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ROBERT PENN WARREN, AUDUBON AND IMAGINATION

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When Robert Penn Warren was preparing *World Enough and Time* (1950) he immersed himself in Americana of the early nineteenth century, including the writings of John Audubon. An early attempt to write a poem about him came to nothing but later, in the sixties, Warren did a section on Audubon for the history of American literature on which he collaborated with Cleanth Brooks and R. W. B. Lewis. The impact Audubon made on Warren's imagination is clear from the introductory note to his selections from the ornithologist's works:

> Audubon came very near to fulfilling his "astonishing desire to see much of the world" — at least that world that was his dream. His dream was not unique. For two hundred years, men had been dreaming of the Eden beauty of the great forests, the majestically uncoiling rivers, and the endless plains of the inner America. For some that dream had been of a land to be possessed and exploited for the use of civilisation, but for others it was of a land in which man could joyfully enter nature ... Audubon knew that it was too late for his dream of man's sinking into nature, and he could even praise, though in somewhat ambiguous inflections, the course of history that had rendered that dream anachronistic. Now he could only hope for a faithful record, and a fitting monument, to render "immortal" the world that had once provoked that dream (Brooks 1973 : 1062—63).

In Part Five of *Audubon: A Vision* (1969)[1] Warren writes that the hero of his poem "dreamed of hunting with Boone, from imagination painted his portrait" (p. 96). The poet, in his turn, seeks to paint, from an imagination stimulated by Audubon's writings, a portrait of the great American ornithologist. The poem begins by discarding the most preposterous of the legends about Audubon's identity — that he was the lost Dauphin — and penetrates to the heart of the man by imaginatively subjecting his consciousness to the world in which he walked. The resulting poem is one of Warren's most compelling treatments of the theme of selfhood and of the problem of achieving happiness in a world both beautiful and brutal. It belongs to a group of poems in which Warren is particularly concerned with the imagination. *Audubon* is not only *about* the imagination, it also exemplifies the way in which the poet's own imagination works on historical materials to produce a vision grounded in fact.

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[1] Robert Pann Warren, *Audubon: A Vision* (New York: Random House, 1969). Reprinted in *Selected Poems, 1923—1975* (New York: Random House, and London: Secker and Warburg). 1976. Page references are to the latter volume.

The central incident of Warren's poem occurred early in Audubon's compiling of his record. It is the spring of 1812 and Audubon is alone on the prairie, somewhere between Ste Genevieve (Missouri) and Henderson (Kentucky). In Part Two, "The Dream He Never Knew the End Of", Warren imagines his coming on a cabin presided over by a tall, ugly woman, being put up for the night in company with a one-eyed Indian, and barely espacing the sudden violence of the frontier. The woman and her two sons would murder Audubon for his watch and he escapes only because of the timely entrance of three travellers. Next morning the woman and her sons are hanged.

Warren's source for this incident is "The Prairie", the third of the "Delineations of American Scenery and Manners" with which Audubon intersperses his descriptions of birds in the five-volume *Ornithological Biography*. At three points Warren's recreation of the incident differs significantly from Audubon's narrative. When the woman in "The Prairie" is "all ecstasy" over his watch, Audubon is preoccupied with feeding his dog and himself: "Thoughtless, and, as I fancied myself in so retired a spot, secure, I paid little attention to her talk or her movements" (Audubon 1831—1839 : 16). Warren's hero is all attention from the moment the woman hangs the watch round her neck:

> ... near it the great hands hover delicately
> As though it might fall, they quiver like moth wings, her eyes
> Are fixed downward, as though in shyness, on that gleam,
> and her face
> Is sweet in an outrage of sweetness, so that
> His gut twists cold. He cannot bear what he sees.
>
> (p. 88)

