from Kenyon College
- Lowell starts a junior fellowship at LSU
- April – Lowell marries Jean Stafford
- June – Jarrell marries Mackie Langham
- Jarrell's *The Rage for the Lost Penny* is published in *Five Young American Poets*

## **1941**

- January – Warren is a visiting professor at University of Iowa
- March – Lowell converts to Catholicism
- Lowell is an editorial assistant for publishers Sheed & Ward (1941-1943)

## **1942**

- April – Warren's *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* published
- Spring – Warren begins teaching at University of Minnesota
- Summer – Warren is a visiting professor at University of Iowa
- September – Jarrell's *Blood for a Stranger* published
- October – Jarrell enters the US Army Air Force (1942 – February 1946)

## **1943**

- October – Lowell is sentenced to the Federal Correctional Center in Danbury, Connecticut, and released in March 1944
- November – Jarrell stationed in Davis-Monthan Field in Tuscon, Arizona

## **1944**

- April – Warren's *Selected Poems: 1923-1943* published
- July – Warren is Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress
- September – Lowell's *Land of Unlikeness* published
- Winter – Warren's "The Ballad of Billie Pots" published

## **1945**

- October – Jarrell's *Little Friend, Little Friend* published

## **1946**

- Jarrell awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship
- February 1946 – Jarrell discharged from the Army
- April – Jarrell takes over as literary editor of *The Nation*
- August – Warren's *All the King's Men* published
- December – Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* published

## 1947

- April – Warren receives Guggenheim Fellowship
- April – Lowell receives a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry
- May – Warren receives Pulitzer Prize for *All the King's Men*
- September – Lowell is Consultant in Poetry for the Library of Congress
- September – Jarrell begins teaching at the Women's College of the University of North Carolina in Greensboro

## 1948

- March – Jarrell's *Losses* published
- June – Divorce between Lowell and Jean Stafford is official

## 1949

- April – Warren's *Modern Rhetoric* published
- July – Lowell marries Elizabeth Hardwick
- Warren resigns from University of Minnesota

## 1950

- January – Lowell starts teaching at Iowa University
- Warren is visiting professor at Yale University
- Lowell's *Poems 1938-1949* published
- Winter – Jarrell's "The Obscurity of the Poet" published in *Partisan Review*

## 1951

- Lowell's *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* published
- June – Warren granted divorce from Cinina Brescia
- Fall – Jarrell's *The Seven-League Crutches* published
- Fall – Jarrell teaches one year at Princeton

## 1952

- Spring – Jarrell's "The Age of Criticism" published in *Partisan Review*
- November – Jarrell marries Mary von Schrader
- December – Warren marries Eleanor Clark

## 1953

- August – Warren's *Brother to Dragons* published
- Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* published

## 1954

- Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* published

## 1955

- Fall – Lowell begins teaching at Boston University
- November – Lowell rejoins the Episcopal church
- December – Warren retires from Yale University
- Jarrell's *Selected Poems* published

## 1956

- Fall – Jarrell is the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (1956-1958)
- May – Three-day Fugitives' reunion at Vanderbilt
- August – Warren's *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* published

## 1957

- August – Warren's *Promises: Poems, 1954-1956* published

## 1958

- January – Warren receives Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize for Poetry
- March – Warren receives National Book Award for *Promises*
- June – Warren's *Selected Essays* published

## 1959

- March – Lowell's *Life Studies* published and he is awarded the *National Book Award*
- Warren's *Understanding Fiction* published

## 1960

- April – Warren's *All the King's Men: A Play* premiered
- August – Warren's *You, Emperors, and Others: Poems, 1957-1960* published
- September – Lowell's *Imitations* published
- Jarrell's *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* published

## 1961

- February – Warren's *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* published
- Lowell's *Phaedra* (translation) published
- Lowell's *Imitations* published and awarded the Bollingen Prize

## 1962

- Spring – Warren accepts one-term-per-year appointment as professor of English at Yale
- Jarrell translates stories by the Brothers Grimm in *The Golden Bird* and in *The Rabbit Catcher and Other Fairy Tales of Ludwig Bechstein*
- Jarrell's *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* published

## 1964

- October – Lowell's *For the Union Dead* published
- November – Premier of Lowell's play, *The Old Glory*
- Jarrell's children's books, *The Gingerbread Rabbit* and *The Bat-Poet*, published

## 1965

- Jarrell's *The Lost World* published
- Jarrell's children's book *The Animal Family* published
- March – Jarrell is hospitalized for nervous breakdown
- Lowell's *Selected Poems* published
- Lowell rejects an invitation to a White House Arts Festival in Vietnam protest
- May – Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?* published
- October 14 – Jarrell dies

## 1966

- October – Warren's *Selected Poems: New and Old, 1923-1966* published

## 1967

- Lowell's *Near the Ocean* published

## 1968

- June – Lowell's *Notebook 1967-68* published
- October – Warren's *Incarnations: Poems 1966-1968* published

## 1969

- Warren's *Audubon: A Vision* published
- Lowell's *The Voyage & Other Versions of Poems by Baudelaire, Prometheus Bound* (translation), and *Notebook 1967-68* published
- Jarrell's *The Complete Poems*, *The Third Book of Criticism*, and *The Three Sisters* (translation) published posthumously

## 1970

- July – Warren receives National Medal for Literature
- Lowell's *Notebook 1967-68* (revised and expanded edition, *Notebook*, 1970) published

## 1971

- August – Warren's *Homage to Theodore Dreiser* published

## 1972

- October – Lowell's divorce from Lizzie and subsequent marriage to Lady Caroline Blackwood



### 1973

- May – Warren’s *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* published
- June – Lowell’s *History, For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin* published

### 1974

- April – Lowell receives a Pulitzer Prize for *The Dolphin*
- April – Warren delivers Jefferson Lectures in the Humanities
- October – Warren’s *Or Else: Poem / Poems 1968-1974* published

### 1975

- July – Warren’s *Democracy and Poetry* published

### 1976

- Warren’s *Selected Poems: 1923-1975* published
- Lowell’s *Selected Poems* published (revised edition, 1977)
- Jarrell’s children’s book *Fly By Night*, and *Faust, Part I* (translation) published posthumously

### 1977

- Lowell’s *Day by Day* published
- September 12 – Lowell dies

### 1978

- September – Warren’s *Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978* published
- Lowell’s *The Oresteia of Aeschylus* (translation) published

### 1979

- April – Warren receives Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Now and Then*
- September – Warren’s *Brother to Dragons: A New Version* published

### 1980

- December – Warren’s *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* published
- July – Warren’s *Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980* published

### 1981

- August – Warren’s *Rumor Verified: Poems 1979-1980* published

### 1982

- Summer – Warren’s *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* published

**1985**

- March – Warren’s *New and Selected Poems: 1923-1985* published—new poems collected in *Altitudes and Extensions: 1980-1984*

**1986**

- February – Warren appointed Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry

**1987**

- July – *A Robert Penn Warren Reader* published
- Lowell’s *Collected Prose* published

**1989**

- March – Warren’s *New and Selected Essays* published
- September 15 – Warren dies

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