Notes on *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*

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What I would like to do today is to give an account of the general shape of the *Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren* as I envision it, and to recount a few of the cruxes and conundrums I have observed in the process.

First, I would like to talk about what I understand this Collected poems to be. Crudely speaking, a Collected Poems can be one of two things. It can be like an author’s autobiography, representing the author’s career as it looked from the end of it, with all of the blind alleys and false turns either edited out, or marked out as necessary lessons and difficult preliminaries. Or it can be like an author’s diary, representing his intellectual life as it unfolds, with no certainty, but many provisional intuitions, about how each event will fit into the big picture. A Collected Poems of the first type includes only those poems the poet, at the end of his life, felt were worthy to represent him, and it should represent the texts, in the absence of compelling reasons not to do so, as they stood when he last gave considered attention to them. (Mendelson’s Auden is an example of this kind of edition.) A Collected Poems of the second type should include all the poetry the poet published, and it should represent the texts, in the absence of compelling reasons not to do so, as they stood during the period of the poet’s career with which they are most strongly associated. Warren started, but did not bring to completion, a Collected Poems of the first type, giving to Stuart Wright, who was preparing the edition, a sense of the poems he wished to include and exclude, and interlinearly adding final revisions to many poems. I have consulted the materials from which that edition was to be prepared, and the
changes Warren marked have been included in the notes to my edition, but I have chosen, both because I am not certain what shape that volume finally would have taken and because I wish to include all of Warren’s published poetry, to compile a Collected Poems of the second type.

I am also following the original publication in the individual volumes rather than the later revisions because I want to preserve the shape Warren gave to his original volumes, and to the long, titled sequences of poems within the volumes (such as “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” or “Promises”). I follow the first book publication rather than the later revisions because I do not wish to produce a totally eclectic text, in which the sequences were patchworks of texts from different eras, but I do want to represent the sequences as fully as possible. Even doing it this way, of course, involves trade-offs. When in 1932 Warren published “The Owl,” for instance, he marked it as part of the sequence “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” and it is included in the sequence in the typescript of his two unpublished first volumes, Pondy Woods and Other Poems and Problems of Knowledge, but “The Owl” never actually appeared in print with the rest of the sequence, so it will appear separately in my edition. The book-length sequence Or Else includes most of the earlier sequence “Notes on a Life to be Lived” (from Tale of Time and part of the earlier sequence “Enclaves” (from Incarnations. Because Or Else was such a major statement, I chose to sacrifice the other two sequences to it, but of course you can reconstruct the earlier sequences from the notes. And that still leaves the problem of how to represent the orphaned sections left over from the dismantled sequences.

My desire to respect the sequences as they appear in the original volumes also forced me not to use the original publications of the poems in magazines as proof texts, because sometimes sequences were published piecemeal, not always with indications that the sections were intended as part of a sequence. Much of the “Promises” sequence, for instance, appeared in two different, non-overlapping magazine subset versions, each in a different order from that in the book Promises. Another section from the “Promises” sequence that was originally published separately was marked as part of a sequence, and was even given a section number, but it was not given the section number it had in the book. Other sections were published completely independently. Following these first magazine publications may have given the reader a closer up view of Warren’s developing oeuvre than following the first book publications, but it would have obscured his tendency to think in terms of sequences of poems, which is an important feature of his poetry.
Also, the extensive revisions of his poetry which Warren always engaged in between publication in a magazine and the first book publication of every poem suggests that he thought of the magazine versions as provisional texts, as trial versions.

My choice to use the original volumes as proof-texts forced a further decision on me: since Warren continued to revise the poems, sometimes in five states over fifty years, I decided that I had to produce an extensive textual apparatus, enabling one to reconstruct all of the published states of his poems.

Reconstructing the published states of the poems is, however, quite a different thing from representing his local intentions for the work at each stage. Warren’s several revisions of his work were carried out with varying degrees of care. (Anyone who has looked closely at the 1985 Selected Poems will see that Warren did not exercise the same degree of care preparing that volume as he did for the 1966 Selected Poems New and Old.) The 1966 revisions are of special interest, not only in the care of Warren’s work, but also in the kinds of things he revises and does not revise. Although he made thousands of revisions in 1966, some of them quite substantial, Warren did not attempt to revise the convictions his earlier poems expressed, even when he no longer shared those convictions, and he did not attempt to make poems which had originally appeared in the twenties and thirties closer in sound to the poetry he was writing after the profound stylistic changes of the early 1950’s.