The poem's second important departure from its source occurs at the moment of crisis. After a silent warning from the one-eyed Indian, the real Audubon observes the woman whetting her carving-knife; he confesses that "the sweat covered every part of my body", but fear does not paralyse him: "I turned, cocked my gunlocks silently, touched my faithful companion, and lay ready to start up and shoot the first who might attempt my life" (Audubon 1831—1939 : 83). Warren's hero experiences a sense of having entered a nightmare, "knows it/Is the dream he had in childhood but never/Knew the end of", and, although he knows what he must do to defend himself, sinks into a "lassitude" which "Sweetens his limbs". Unable to act, he "cannot think what guilt unmans him, or/Why he should find the punishment so precious" (p. 90). The third notable discrepancy between the two narratives is in their descriptions of Audubon's state of mind after frontier justice has been visited on the woman and her sons. In "The Prairie" Audubon does not even refer to the hanging, expressing himself" well pleased" with the way things have turned out and closing his account of the incident with the patriotic observation that during twenty-five years of wandering "this was the only time at which my life was in danger from my fellow creatures" (Audubon 1831—1839 : 84).

Some readers have found the vision of the poem hard to accept not on philosophical or artistic grounds but because of the liberties they think Warren has taken with the facts of a historical figure's life. Thomas Lask objects to the "hidden sexuality" Warren imparts to the relationship between Audubon and the woman and concludes that although "it can be argued that the poet has the right to recreate the man as he sees fit ... there ought to be a cautionary warning to indicate the fissure between the original and the image" (Lask 1969 : 37). For Allen Shepherd, "Warren's attempt ... to provide a moral dimension beyond the psychological is both crucial and suspect since neither unmanning guilt nor precious punishment seems to have adequate referent within the context of the incident" (Shepherd 1971 : 50). It is surprising that Shepherd lets the matter rest there, for he understands the essential difference between Audubon's story in "The Prairie" and Warren's poem: "Although Audubon may have rounded out a good story, his primary purpose was to record, not to interpret. Warren is at least as much concerned to interpret, to render dramatically an issue in this *exemplum*-like sequence, as he is to transcribe a narrative" (Shepherd 1971 : 51).

There is, moreover, something suspect about Audubon's narrative. Although he claims to have paid "little attention" to the woman's admiration of his watch, he records it with succinct thoroughness: "She was all ecstasy, spoke of its beauty, asked me its value, and put the chain round her brawny neck, saying how happy the possession of such a watch should make her" (Audubon 1931—1839 : 82). That the woman made a strong impression on Audubon is clear from his precise references to her gruff voice, negligent attire and ugly mouth, his calling her an "incarnate fiend" and "infernal hag", and his according her the only direct speech in the narrative. Given the amount of detail he does provide, his failure to say exactly what was done to the woman and her sons must strike the reader as evasion:

> We marched them into the woods off the road, and having used them as Regulators were wont to use such delinquents, we set fire to the cabin, gave all the skins and implements to the young Indian warrior, and proceeded, well pleased, toward the settlements. (Audubon 1831—1839 : 84).

Such inconsistency and evasion must have suggested to Warren that the incident described in "The Prairie" deeply affected Audubon, but that he repressed his perplexingly strong feelings towards the woman. Out of his total sense of

Audubon's life and character Warren does "interpret" the incident, but he does so within the known scope of Audubon the man and the peculiarities implicit in the story. The poet does not cook the books.

The whole poem develops out of its first part. In (A) Warren gives us his Audubon watching one of America's most splendid birds:

> Moccasins set in hoar frost, eyes fixed on the bird,
> Thought: "On that sky it is black",
> Thought: "In my mind it is white".
> Thinking: "*Ardea occidentalis*, heron, the great one".
> Dawn: his heart shook in the tension of the world.
> Dawn: and what is your passion?
>
> (p. 85)

Of course Audubon's heart shakes "in the tension of the world": he lives in that tension by a defining passion for the beauty of the birds of America which involves him in killing them. Within a page's length of the *Ornithological Biography* he says appreciatively of the great white heron that "They walk majestically, with firmness and great elegance", and then, matter-of-factly, "It is difficult to kill them except with buck-shot, which we found ourselves obliged to use" (Audubon 1831—1839 : 547—48). The birds themselves live "in the tension of the world": Plate 281 of *The Birds of America* depicts the elegant and majestic heron with a fish in its mouth, and while the white-headed eagle referred to in Part Five of the poem draws praise from Audubon for its "strength, daring and cool courage" and its ability to glide through the air "like a falling star", the savagery of its attack on a swan leads him to deplore "the cruel spirit of this dreaded enemy of the feathered race" and to repine, with Benjamin Franklin, that this of all birds "should have been chosen as the emblem of my country" (Audubon 1831—1839 : 161—68).

