The last of the paternal texts we shall try to read is perhaps the first one to appear in Warren's work, the "taciturn tall stone, Which is your fathers' monument and mark," in a poem he wrote before his twentieth year. "To a Face in a Crowd" occupies a peculiar place in the canon Warren has created for his poetry. It is always the last poem in his self-selected anthologies, the Thirty-six Poems of 1935 and the four editions of Selected Poems published since 1943. The sequences from which selections are made in the Selected Poems appear in reverse chronological order, although the poems within each sequence do not, since such sequences as Promises, Incarnations, and Being Here have always been organized on something other than a chronological basis. "To a Face in a Crowd" not only always has the last word, and is Warren's oldest consistently republished poem, but it also has the distinction of being named in the title of each of the Selected Poems, as it alone accounts for the 1923 in Selected Poems 1923–1943, . . . 1923–1966, . . . 1923–1975, . . . 1923–1985.

"To a Face in a Crowd" marked the beginning, in Warren's estimation, of his literary career. For the reader of these backward glances at his significant production, thanks to the choice he made over forty years ago, it is the taciturn text, the blank stone at the end of the journey that says little or nothing, in the same implacable monotone.

Brother, my brother, whither do you pass?

In dream, perhaps, I have seen your face before.

A certain night has borne both you and me;
We are the children of an ancient band
Broken between the mountains and the sea.
A cromlech marks for you that utmost strand

And you must find the dolorous place they stood.
Of old I know that shore, that dim terrain,
And know how black and turbulent the blood
Will beat through iron chambers of the brain

When at your back the taciturn tall stone,
Which is your fathers' monument and mark,
Repeats the waves' implacable monotone,
Ascends the night and propagates the dark.

Warren's partly autobiographical 1980 essay *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back*, by stressing the importance of another blank monument as a screen for the projection of his youthful literary desire, presents a tantalizing parallel to this taciturn stone. In 1917, when he was "nearly twelve," Warren kept returning to Fairview, Kentucky, just up the road from Guthrie, "to stare at the . . . gray-white shaft" (23), the "great monolith" (12) of the unfinished concrete monument to the president of the Confederacy. It seemed to be trying to speak: "Was the blank shaft that was rising there trying to say something about that war of long ago . . . ? Was the tall shaft, now stubbed at the top, what history was?" (24). And it seemed as well that the boy was trying to force some significance out of that blank stone by the effort of staring at it: "In any case, as I fumble at recollection and try to immerse myself in the dark flow of that moment, it seems that in facing the blank-topped monument I was trying to focus some meaning, however hard to define, on the relation of past and present . . ." (25). Six decades later, recently refurbished, the Jefferson Davis monument seemed "somehow, suddenly, meaningless" (110).

The parallel between the Davis monolith that seemed to have something to tell that it never disclosed and the fathers' taciturn tall stone is uncannily enhanced by the fact that Davis—as Warren takes the trouble to mention no less than three times in this brief book—was, like so many father figures in his fiction, blind in one eye: his face "twitched with neuralgia"—one thinks of the old hitchhiker in *All the King's Men* whose twitch presaged a wink that never came—and his "left eye was bleared in blindness" (31). "He was now past fifty, erect but even more gaunt-cheeked, blind in one eye . . ." (51). "Davis's blind eye—blind for years now—prompted him . . . to reach back into his memory for Milton: 'Oh dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon; / Irrevocably dark, total eclipse without the hope of day'" (77).

The same conjunction had already occurred in Warren's "Folly on Royal Street Before the Raw Face of God" (in *Or Else*). That is, these very lines were the response he made to a certain one-eyedness then, though in this instance it was not semiblindness but a wink, and not his own wink but
the Father's: "God's/ Raw face stared down. / / And winked. / / We/
Mouthed out our Milton for magnificence." The "Milton" there mouthed
was, evidently, these parodying first lines of Warren's poem: "Drunk, drunk
drunk, amid the blaze of noon, / Irrevocably drunk, total eclipse..." We
saw in Flood how this eclipse of God is thematically linked both to the
disappearance of the father and to the father's missing eye. There God has
vanished into the death of the sun; all that is left is the "black hole in the
sky God left when He went away" (166). "It looked like the death of the
sun... . It was like last week's Time magazine. The sun was already, in fact,
dead" (28)—for it was precisely from an outdated copy of Time magazine
that Brad Tolliver learned of the death of Ramon Echegaray (334), the rival
who had seduced Brad's wife by staring at her with his black hole of a
missing eye (148). So that, through the Time connection, it is clear that
Echegaray and God occupy the same space. And that the empty space God
left behind is same place where Brad looks in vain for his father's corpse:
"hunched, shivering, in that room, in his overcoat, the beam of the flashlight
on that spot, the same spot over there where the coffin had been..." (196).
The same coffin, ultimately, that Cass Mastern "had the impulse to hurl... to
the ground and see its emptiness burst open" (172).