In my use of the extensive typescripts and galleys and publisher’s correspondence at the Beinecke Library I have tried to steer a middle course between the classical procedures adopted by Greg and Tanselle and the as it were postmodern procedures described by Greetham and McGann. I do this not for theoretical reasons but because I am led to do so by my sense of how Warren worked as a poet. The typescript of the 1943 Selected Poems, for instance, is grossly different from the published text, not only in many local variants, but also in that it includes a poem—“Genealogy”—that the published text excludes. Yet none of the changes are marked by Lambert Davis at Harcourt Brace, or by Warren, although the typescript is marked up with instructions for the typesetter. This cast some doubt for me about the superior authority of the typescript over the printed text. The galleys for this volume do not survive. But in a letter of November 2, 1943, Warren’s editor at Harcourt Brace, Lambert Davis, suggests that Warren wait until he sees the galleys before making a final decision about what poems to include.
and in what order, which suggests that Warren had the opportunity to make considerable revisions to the volume in proof. In most of the cases where SP43 differs from the typescript, the typescript preserves readings from TSP and EP or magazine versions, and almost never does Warren in SP66, SP75, or SP85 revise poems from SP43 so as to restore the typescript reading. All of these facts lead me to believe that most if not all of the differences between SP43 and the typescript represent the Warren’s own revisions to the poems. Nothing in the typescript or in the correspondence suggests that any of the revisions are Davis’ work; indeed, Davis’ correspondence suggests that he was preoccupied at this time with Warren’s early drafts of *All the King’s Men*, which he revised considerably, and that he gave SP43 less than his full attention. Therefore I have chosen to give SP43 more weight than the typescript where they disagree.

The situation is more complicated once Warren moves to Random House, because Albert Erskine was a close friend whose poetic advice Warren often sought, consulting him much as he consulted Allen Tate or John Palmer. Further, he seems to have sent Erskine his poems as he finished them to keep in a file, so that the copies which are the basis of the “typescripts” often represent very early states of the poems—earlier even than the magazine versions. Warren frequently wrote to Erskine and to his secretary with changes in lines of the poems they had on file. This is why many of the typescripts are very substantively marked up—even adding dedications—in a hand that is neither Warren’s nor Erskine’s. Their correspondence also discusses sessions in which they have worked over poems together. Warren furthermore continued to revise his poems not only on galley proofs (sometimes on several sets of galley proofs) but on page proofs as well. And after publication he continued to send corrections and revisions to Erskine, and to keep a marked-up copy of the book for use in further revisions. The upshot of all this is that it is Warren’s collaboration with Erskine was so close that it is impossible to imagine editing out Erskine’s contributions from Warren’s poetry in the way one seeks to edit out Thomas Higginson’s contributions from the poetry of Emily Dickinson.

I have am collating the chapbooks such as the Palaemon Press *Two Poems*, but I have treated emendations based on the texts of limited editions with extreme caution. That said, there are a handful of poems to which the best witnesses are chapbook editions.

A particularly puzzling set of problems are raised by the 1987 *New and Selected Poems* printed by Eurographica in Helsinki, Finland. Unlike *The
Robert Penn Warren Reader this volume was prepared with Warren’s supervision, and there is a setting typescript for it in the Beinecke Library. The volume is very different from other Selected Poems volumes, in that the poems are printed in chronological order rather than in reverse chronological order, and some of the titles are changed in ways that it is difficult to attribute merely to typographical error. (‘Tiberius on Capri,’ for instance, is changed to “Tiberius on Capri, Autumn 1939,” and “Folly on Royal Street Before the Raw Face of God” is changed to “Folly on Royal Street, New Orleans, Before the Raw Face of God.”) That noted, I don’t plan to emend anything on the sole evidence of the typescript of the Helsinki edition.

I have found it useful to Warren’s copies of his own poetry, both the volumes at Emory University, and the volumes at Western Kentucky University, where all of Warren’s personal library is preserved. Warren’s marginal corrections in his own copy (now at Western Kentucky University) of the Palaemon Press Fifteen Poems, for instance, makes clear that most of what might have been taken for late revisions of Warren’s poems are in fact typographical errors.

