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THEME AND METAPHOR IN *BROTHER TO DRAGONS*

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WHEN *Brother to Dragons* came out ten years ago, its reviewers were inclined to show deep admiration. "An event, a great one," was Randall Jarrell's opinion, as he sought to substantiate his judgment that "this is Robert Penn Warren's best book."¹ Another of Warren's fellow poets, Delmore Schwartz, likewise evinced high enthusiasm, calling *Brother to Dragons* "a work which is most remarkable as a sustained whole," a work having "perfect proportion throughout."² Both these reviewers, furthermore, placed Warren in some very distinguished company on the basis of this work, Jarrell by finding echoes of Milton, Shakespeare, and Eliot, and Schwartz by observing "Warren's resemblance to Melville."

In the wake of high praise such as this, one might have expected serious, full-length studies to appear soon after. Curiously, such was not to happen. In these ten years, only one really significant, comprehensive study of the poem has come forward, that being Frederick McDowell's "Psychology and Theme in *Brother to Dragons*" in the *PMLA* of September 1955 (LXX, 565-586). This very perceptive article, by discussing the theme in terms of character analysis (or character psychoanalysis), helped us to understand *Brother to Dragons* as a drama, or play, and as such was indeed useful. But *Brother to Dragons* is not only a play. It is a poem—a "dramatic poem," its author tells us—and so it requires poetic as well as dramatic analysis.

In viewing *Brother to Dragons* as a dramatic poem, rather than a poetic drama, we find the structure of the work depending not so much on characterization as on a finely-wrought pattern of images, images calculated to transmit Warren's theme to the reader in a subtle but convincing way. Unfortunately, this imagery appears to have been a bit too subtle for many readers: although it permits Warren to avoid mere didacticism, so distasteful to the modern temper, this framework of images carries a high risk of leakage of meaning in so long and complex a work. I propose to reduce that leakage. In this paper I shall trace out the poem's master metaphor—the beast image—and its two major subsidiary metaphors, the Lewis house (the house of the psyche) and the twice-recurring winter setting (the winter of philosophic naturalism). These dominant and interrelating image patterns bear the major bur-

den of Warren's theme, and I should like to consider each in its turn.

I

It may at first surprise the reader, since Warren nowhere tells the source of his title allusion, to find that the title of his most celebrated poetic achievement comes from the most ancient book of the Bible, The Book of Job (xxx. 29): "I am a brother to dragons and a companion to owls." On second glance, however, this reference is not so surprising. The occasion of Job's complaint is his feeling of resentment towards his Maker for bringing intolerable humiliation upon him. The loss of wealth and family and even his physical torment he could possibly abide, but the humiliation is another matter: "But now they that are younger than I have me in derision, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock" (Job xxx).

It is most revealing to observe that Warren's attention is focused not on Job's suffering and loss and endurance but upon the one thing he could not endure, his loss of pride. Being a brother to dragons and a companion to owls, after all, is a fate singularly undeserved for a man who had always (like Thomas Jefferson) walked "upright and perfect . . . and eschewed evil." "Did I not?"—Job puts the question bitterly—"Did I not weep for him that was in trouble? was not my soul grieved for the poor?" (xxx.25). And all Job gets for a lifetime of high-minded service, tendered in absolute innocence, is ridicule at the hands of "base men . . . viler than the earth":

They were children of fools, yea, children of base men:
they were viler than the earth.

And now I am their song, yea, I am their byword.
(Job xxx.8-9)

Job's bitterness at finding himself a "brother to dragons" (a condition he actually refuses to admit until the very end of The Book of Job) provides a most satisfactory analogy to the attitude of Warren's Thomas Jefferson. Both men lacked, in Warren's estimation, the sense of limitation which is essential to the religious attitude.

¹ Randall Jarrell, "On the Underside of the Stone," *New York Times Book Review*, 23 August 1953, p. 6.

² Delmore Schwartz, "The Dragon of Guilt," *New Republic*, CXXXIX (14 September 1953), 17.