In its very first appearance, in the June 1925 issue of The Fugitive,
"To a Face in the Crowd" (as its title was then) was immediately preceded
by another of Warren's poems, which has never been republished. Because
he evidently wrote both at the same time in his life, and because they share
some of the same imagery, "Mr. Dodd's Son" may help us to interpret its
one-time companion. In the now-forgotten poem the protagonist comes off
sounding very much like a young Penn Warren from rural Kentucky who
regrets having been born so far from such more poetically inspiring regions
as windswept beaches—like young Seth of "Blackberry Winter," for whom
the red mud of that same landlocked region would have to make do for
"the glistening auroral beach of the world."

He was born far inland in a little town
That sent no men in ships down to the sea,
And beyond her dusty streets had only known
Green mains of the wheatfield tossing silently.

Only by putting his ear to a shell imported from such a shore can he hear
that authentic sound that has the power to remind him of what he has
heard before, in a dream, where it was, even then, something that reminded
him of something else:

If in her steeple's never there tolled a bell
For lovely keels that left her but to be lost,
At least in chambers of the deep whorled shell
Reverberation lingered like the ghost
Of reminiscent music in a dream.

Yet, as he must have surely been aware, since it is one of the most universal of childhood realizations, what one hears in a seashell is the magnified echo of one's own blood. Indeed, he evidently was aware, for in “To a Face in the Crowd” this is precisely what one will hear if one goes to the beach to stand between the paternal monolith and the sea, as the “chambers of the deep whorled shell” in the first of these two poems will become what they originally echoed, the “iron chambers of the brain” in the other (“And know how black and turbulent the blood / Will beat through iron chambers of the brain . . .”). Mr. Dodd’s son will finally get to that beach, but when he does he will be afflicted with speechlessness:

Before he died unto the sea he came;
He could not speak—as one who suddenly
Hears in the night beyond the coasts of time
Faintly the surges of eternity.

“In the Turpitude of Time: N.D.,” from the “Mortmain” series in You, Emperors, and Others, shows us the poet, as in “To a Face in a Crowd,” on the beach by a stone that tries to speak and, like “Mr. Dodd’s Son,” is unable to give utterance. “Can we—oh, could we only—know / What annelid and osprey believe, / And the stone, night-long, groans to divulge? / If only we could, then . . . might . . . between the stone and the wind’s voice / A silence wait to become our song . . . .” The stone is evidently the taciturn one by the ocean in “To a Face in a Crowd” that was the “fathers’ monument and mark”—all the more so because of the fact that the “Mortmain” series tells the story of his father’s death. The first poem recounts the death itself, with the last gesture of a hand that “Like an eyelid . . . sank”; the second imagines the father as a young man “Circa 1885”; in the third the son finds the paternal text he left behind, a Greek grammar; while the fifth imagines him again in his youth, “Circa 1880.” “In the Turpitude of Time: N.D.,” the fourth in the series, seems at first glance to have no immediate reference to the father—until, that is, we realize that he is there in the stone that groans, night-long, to speak.¹

The groaning that is the attempt to speak may be all the speech one gets to hear, for already implicit in the conjunction of those two poems in The Fugitive—which are printed on the front and back of the same sheet, as it happens (pp. 35–36)—and especially in the echo of the chambers that reverberate from one poem to the next, is the suspicion that what the
father's stone has to say has no intention in it, that it is nothing but the automatic echo of the waves' implacable monotone, just as the ghostly dream music Mr. Dodd's son hears in the chambers of the shell is nothing more than the echo of the blood beating in his brain. What the father's monument and mark has to say may thus be no more than the reflection of something else, as the eyes of the fathers in the novels display a glimmer of intent that may have a trivially physical cause—just the warmth of the blood, in fact: "only some fluctuation of the fever . . . in that fading brain" (Hans Meyerhof, in Wilderness, in this instance).

That paternal monolith is nevertheless the object of the poet's pilgrimage, particularly in the sense that he keeps returning to the poem in which it appears at the end of every edition of the Selected Poems. However, what "To a Face in a Crowd" actually recounts, or projects, is not the poet's journey to that beach and that stone (for he has already been there) but someone else's—the brother he passes, whose face he has seen in dream before, the reader he here encourages to make the same voyage: "you must find the dolorous place," he tells us, and if you do "we must meet / As weary nomads in this desert at last . . ." If, that is, we take the risk of wandering the deserted beach and listening for the father's lithic text to speak, even though we may never know for certain if its taciturnity means it has, in the end, nothing to say, we will at least have met the author on his own terrain.