Warren has caught in his poem Audubon's responsiveness to the individual characteristics of different species: each bird — heron, crow, buzzard, eagle, goose — "selves" in the way of Gerard Manley Hopkins's kingfishers and dragonflies. The bear, too, in (B) is completely involved in its own specific creaturehood:

> The bear feels his own fat
> Sweeten, like a drowse, deep to the bone.
>
> (p. 86)

Watching the bear, Audubon thinks: "How thin is the membrane between himself and the world". The bear could not define itself as the above lines do, any more than the great white heron could call itself by a Latin name or the whooping crane liken the air it cleaves to "fluent crystal" or "transparent iron" (p. 99). These precisions come from the human imagination, the "membrane" that distinguishes man from other creatures of the natural world.

When, in Part Two, Audubon sees the woman, she is a strong physica presence, a creature, albeit a less prepossessing one than the bear, peering out from her lair:

> The face, in the air, hangs. Large,
> Raw-hewn, strong-beaked, the haired mole
> Near the nose, to the left, and the left side by
> firelight
> Glazed red, the right in shadow, and under the tumble and
> tangle
> Of dark hair on that head, and under the coarse eyebrows,
> The eyes, dark, glint as from the unspecifiable
> Darkness of a cave. It is a woman.
>
> (p. 87)

Audubon's watch immediately becomes the defining passion by which the woman is transformed: "Her body sways like a willow in spring wind. Like a girl". The change is shocking, her face is "sweet in an outrage of sweetness", so that Audubon's "gut twists cold. He cannot bear what he sees" (p. 88). Here is the extreme feeling which the real Audubon represses in "The Prairie" but which is betrayed by the inconsistency and evasion we have noticed.

In this scene Warren prepares the ground for Audubon's reaction to the prospect of death. Within the general context of human sin and guilt imaged by the dream of Part Two (F), Audubon is specifically unmanned by the kinship that can now be seen to exist between the woman and himself. Part Five of the poem begins: "He walked in the world. Knew the lust of the eye", and the lust of the woman's eye is essentially the same as his. Elsewhere Warren says: "Audubon was the greatest slayer of birds that ever lived: he destroyed beauty in order to create beauty. Love is knowledge" (Stitt 1977 : 475). The woman's readiness to kill in order to know and fulfil herself through beauty is the moral counterpart of Audubon's ambition "to acquire a true knowledge of the Birds of North America" (p. 96). It is no mere sexual masochism that "sweetens his limbs" with "lassitude"; his "punishment" will be "precious" because it is to be inflicted by a fellow criminal.

When the woman is hanged Audubon suddenly sees that her face is "beautiful as stone, and/So becomes aware that he is in the manly state" (pp. 91—92). His sexual response expresses Warren's equation of love and knowledge, for Audubon, recognising his moral kinship with the woman, has come to know her in the intense moment of his own impending death. The woman is self-fulfilled in death and, therefore, beautiful. Her laughter, provoked by the suggestion that she might wish to pray, expresses much more than contempt for the God who may have created both her executioners and herself. In the second "Interjection" of *Or Else* the poet warns the reader that intense concentration on a single object, even a fragment of crushed rock, may afford an unnerving experience:

> ... Not all witnesses
> of the phenomenon survive unchanged
> the moment when, at last, the object screams
> in an ecstasy of
> being.
>
> (p. 26)

The woman's laughter is her scream of ecstasy in the fulfilment of being, achieved through her commitment to the transfiguring beauty of Audubon's watch which her imagination reveals to her. Audubon does not "survive unchanged". The woman's fulfilment, in spite of her failure to take possession of the "magic" of the watch, asserts the power of imagination and challenges his own sense of identity: "He tries to remember his childhood. / He tries to remember his wife. / He can remember nothing" (p. 92). He can only "continue to walk in the world", driven by his dream, his defining passion for the birds whose self-sufficiency echoes the woman's completeness of being. As he comes to know the woman's beauty by becoming the agent of her death, so with the birds in Part Six:

> He slew them, at surprising distances, with his gun.
> Over a body held in his hand, his head was bowed low,
> But not in grief.
>
> (p. 99)

The image of Audubon reverently bent over the bird he has just killed recalls the picture of his standing alone in guilt and awe before the mysteriously beautiful, rigid corpse of the hanged woman and yearning "to be able to frame a definition of joy" (p. 92).