The more complete Collected Poems that I am preparing will show a few things that the version Warren and Wright were preparing would not have shown. Warren was known as one of the “Fugitive” poets because of his association with the magazine The Fugitive, but only one of the poems from The Fugitive ever appeared in his books: “To a Face in a Crowd,” which ended the different Selected Poems volumes Warren published in 1943, 1966, 1976, and 1985. In a 1977 poem, “Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth,” Warren describes himself as burning, in pain and humiliation and guilt, “a book/ Of poems friends and I had printed in college.” The book to which he refers is clearly the volume Driftwood Flames, but he did not reprint the poems from Driftwood Flames in any later volume. What Warren is describing in “Red Tailed Hawk and Pyre of youth” is a poetic crisis, and it is not the famous poetic crisis of 1943–1953, but an earlier crisis in 1931 whose traces I think have been largely erased, taking with it much of the poetry of Warren’s early career.

1931 seems to have been a poetic turning point for Warren. In the headnote to his unpublished Problem of Knowledge (a collection roughly contemporary with Eleven Poems on the Same Theme) Warren divides the volume into poems written before and after 1931, noting “a fundamental difference, in both theme and method, between the two groups.” The difference Warren describes here seems purely poetic: in 1931 he leaves behind the essentially
Hardyan ethos of his early poetry for the Marvellian ethos of his poems of the 1930s. In the unpublished headnote to his 1943 Selected Poems, whose division between “Late” and “Early” sections roughly reproduces that of Problem of Knowledge, Warren also remarks upon a profound stylistic change occurring in this period.

The Late poems do represent a selection from among pieces composed during relatively recent years, but the date of composition is in itself not the important factor. Rather, the poems in this group were written from an attitude toward poetry—and toward other things—quite different from the attitude behind the Early poems. But changes in attitude do not usually come all at once, and when the change is going on one may not even be aware of the nature of the process. The awareness comes later. And even when looking back, one can scarcely lay one’s finger on the spot on the calendar and say, “That was the time.” In fact, three poems in this collection, “Problem of Knowledge,” “Calendar,” and “Pacific Gazer,” though fairly late in date of composition, have been placed in the Early group, because in truth they were strays from that period, tardy outcroppings of an old impulse. But the other poems in this group are early, quite literally, one or two of them going back even to undergraduate days.

The language of the unpublished 1943 preface, however, points to psychological as well as poetic urgencies behind the transformation. What Warren says here is akin to his oft quoted argument that poetry is not an expression of temperament but a criticism and purgation of temperament. But there is a personal edge to these lines as well:

It is difficult to say on what basis such a selection is made. In one sense, a poem once on paper means—or should mean—nothing to the author. The act of putting it down was an act of disentangling himself from the “meanings” of the material which went into the poem, an act performed in the hope of achieving a new meaning which would be the poem. The author tries to make his selection in terms of the new meaning, but the old meanings live in him so intimately and vindictively that he may be last man, after all, for the job.
Whatever the crisis Warren describes in “Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth,” was—in the poem he alludes to the death of his mother and the bankruptcy of his father—it seems to have turned him ruthlessly against his earlier poetry in ways his more well-known poetic crisis, the ten years of poetic silence in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, did not do. One trace of this reaction appears in a late republication of the poem he was working on at the crisis point, “The Return: An Elegy.” When Warren republished that poem in a 1970’s volume called “Thirtieth Year to Heaven” he noted carefully that the speaker is not himself. The speaker is returning, in a night train journey through a storm, to East Tennessee (which Warren had not yet ever visited) to the bedside of his dying mother. The poem’s sense of that imagined landscape owes something to the roughly contemporary sequence “Kentucky Mountain Farm.” But Kentucky Mountain Farm surveyed human mortality from above, giving a cold, detached, Nature’s eye view of the futility of human endeavor and human history. “The Return: An Elegy” by contrast, is caught in the whirl of events—it is a tense poem, bewildered, disoriented, very close to its speaker’s inability to make sense of the big event he is lost in. It has nothing of Kentucky Mountain Farm’s icy calm and sense of being beyond human feeling and human vulnerability. The speaker also frequently, if absently, behaves with shocking aggression towards his dying mother: “give me the nickels off your eyes/ from your hands the violets / let me bless your obsequies / if you possessed conveniently enough three eyes / then I could buy a pack of cigarettes.”

In a prose paragraph that Warren cut from the poem at the last minute at Allen Tate’s insistence he is even more aggressive: “the matter is, roughly, this: I have been summoned to the funeral of my mother (a fine woman if I do say it myself) and have departed, dutifully and at considerable expense, the eastern city, where I am engaged in the pursuit of happiness and profit, and now rest, troubled by insomnia, in lower berth, number five.”

