Introduction  the Logic of the Dream

In the dream Robert Penn Warren recounts in his poem "I Am Dreaming of a White Christmas," he returns to a childhood Christmas scene, frozen in time as in memory, although time has exacted its price. Dust obscures the newspapers whose dates the poet cannot bring himself to read, and his parents, still in their chairs, are skeletal mummies now—his father's skin brown as old leather and his eyes "Not there, . . . stare at what / Is not there." Under the denuded tree there's a present for Warren, and he reaches out to take it. But a parental voice forbids him, "No presents, son, till the little ones come." Later in the poem, after the scene has shifted to Times Square and points west, the poet wonders, "Will I never know / What present there was in that package for me, / Under the Christmas tree?" And comments:

All items listed above belong in the world
In which all things are continuous,
And are parts of the original dream which
I am now trying to discover the logic of.

This book is an attempt to join him in the search for the logic of the dream—a search that, in part, is the logic of dream. This dream logic is explained in a book the son had once left behind and imagines his father reading, in another poem ("Reading Late at Night, Thermometer Falling") contained in the same book (Or Else: Poem / Poems 1968–1974) where "I Am Dreaming . . ." appears. The book is "Freud on dreams"—Freud's Interpretation of Dreams—which discovers the "dreamwork" through which the unconscious constructs its nightly fictions. Warren recently commented to Floyd Watkins that the gift the parental voice forbade him to open, which seems to symbolize the dream he cannot yet interpret, contains his "whole life, of course" (Watkins, 164). It contains to a remarkable degree his literary oeuvre as well, which itself is a "world / In which all things are continuous." Just how continuous is suggested by the recurring dream about a package to be unwrapped (analogous to "unwrapping" the dream itself)
that first appears in Night Rider and reappears in one form or another throughout most of Warren's subsequent novels, as if it too were somehow an "original dream"—one that lies at the heart of his fiction.

This continuity is also suggested by the persistence with which texts in all of Warren's ten novels circulate between father and son: a text the father wrote for the son to read, a text the father should have written but did not, a text the son mistakenly thought the father had written, a text someone else wrote but the father came to possess and passes on to the son, a text whose existence the father refuses to acknowledge in the very moment he transmits it to the son, a text that denies its own existence, a text the father wants the son to write for him, or a text the son inherits from the father and rewrites to his own advantage.

Pervading each one of these relationships of fathers and sons is the old, old story of what happened to Oedipus at the crossroads and at Thebes. Just under the surface is an unremitting and murderous hostility—as Warren was to write in his autobiographical memoir disguised as a book on Jefferson Davis: "How often we learn in later life . . . that the love we long ago thought we had was a mask for hatred, or hatred a mask for love" (24–25). An undercurrent of violence is not entirely absent, either, from the relationship of author to critic thus already inscribed in these stories about sons trying to make sense of the text their fathers left them: " . . . I suppose that I am the last person, quite literally, whose comment on the book is relevant. It might be somewhat like a patient etherized upon the table jumping up to grab the scalpel from the surgeon and stabbing the surgeon to the heart" (letter from RPW to RPR, 10 June 1985).

Given the importance of this recurring pattern in the novels, the way in which Warren performs the symmetrically opposite gesture in "Reading Late at Night" appears all the more significant. It seems to present itself—at least to me—as some kind of response to the question posed by the insistent recurrence of that paternal textual legacy. What the son gives back to the father is Freud, and what Warren at the same time gives the reader who has puzzled over the recurring dreams, unopenable packages, and paternal texts in the novels is some valuable information about how to read. For "Freud on dreams" tells us how to read not only dreams but texts, as Warren himself has elsewhere said. In "A Poem of Pure Imagination," Warren's essay on Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," he made use of Freud's concept of "condensation" from The Interpretation of Dreams to explain how literary symbols are infused with meaning:

The symbol . . . has what psychoanalysts call condensation. It does not "stand for" a single idea, and a system of symbols is not to be taken as a mere translation of a discursive sequence. Rather, a symbol implies a body of ideas which may be said to
be fused in it. This means that the symbol itself may be developed into a discursive sequence as we intellectually explore its potential. To state the matter in another way, ... a symbol may be the condensation of several themes and not a sign for one. (352)

For Freud, condensation was one of the four principal phenomena of the dreamwork of the unconscious, along with “displacement,” “the means of representation,” and “considerations of representability.” “The first thing,” he wrote, “that becomes clear to anyone who compares the dream-content with the dream-thoughts is that a work of condensation on a large scale has been carried out. Dreams are brief, meagre and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of the dream-thoughts. If a dream is written out it may perhaps fill half a page. The analysis setting out the dream-thoughts underlying it may occupy ... a dozen times as much space” (312—13).