The poem itself seeks to express such a definition and to be a "story of deep delight" such as the poet asks for in Part Seven. The vision offered is of a world of tension in which "human filth" is complemented by "human hope", bestiality by beauty, the anguish of self-uncertainty by the triumph of self-realisation, all through the redeeming power of the imagination by which love is knowledge and time itself may be transcended in "the dream / Of a season past all seasons" (p. 98). This celebration of the imagination is Warren's answer to "this century, and moment, of mania" (p. 100). In *Audubon*, as in *Brother to Dragons*, he has both performed an exercise in creative biography and taken from history — "the big myth we live" (Warren 1953 : xii) — a story which, in his hands, becomes a "little myth" that may help us to live better.

II

In *Audubon*, in much of *Incarnations* (1968) and in the best of *Or Else* (1974) there is a maturity of vision and an assurance of utterance marked by the absence of those often violent refractions of theme by which, in earlier poems, Warren seeks to prove that he apprehends the full complexity of the subject in hand. Authority of voice and vision is especially evident in "Time as Hypnosis", "Composition in Gold and Red-Gold" and "A Problem in Spatial Composition" — all from *Or Else* — each of which displays what Warren calls in his essay on Coleridge "a high degree of expressive integration" (Warren 1966 : 262) and, like Audubon, is concerned with the imagination.

The life-declaring power of recollected images substantiates the neo-Wordsworthian "unsleeping principle of delight" in the eighth "Interjection" of *Or Else* (p. 75). This neat poem is really a salute to the imagination. A weightier testimony to human dependence on imagination is contained in "Time as Hypnosis", aptly dedicated to I. A. Richards. The snow-covered landscape is an image of annihilation, reproducing on earth the eternal emptiness of the sky to which it imparts its dizzying light:

> All day in a landscape that had been
> Brown fields and black woods but was now
> White emptiness and arches,
> I wandered. The white light
> Filled all the vertiginous sky, and even
> My head until it
> Spread bright and wide like another sky under which I
> Wandered.
>
> (p. 23)

The boy's mind is absorbed into the annihilating whiteness: like the poet in the "absoluteness" of "Fog", he becomes "contextless" (p. 137). The general death, symbolised by the snow, is particularised by the field mouse's epitaph, "the single / Bright frozen, red bead of a blood-drop" at the end of its delicate tracks. Looking back at his own tracks and ahead at "the blankness of white ... Then the sky", the boy is set parallel to the field mouse. Death comes physically to the mouse — a creature purely of nature — in the owl and metaphysically to the boy in the blankness of the snowscape and the emptiness of the sky:

> All day, I had wandered in the glittering metaphor
> For which I could find no referent.
>
> (p. 24)

The hypnotic power of snow and sky has paralysed the boy's imagination, transforming it, in Wallace Steven's phrase, into "a mind of winter":

> All night, that night, asleep, I would wander, lost
> in a dream
> That was only what the snow dreamed.
>
> (p. 24)

Obscuring the natural detail by which the boy customarily takes his bearings, the snow also represents the power of nature and eternity to deprive man of the faculty by which he maintains his hold on the world and on his own identity. "Looking into the heart of light", like Eliot's Tiresias in the hyacinth garden of "The Waste Land", the boy is "neither / Living nor dead". Without imagination man's mind is, indeed, a blank, his life a desolation.