In Thirtieth Year to Heaven Warren is careful to note that the poem is not autobiographical. But while he was writing the poem his mother did, in fact, die suddenly, and indeed, he tells us that he knew she was ill, although he didn’t know she was fatally ill, when he began the poem. The effect, Warren remarks, is that he did not return to writing poetry that resembled “The Return: An Elegy” for twenty years. (My guess is that the poem that the poetry that returns to “The Return” is “Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace.” in the 1956 Promises.)

Some of the poems that have occurred only in chapbooks are of consid-
erable interest. Here is a poem from a 1981 chapbook called *Love: Four Versions*. A later version was published in the American Poetry Review, but it was never collected into a book. It’s a very risqué poem, although no more so than “Heat Lightning” or a dozen other late poems, so I do not think that it was merely its sexual explicitness that led to its exclusion. Its combination of lust, guilt, regret, perception, and puzzlement is fascinating, more pointed than one finds in Brad Tolliver’s thoughts in *Flood* or Jed Tewksbury in *A Place to Come to*. Warren may have held this poem back from book publication—after publishing it twice—because it may have been taken to be autobiographical and it might have been possible to identify the woman it concerns. It looks more to me like one of those fictional stories of sexual excess matched with sexual disgust that Warren kept recurring to in the poems of *You, Emperors, and Others*. I think he held the poem back because he felt he had dome the same thing, only better, in “Heat Lightning.” But the poem is still interesting, if only because the woman in the poem is a more fully realized character than the woman in “Heat Lightning.”

**You Sort Old Letters**

Some are pure business, land deals, receipts, a contract,
Bank statements, dead policies, demand for some payment.
But a beach-party invite!—yes, yes, that tease
Of a hostess and you, withdrawn behind dunes, lay,
With laughter far off, and for contact
Of tongue and teeth, she let you first loosen a breast.
You left town soon after—now wonder what
Might have that day meant.

Suppose you hadn’t left town—well, she’s dead anyway.
Three divorces, three children, all born for the sludge of the pit.
It was Number One, nice fellow, when she took you to the dunes.
And she gasped, “Bite harder, oh, hard!” And you did,
In the glare of day. When she scrambled up,
She cried: “Oh, you hate me!” And wept,
Like a child. You patted, caressed her.
Cuddled and kissed her. She said: “I’m a shit.”

Do you seem to remember that, for a moment, your heart stirred?
You shrug now, remembering how, in the end, she shacked up
With a likker-head plumber, who, now and then,
Would give her a jolt to the jaw, or with heel of a palm
Would flatten lips to the teeth, then slam
Her the works, blood
On her swollen lips—as was common gossip.
You married a little late, and now from this mess
Of old papers words suddenly at you stare:
“You were smart to blow town. Keep your pecker up!”
Signed only: “Yours, maybe.” And then:
“P.S. What might have been?”
Of course, she had everything—money, looks,
Wit, breeding, and a charm
Of defenseless appeal—the last what trapped, no doubt,
The three near middle-aged fall-guys, who got only
Horns for their pains. Yes, she threw
All away and, as you’ve guessed, by struggling
Sank deeper, deeper, into
A slough of self-hate. However, you
Are no psychiatrist, and couldn’t say
What or why, as you, far away, lay
By the warm and delicious body you loved
So well, in the dark ashamed of
Recurring speculation, or memory, as though this
Betrayed your love. Years passed. The end, you heard,
Was sleeping pills. You felt some confusion, or guilt,
But how could you be blamed?—Even if
Knees once were grinding sand as sun once smote
Your bare back, or, once in dream, lips,
Bloody, lifted for your kiss.

The book version “Heat Lightning” itself, like “You Sort Old Letters,”
and “Afterward” from *Rumor Verified*, concerns a powerful and vivid erotic
memory of a now-dead sexual partner. Observing heat-lightning, the silent
sign of a furious energy almost too distant to perceive, Warren remembers a
stormy sexual interlude that is now as distant as heat-lightning. But in the
version published in the Times Literary Supplement he goes on to remember
an even more devastating although now thunderless memory:

That moment when, kneeling, she wept, clutching
His knees till the doctor got in, vindictively,
A good jab of his syringe. How thunderless—
Yes—the newspaper obit years later I stumbled on. How faint
That flash! And I sit in the unmooned
Dark of an August night to see
The flicker and rose-flush beyond
Black peaks, and think how far,
Far away, and down what deep valley and scar
The thunder, redoubled, redoubling, rolls. here silence.