Another Fugitive poem, never since reprinted, recounts a similar pilgrimage, whose goal is defined by a similarly ambivalent void. In "Crusade," published in the June-July 1923 issue (pp. 90–91), the young poet has to all appearances donned the clanking armor of romantic medievalism in an impetuous attempt to storm the battlements of poetry by telling a "poetic" tale—the poetry supposedly inherent in the subject. Yet even in this product of his immaturity Warren, with what in retrospect seems remarkable consistency, discovers what the protagonist of Flood will still be thinking about forty years later, the hole God left when he went away: "We have not forgot the clanking of grey armors / . . . The close hush of the rabble as we made our vow / To win the Tomb of God—that was our mission / . . . We have now won through . . . to the Tomb of God; / Here is a hole where once lay sacred bones." And the ambiguous emptiness of that hole (ambiguous because it might not mean that God is dead but that he is risen) is remarkably like the taciturnity of the father's monument and mark that Warren was discovering at about the same time.

Placing the poem with the father's stone at the end of every Selected Poems is one way Warren has of saying what is left in the end, a taciturn paternal text that may just be an empty screen for his own imagination;
another way is to pose the question and answer it, as he does at the end of “Aspen Leaf in Windless World,” in Being Here:

What image—behind blind eyes when the nurse steps back—
Will loom at the end of your own life’s long sorites?
Would a sun then rise red on an eastern horizon of waters?
Would you see a face? What face? Would it smile? Can you say?

Or would it be some great, sky-thrusting gray menhir?
Or what, in your long-lost childhood, one morning you saw—
Tinfoil wrappers of chocolate, popcorn, nut shells, and poorly
Cleared up, the last elephant turd on the lot where the circus had been?

The sorites spoken of here is evidently a “series of propositions, in which the predicate of each is the subject of the next, the conclusion being formed of the first subject and the last predicate” (O.E.D.); in Greek it originally meant “heaped up”: “a sorites or heap of syllogisms, the conclusion of one forming the premiss of the next” (Liddell and Scott). The last image one sees acquires a sense of finality from nothing but chance; it just happens to be the last thing one sees, and the chain could have been indefinitely continued. Yet, in this instance at least, each of the four elements in the chain, as haphazardly as they may seem to have been chosen, could be taken to represent the father. We have seen how the death of the sun parallels his disappearance; the face could certainly be his; while the menhir is clearly a version of his taciturn tall stone. The paternal resonance of the last of the four is a little harder to see, but that makes it all the more interesting.

If we were to explore what connotations elephants have here—not just in this poem but in the poetic sequence in which it appears, Being Here—we would have to consider “Snowshoeing Back to Camp in Gloaming,” where “Hillward and sky-thrust, behind me, / Leafless and distanced to eastward, a huge / Beech clung to its last long twinge / Of pink on the elephant-gray . . . .” The elements of the “sun” that would “rise red on an eastern horizon,” the first of those four possible last visions, appear here in “eastward” and in the “pink” of this sun. Elements of the “sky-thrusting gray menhir” repeat the “sky-thrust” “gray” beech, while the elephantine quality of that gray anticipates the “last elephant . . . .” Even that “last” had already appeared in the “last long twinge . . . .” That what is elephant-gray is a beech is also meaningful in Being Here, for elsewhere in this sequence, in “No Bird Does Call,” we learned that the beech was the father, whose gold engendered the poet upon Danaë’s lavished lap. Thus the “sky-thrusting gray menhir” is even more clearly the equivalent of the “sky-thrust . . . / Beech.”

We can now understand how something that comes from an elephant
could qualify as a meaningful last glimpse at the end of life's long sorites, but why this particular thing? In "Reading at Night, Thermometer Falling," another account of his father's death, the son discovers something strangely like it. His father

. . . aged eighty-six, fell to the floor,
Unconscious. Two days later,
Dead. Thus they discovered your precious secret:
A prostate big as a horse-apple. Cancer, of course.

No wonder you, who had not spent a day in bed,
Or uttered a single complaint, in the fifty years of my life,

Cried out at last.

"Horse-apple" has two senses, the fruit of the osage tree and equine excrement. Here it is more likely the former; but the latter should not be entirely ruled out, given the importance elsewhere assigned its elephantine equivalent. And given, too, what happens in Band of Angels. There, as in the poem, a father dies after giving birth to a horse-apple (with the difference that there the son acts as midwife). When the boy Hamish Bond told his mother that he didn't believe her constant boasting about having been born into a wealthy slaveholding family, he provoked a sudden outburst from his father.

"The laugh was awful. His face wasn't laughing, but his mouth was open and that awful sound was coming out. . . . Maybe now that I got him free of the horse-apple of a lie he had lived with all that time, maybe there wasn't anything to live for now'" (183). This, too, is evidently the vegetal definition. But, significantly, the other meaning had already appeared in Hamish Bond's New Orleans courtyard when Amantha Starr saw a horse "letting two or three great golden apples of manure drop with solid ripeness to the brick" (99). Within the novel the instances of horse-apple answer each other, one occurring before the other in the narration but succeeding it as an event in Bond's life; indeed, the wealth Bond accrues and displays in the luxuries of his New Orleans mansion (especially his slaves) is the real opulence to which his mother had only pretended, in that "horse-apple of a lie."