The obligation laid upon the imagination to achieve the completeness of vision defined by *Audubon* is the theme of "Composition in Gold and Red-Gold". Autumn suffuses this scene with gold, binding sun-light, apples, chipmunk, girl and brook in one ideal texture. The cat adds the finishing touch:

> The tail of the cat, half-persian, weaves from side to side,
> In infinite luxury, gold plume
> Of sea-weed in that tide of light.
> That is a motion that puts
> The world to sleep.
>
> (p. 63)

It is, obviously, another case of hypnosis. Mesmerised by the movement of the cat's tail, the poet is lulled by the rich perfection around him until sudden violence "unstitches the afternoon", adding the "flame-gold" at the base of the chipmunk's skull to the colours of the scene. Warren's concern is now clearly with the relationship between the imagination and reality. Scenery, like poetry, wants to be pure, but, in the real world, scenes are not, and the poet is not allowed to rest content until the climactic colour of "flame-gold" brings the impure fact of death into the centre of his scene. Good aesthetics is concerned not just with form and colour but with the completeness of truth. The "flame-gold" of the dead chipmunk is the most vividly beautiful as well as the most forbidding colour in the scene. The poet's imagination, now fully awake, perceives that this death "completes composition" by making it a true image of the world, and moves beyond the scene to find in the unseen trout's determination and the vanished eagle's flight, affirming images of continuing life.

Warren returns to the theme of the imagination in "A Problem in Spatial Composition", the concluding poem of *Or Else* (pp. 80–81). The "problem" involves us again in the relationship between art and truth. Looking westward, across a forest toward the setting sun, the poet's eye orders what it sees in terms of the rectangle of a high window that gives on the scene. References to "lower right foreground", "upper left frame" and the "perspective" from which the scene is viewed stress the poet's awareness of his own act of composition. The question is whether the poet's subjective ordering of the scene to his aesthetic satisfaction results in a true picture of the world, whether truth of coherence is also truth of correspondence. The poet knows exactly how his own imagination works. The "tall scarp of stone" is a fact and continues to be one "in knowledge". The imagination turns the scarp into a "mass of blue cumulus" according to "truth of perception", but does not deny its factual existence as a scarp: the simile expands the object without undermining its original state. Fact and idea co-exist perfectly. Similarly, the poet realises that his "perspective" is responsible for the image of the branch that "Stabs, black, at the infinite saffron of sky". Perspective closes the gap between tree and sky, but the poet is aware that the gap is still there. "All is ready", then, because the poet has made it so, but, as in his picture of Audubon, without distortion of the facts.

The hawk brings the poem's only awkward moment as it glides down "In the pellucid ease of thought" a strained phrase bespeaking an unassimilated idea. The hawk's element, the sky, has already been established as a legitimate symbol of "forever" and when the bird settles on "the topmost, indicative tip of / The bough's sharp black and skinny jag skyward", it brings the eternity of the sky into contact with the temporal earth. We may or may not agree that "The hawk's instantaneous disappearance from the scene is akin to man's disappearance from life at death ... The hawk in the poem is analogous to the spirit of man, as birds so often are in English and American poetry generally". But it is clear that "When he resumes his flight, the bird returns to the eternal realm of sky, having rested for but a moment on the time-bound earth" (Stitt 1976 : 275). More important than any specific equation between the bird and the human spirit is the fact that the bird's perching on the tree is something that happens outwith the poet's control. The bird — an object of fact — enters the composition — a matter of art — "at the upper left frame", and the poet's imagination accepts the event into his picture. His "perspective" yields the image of contact between the earth and sky in the branch that "jags upward ... higher / Than even ... / The Mountain"; the actual arrival of the hawk to express the same thing rewards the imagination for its scrupulousness by confirming its vision. "The Imagination", as Keats says, "may be compared to Adam's dream — he awoke and found it Truth". The moment both completes the poet's account of the relation between the imagination and the world, and expresses the possibility that we may, at times, catch glimpses of the eternal on earth. If "A Problem in Spatial Composition", like the Ancient Mariner's blessing of the water snakes, is "a little fable of the creative process", (Warren 1966 : 258) it is also a compact and eloquent fable of "the tension of the world", intimating how, through the imagination, that tension may be resolved.

Wallace Stevens, one feels, would have liked this poem. In his discussion of the imagination as value in the modern age, Stevens writes:

> The world may, certainly, be lost to the poet but it is not lost to the imagination. I speak of the poet because we think of him as the orator of the imagination. And I say that the world is lost to him, certainly, because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written (Stevens 1965 : 142).

Whatever may be lost to Warren, it is not the world. A long, vigorous career has produced a body of poetry that includes many fine poems of the earth. How many of them are great must be, of course, a "tale of time".

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