Here again the character the poet describes is more fully realized, although once again the character may be identified as based on a particular person, and Warren may have sought a more generic memory, such as the fictional ones he invents for “you” in “Garland for You.”

Another case in which the magazine version is startlingly different from the book version is in the “Nursery Rhyme” called “The Bramble Bush” from You, Emperors, and Others. In the book version, the speaker sees a man jump into a bramble bush, scratching out his eyes, and jump back out, restoring his sight. The speaker then remarks

And like petals from a wind-torn bough
   In furious beauty blown,
The stars were gone—and I heard the joy
   Of flesh singing on the bone.

But the magazine version—replaced in a stapled-in last-minute revision in the typescript of You, Emperors, and Others—read very differently:

And saw a single sparrow fall,
   Then groping down from the sky
God’s hand appear, arthritic and old,
   In cranky uncertainty.
I saw the place the sparrow fell,
   Which the poor hand couldn’t find,
And as the face leaned closer, I saw
   The reason was it was blind.
So when I think that God has made
All furious beauty blown
Like petals from a wind-torn bough,
And our flesh singing on the bone,
But never, never, can see these things,
I cannot help but begin to
Bewail the fact that God Himself
Has no bush that He can jump into.

I have run into a few cruxes in the course of editing the volume. One amusing one involves the last stanza of “Aubade for Hope.” In the magazine version and in *Thirty-Six Poems* Warren in the last stanza compared hope to a “blockhead grandam” who “Above the ash and spittle croaks and leans.” When he republished the poem in the 1943 *Selected Poems* hope was not a blockhead grandam but a blockhead grandma. They’re close, of course, but not precisely the same thing. And although it was tempting to think of “grandma” as a typesetter’s error—maybe he didn’t know what a grandam was?—“grandma” would have been like Warren’s later use, and “grandam” was the kind of word he would have used earlier. It turns out that it is a revision after all, and not an error. In the typescript for the 1943 *Selected Poems* Warren has corrected it from “grandam” to “grandma,” and the typescript for the unpublished *Problem of Knowledge*, which is at best a few years older than *Selected Poems 1923–43* the reading is “grandma” as well. It would have been a delicious editorial moment, but alas it’s not to be.

I’ve also run into a few curiosities. At the end of “Old Nigger on One-Mule Car Encountered at Night when Driving Home from Party in the Back Country,” Warren quotes from a sonnet he was attempting to write about the protagonist of the poem. In the later poem Warren thinks that it’s a pretty bad sonnet, and he quotes it as a way of demonstrating that he had not learned the lessons the encounter the poem describes was supposed to teach. In the poem, Warren describes himself driving home, a little too fast and a little drunk, from a late party in Louisiana. He almost runs down a black man driving a mule cart. He takes the incident as a kind of rebuke, not only of the fast life the poem describes, but of the complacent acceptance of racial politics he grew out of in his maturity, and of the highly formal and ambitious and perhaps somewhat artificial style of his poetry of the period. The encounter with the junk-dealer—who is to Warren what the leech-gatherer is to Wordsworth in “Resolution and Independence”—calls him back to his true poetic vocation and to his humanity. In the junk dealer’s
rebuke Warren puts together both the transformation of his political views in the 1930’s and the transformation of his poetic style in the 1950’s. The actual sonnet Warren describes has surfaced, in what is marked as a folder of typescripts for the 1943 *Selected Poems* but what seems in fact to be a folder of fragments from the ten years of poetic silence that followed that volume:

In late afternoon, he stops in the road’s red dust,
   Or the red mud, stalled there, cart’s tongue, wheel’s rim,
   (Iron or wood ruined by the rot or rust)
   Broken at last; then passing, we see him
   Bend, and the mule droop, and over his head
   The bright leaves, if autumn, fly, or summer, the sun
   Beats, winter, the rain; he stands in the red
   Dust, red mud, his motion the same, the one
   We always recall but cannot name
   —Sudden to mind like the flung headlight glare,
   Motion always, which we know but cannot name
   —Sudden like the flung headlight glare in dark
   That seasonless gesture to mind comes, the same
   Motion that stuns the eternal, empty air:
   One of the poor with a cart of junk to use
   For purposes which we cannot peruse.