What Warren calls the development of a discursive sequence out of a literary symbol is clearly analogous to Freud’s drawing out the latent content of a dream: both are ways of describing what it is I shall try to do here, as I draw out of such a condensation—for example, the beech tree for which Warren, in a letter to me, could recall no “‘reason’ for putting ... there [in World Enough and Time] except that I have always liked going to woods, and the beech is a splendid thing”—an entire network of associations essential to the mystery at the heart of the ongoing story that underlies his fiction and poetry and reaches its conclusion only in his last novel.¹ The beech tree, despite Warren’s denial, is a symbol that “may be developed into a discursive sequence as we intellectually explore its potential.”

One may object that the analysis presented here is too ingenious; but both Warren and Freud can be called as witnesses for its defense. In his Coleridge essay, Warren declares that to say “Assuming that certain interpretations can be ‘drawn out of’ or ‘put into’ the poem by an ‘exercise of ingenuity,’ how do we know that the poet ‘intended’ them?” is to ask a “false” because “loaded” question (395). This is because, he goes on to assert, no specific intention precedes the creation of the poem other than the poem itself: “the only thing [the poet], in the ordinary sense, may ‘intend’ is to make a poem” (396).² Such a question also misrepresents the creative process, Warren argues, because it ignores the role played by the unconscious: “As Coleridge said, and as many other poets and even scientists have said, the unconscious may be the genius in the man of genius” (396).

Freud answered the accusation of overcleverness leveled at The Interpretation of Dreams by pointing out that the unconscious is more clever than we give it credit for:

The first reader and critic of this book—and his successors are likely to follow his example—protested that “the dreamer
seems to be too ingenious and amusing.” This is quite true so long as it refers only to the dreamer; it would only be an objection if it were to be extended to the dream-Interpreter. . . . If my dreams seem amusing, that is not on my account, but on account of the peculiar psychological conditions under which dreams are constructed. . . . Dreams become ingenious and amusing because the direct and easiest pathway to the expression of their thoughts is barred. (332–33n)

It is precisely at this point, however, that I may have to disagree with Warren. In his estimation, poetic creation is not governed by the unconscious, nor does it work by the same rules the unconscious employs to create, for example, dreams. The role of the unconscious is limited, in his view, to providing raw material for the rational mind of the poet to select or reject. Poetic creation, he hastens to add immediately after quoting Coleridge on how the unconscious may be the genius in the man of genius, is not “an irrational process.” Despite the fact that Warren is sufficiently comfortable with Freud to adopt a psychoanalytic critical vocabulary, it seems that he nevertheless displays a certain fear of the unconscious in that essay. The unconscious may have its uses, but it is something from which the poet, in his view, needs finally to escape: “creative reverie is, in the end, a liberation from the compulsiveness of the unconscious” (410).

But to give in to Warren’s claim that it is the unconscious which is exploited by the poet and not vice versa, and then to read his literary production as if such a claim were true, would be uncomfortably close to disagreeing with him when he says that poems are not made with preexisting blueprints. It would be to treat such a critical theory as something like the blueprint Warren had in mind when he wrote (as well as a blueprint for the reader to follow). Surely the way out of this dilemma is to read his critical writings with the same eye with which one reads his fictional and poetic texts—that is, open to the possibility that even here he may be saying more, and something other, than he means to say. In the end it is the text that we are obliged to read, not the man who wrote it:

If the poet does not have a blueprint of intention (and if he does happen to have it, we ordinarily have no access to it), on what basis may a poem be interpreted? What kind of evidence is to be admitted? The first piece of evidence is the poem itself. And here . . . the criterion is that of internal consistency. If the elements of a poem operate together toward one end, we are entitled to interpret the poem according to that end. Even if the poet himself should rise to contradict us, we could reply that the words of the poem speak louder than his actions. (397)
In any case, the chief reason why Freud on dreams is relevant to Warren—the fact that his narratives are not only sometimes about dreams but are possibly constructed like dreams—is that they contain dreams that belong not only to the dreamer. There are good reasons to conclude that they belong, on some level, to the novel as well, for there are connections between the dreams the story tells and the fabric of the narrative which go beyond the demands of the story. In one instance (Night Rider), the novel gives us clues to the interpretation of the dream before we are even told the dream. Although these clues are events in the hero’s life that occur after the dream, in the reader’s experience they precede it, in much the same way that Freud maintained that the events of the preceding day come before, and are recombined in, a night’s dreaming—and in the way Warren himself describes the process in an early Fugitive poem:

... sleep, the dark wherein you all are piled,
Poor fragments of the day, until there come
Dreams to release from the troubled heart and deep
The pageantry of thoughts unreconciled.