The horses from which these apples come have a paternal resonance in Warren. In "The Mission" (from Now and Then) they stand silently by the ocean like the taciturn ancestral stone, "like gray stone" (like the elephant-gray beech), "like stone primitively hewn":

. . . I wake from a dream of horses. They do not know
I am dreaming of them. By this time they must be long dead.

Behind barbed wire, in fog off the sea, they stand.
. . . like gray stone, stand . . .
... if I stare at the dark ceiling
And try to remember, I do not have to go back to sleep,
And not sleeping, will not again dream

Of clumps of horses, fog-colored in sea fog... .
... standing like stone primitively hewn... .

This is a dream about the father, not only dead but possibly murdered, which may explain why the poet does not want to go back to sleep to dream that dream again. The poem begins its own dream analysis as the poet realizes that the motionless stone horses are standing in a specific place, on the shore of the Bay of Biscay in southwest France, and that he must have remembered that “La boucherie chevaline, in the village, / Has a gold horse-head above the door.” The dreamer knows that he has dreamed of horses because he saw the sign (that it was the “day residue” that brought horses to the dream), and that the reason he is so certain that “They are dead” is because of what the sign really means: equine butchery. The reader of Warren’s poems who is willing to read them like dreams will realize that the poet dreams of dead stone horses for another reason as well: because when the father died, what he left his son is what a horse leaves, a “precious secret” as worthy of the son’s (and our) attempt at decipherment as the last heap of elephant dung discovered among “Tinfoil wrappers of chocolate, popcorn, nut shells... . on the lot where the circus has been.”

That last detail from “Aspen Leaf”’s last vision recalls the other dream, the “original dream which / I am now trying to discover the logic of,” in “I Am Dreaming of a White Christmas.” There, too, the poet found himself staring at what was left after the giver of gifts had come and gone:

On
The ashes, gray, a piece of torn orange peel.
Foil wrappings of chocolates, silver and crimson and gold,
Yet gleaming from grayness.

Among the detritus on the Christmas hearth and that in the circus lot one can find least one common remnant: tinfoil wrappers of chocolate. Could it be that the original dream and the last item in life’s sorites are not only linked but the same thing, another attempt to name “What present there was in that package for me, / Under the Christmas tree?” In other words, could the logic of that original dream be in part soritic logic, where the first and last terms of an indefinitely long series turn out to be the same (“the conclusion being formed of the first subject and the last predicate”): could the content of the package that his dream would not let him open be what can ultimately be discovered behind the troubling object of life’s last glimpse? Could the ultimate text bequeathed from father to son, nourished
for years inside him, growing in secret, finally reveal itself, in a parody of childbirth, as a kind of ancient fetus?

The "precious secret" the father reveals in death assumes, in "One I Knew" (from Rumor Verified), the form of something living, like a fetus, and straining to be born.

It was as though he leaned
At a large mysterious bud
To watch, hour by hour,
How at last it would divulge
A beauty so long withheld—
As I once had sat
. . . watching
The bud of a century plant
That was straining against the weight
Of years, slow, slow, in silence,
To offer its inwardness.

The son finds that he himself had already performed an unwitting parody, before the event ("As I once had sat . . ." puts his century plant vigil in a more distant past than his father’s death), of his father’s secret study of the growth of his cancer, as he waited for it to emerge and blossom forth into its parody of life that is in fact death (when it blooms, too, the century plant dies). The son discovers, in other words, that he had already been reading something like the text—the century plant, the horse-apple, the inner fetus—that had been the object of his father’s most secret scrutiny.

That what the father leaves the son in this instance is indeed a text is made clear by what the father was doing at the very moment the blossoming of that mysterious bud caused him to lose consciousness:

he
Collapsed and, unconscious, slid
To the floor, pen yet in hand.
They revived him only for
The agony of the end.
. . . Later,
I found the letter, the first
Paragraph unfinished. I saw
The ink-slash from that point
Where the unconscious hand had dragged
The pen as he fell. I saw
The salutation. It was:
"Dear Son."
The shimmering
White petal—the gold stamen—
Were at last, in triumph,
Divulged. On the dusty carpet.

Although the letter is unfinished, something is divulged: the triumph of the flower, its "inwardness" brought to light, opened at last to the gaze of the poet, who elsewhere was for so long denied the knowledge of what "was in that package for me. . . ." And something else is divulged, at last: The taciturn father's text that keeps appearing in so many other forms in Warren's œuvre is now quite literally a text, the briefest imaginable, addressed to the only reader who can answer its incompleteness: "Dear Son."