It’s clear that the author of the sonnet has not yet learned the lesson of the author of the later poem: there’s no sign of the junk-dealer’s race in the sonnet; it is late afternoon rather than night (the driver’s headlight glare being confined to metaphor rather than to reality); the junk-dealer has broken down by the side of the road (rather than being caught riding on the wrong side of it); and there’s no sign that the speaker has nearly run the poor man down, much less that he feels rebuked by him. Indeed, the speaker wants to see in him the eternal, timeless patience of the poor, but his final stance is not that of one who has met his brother, philosopher, and rebuker past all casuistry, but of one who is puzzled and amused by the incomprehensible ways of strangers. The sonnet is the work of a poet at an impasse—someone who is stuck in place, broken down like the junk dealer—but only the later poem provides what he needs to get out of that impasse.

One more curiosity—I save it for last because I have just tracked it down—a poem from the late 1930’s which at the moment I only know from typescript, but which I am relatively certain was published because it won an
award from the Poetry Society of South Carolina. I haven’t yet found the published version, but I have just sent for the Poetry Society’s annuals, and I bet my bottom dollar it’s in there:

Love’s Voice

If once we dreamed love had a tongue
Tuned not to flatter but command
Gross ear and grosser thought, and strong
Enough to stay the ravening hand;
Or dreamed that trumpet-lipped loud love
Might shake us where like leaves we hung,
Or throated Joshua-strong might move
The stone—that time, it was not long.
For, no: no breath, no blast, no word
Provoked from sloth or balked from greed
The sty-fat thought, untaught, unstirred,
That slouching but awoke to feed.
For, no: what ear, though keen, had heard
Abroad that breath, that master-sound,
That wristward draws the unhooded bird
Or calls to heel the sullen hound?
Like one alone in a darkened room
Who leans and listens, and translates
What hope has lived despite that gloom
Into a step the ear awaits;
So in the darkness of the breast
The soul then leaned, and hearkened, then
Stretched forth the hands, and took no rest,
And waited, and would lean again,
Would lean like that lucky mariner
Who spied the drifting, berried bough,
Wave-borne yet green (ah! flown was fear
And the heart leaped, for fairer now
Lost leaf than all the groves of Spain),
Or him who hailed the trade-heaved bird,
Bright-winged, coming, going again;
But dreamed that woodland note he heard.
—No answer then: then hope deferred,
Faith fainter, and the absolute
Of joy forgot, reviled, a word
For fools, and nothing but the brute
Disorder for the anarch ear;
And truth stall-trod, and action weaned
Of essence, blind or bloody or
Knee-pawned—But still, sometimes, she leaned,

For faith had guessed all our wild sounds
To purer sense but silence are,
All brutish tumult that confounds
In vanity the unpregnant ear
But quiet to feed a firmer thought
As rank oil feeds the steady flame,
All ignorances violence wrought
But syllables for a clear name;

Or that fair thought antiquity
Bequeathed that sphere replied to sphere
Moving in music’s surety,
But music of accord so pure
The cold sense paltered, and the excess
Of joy but spoke to those bright powers
Of mind withdrawn to single bliss:
Could we but dram such fable ours!

Such fable ours! or even snatch
New fable from the scientist’s room,
Who marks a world beyond our pitch
Where sounds vibrate, new colors bloom,
Far past the poor ear’s, eye’s, dull span.
And that had been a happy task
In happier time, for us who scan
The world’s blank, eyeless face, and ask,

What evidence in innocence?
What knowledge in the battened lust
Or meat-filled maw or glutted trance?
What glass unwinking gives our trust
Its image back, what echo names
The names we hurl at namelessness?
What thrives but paradox that frames
—And equal, O!—joy or distress?

Such fable ours! However sweet,
That earlier hope had, if fulfilled,
Been but child’s pap and toothless meat
—And meaning blunt and deed unwilled,
And we but motes that dance in light
And in such light gleam like the core
Of light, but lightless, are in right
Blind dust that fouls the unswept floor

For, no: not faith by fable lives,
But from the faith the fable springs
—It never is the song that gives
Tongue life, it is the tongue that sings;
And sings the song. Then, let the act
Speak, it is the unbetrayable
Command, if music, let the fact
Make music’s motion; us, the fable

Then let us turn now—you to me
And I to you—and hand to hand
Clasp, even though our fable be
Of strangers met in a strange land
Who pause, perturbed, then speak and know
That speech, half lost, can yet amaze
Joy at the root; then suddenly grow
Silent, and on each other gaze

I may have more for my cabinet of curiosities before this project is finished. But I wouldn’t have anything at all without many of you here, whose generosity and patience as I learn the editor’s art has been of unimaginable help to this project.