(“Images on the Tomb”)

In another novel (World Enough and Time), the protagonist has a dream that he finds puzzling and that poses a riddle only the reader can answer, for it depends upon knowledge that the author and reader share but the hero knows nothing about. The answer to the riddle is a name the novel never speaks but which permeates its imagery and returns in later novels to haunt the reader who has noticed it here.

A word should be said about what I mean by “the reader.” To my knowledge, this is no reader who has gone before, for I believe this study brings to light aspects of Warren’s fiction that have not been made explicit elsewhere, at least in print. But it does seem to me that these narratives at times appeal to a certain kind of reader, one capable of profiting from the various clues they offer to their own interpretation, and that they often do so at the moment the characters in the story are engaged in deciphering a difficult text. For example, in a reading scene in Night Rider occurs a sentence in a letter that does not fit but that when analyzed emerges as the key to the real meaning of the letter; a similarly puzzling sentence appears in the novel itself, whose inappropriateness can jar us into a better understanding of what is going on in the text. In All the King’s Men, Jack Burden’s paradox about how reality arises from the combination of events that are in themselves not real both echoes something Warren says elsewhere about poetic creation and tells us something quite specific about that novel. The Cave is a parable that, in telling how a fiction can become real, illustrates the power of Burden’s insight. The short story collection The Circus in the Attic speaks about how Time and the delay between writing something and
reading it permit meaning to emerge that was not at first apparent; and the
delay parallels the one between these stories' first, separate publication and
their present appearance together in the book, during which they seem to
have taken on new meaning. Flood shows us how the slight deformation of
a text (putting a scratch on a record with the stylus, in this instance) can
make it repeat its actual content, which turns out to be the very idea of
content itself, an insight not without relevance to the interpretation not
just of that novel but of all Warren's fiction.

It seems to me that a reader capable of being alert to such clues is
implied by Warren’s text; it is my hope that this reading of his fiction will
courage such readers to renew their acquaintance with this aspect of his
work. Since so much of my analysis depends upon exactly what events take
place in Warren’s narratives, I have included detailed plot summaries of each
of the novels and short stories.

Perhaps it will be argued that there is something a little eccentric,
even perverse, about such an approach. After all, we already know what
Warren’s novels are about, don’t we? The search for personal identity, self-
knowledge, and redemption; the restoration of community; the inescapable
reality of evil. To read his fiction without paying proper respect to what his
work is manifestly about may well be to behave like Perse Munn’s distant
cousin, Ianthe Sprague, in Warren’s first novel, who was bored by novels:

The novel had a direction, it described lives that were moving
toward fulfillments, it pretended to a meaning. Therefore she
could not listen to it. . . . But the fragmentary, the irrelevant,
the meaningless, such things she could receive and draw her
special nourishment from. . . . [S]he was like some species of
marine life that . . . sustains itself on what the random currents
bring, absorbing the appropriate matter and ejecting all else,
with a delicate and punctilious, but unconscious, discrimina-
tion. (Night Rider, 212)

Ianthe herself may seem to be just such an irrelevant fragment in the novel.
Her name fascinated Perse because he had read Walter Savage Landor’s
poem of that name in a book that had belonged to his father (the only
mention of his father in the entire novel: so much of what happens in Night
Rider and all the novels to follow will depend on a son’s reading of texts of
paternal provenance that even this detail of the origin of her name is no
accident). But her very irrelevance is relevant, for Ianthe, with her “uncon-
scious” power of discrimination, resembles nothing so much as the uncon-
scious itself, as Freud saw it; particularly in its role as dreammaker, culling
the events of the preceding day—those “Poor fragments of the day”—for
the raw material with which it will compose the text—the dream—in
which its repressed desire can find disguised fulfillment. If one wants to
discover the logic of the dream that repeats itself in Warren's fiction one has to pay attention to the figures it proposes for the unconscious and its power to dream. And one will have to take the risk of appearing to ignore the larger issues—the fulfillment and the meaning toward which non-Ianthian readers of Warren believe his fiction strives. What fascinated Freud about dreams was not their manifest content but their latent one, and not even the primal wish therein concealed, so much as the dreamwork itself, the way in which the unconscious both disguises and presents its hidden agenda—how, like that underwater creature to which Ianthe is compared, it finds its nourishment, the raw material for its fictions, in seemingly insignificant details.