Both thought themselves freed, by dint of an absolute virtue, from the common human contamination. Even Divinity must surely recognize their triumph, their disentanglement from the influence of the Fall, they would contend. Surely God, if He be just and true, could not fail to distinguish the righteous from "base men . . . viler than the earth."

But, of course, Warren does not grant such a distinction. Humanity's black collective shadow, the acknowledgement of which formed the crux of *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*, belongs as much to a Job or a Thomas Jefferson, for all their innocence and virtue, as to all the rest of mankind. Warren's answer to Job's complaint of injustice, then, is to fling Job's own protest back at him shorn of its original sarcasm: You are indeed a brother to dragons, Brother Job (and Brother Jefferson). And so we have the poem's master metaphor, its dominant and most recurrent image.

The exact meaning of this master metaphor has not, I feel, been completely or properly understood. Critics have been inclined to lean too heavily on one recurrence of this beast-image, while ignoring others. Such an approach would be useful if the beast-image meant the same thing each time it appears, but it does not: like Melville's whale, Warren's beast has a different meaning for each of his characters. Thus I believe that George Palmer Garrett and Frederick McDowell err when they agree in viewing "the birth of the minotaur and the creation of the Labyrinth" as "a symbol which dominates the poem."³ This is actually only Thomas Jefferson's view of the beast within the self, and it is a view badly distorted by an excess of outrage and revulsion. For this reason, the minotaur image, though in itself a masterpiece of poetic brilliance and power, is only briefly handled. After the first few pages, it gives way to something more akin to the title image, "dragons." Here I refer to the serpent seen by R. P. W. with startled fright, but without outrage or revulsion.

Because R. P. W. lacks Jefferson's outrage and revulsion—because, that is, R. P. W. has (like Melville's Ishmael) the most comprehensive and objective perspective of anyone in the story—we must consider his vision of the beast-image to be the most accurate and crucial of them all. The actual dominant symbol of the poem, then—to which the minotaur image is related but subordinate—initially appears as R. P. W. describes his first visit, in the heat of summer, to the ruined home site on the hill:

I went up close to view the ruin, and then
It happened. . . .

In some black aperture among the stones
I saw the eyes, their glitter in that dark,
And suddenly the head thrust forth, and the fat, black
Body molten flowed, as though those stones
Bled forth earth's inner darkness to the day.⁴

We have seen this fellow before somewhere. To be specific, he first appeared in *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*, where in such poems as "Crime" and "Original Sin" he lay toad-like in the "hutch and hole" of the "cellar-dark," and was later repudiated altogether by the conscious mind and locked out of the mind's metaphorical house. He reappears here in *Brother to Dragons*, however, in truly awesome magnitude, for in this tale of subconscious depravity he can no longer be locked out by even so high-minded a consciousness as Jefferson's. His existence, as this tale (drawn from actual history) proves, is real; the "fat, black" serpent rising from "earth's inner darkness" represents the unconscious self, which "haunts beneath earth's primal, soldered sill, / And in its slow and merciless ease, sleepless, lolls / Below that threshold where the prime waters sleep" (p. 33).

Because of its central importance in the poem, Warren devotes several pages to this first encounter of R. P. W. and the serpent. The poet's highest powers of imagination go into this attempt to describe the emergence of the inner self from "earth's inner darkness to the day." Transmuted by the viewer's imagination, this perfectly natural serpent ("just a snake") attains a mythical superstature appropriate to its symbolizing of the unconscious self:

Thus it flowed forth, and the scaled belly of abomination
Rustled on stone, rose, rose up . . .
I saw it rise, saw the soiled white of the belly bulge,
And in that muscular distension I saw the black side
scales
Show their faint flange and tracery of white.
And so it rose and climbed the paralyzed light.
On those heaped stones it was taller than I, taller
Than any man, and the swollen head hung
Haloed and high in light. (p. 33)

³ Mr. Garrett quotes this passage from McDowell as the starting point for his "The Function of the Pasiphae Myth in *Brother to Dragons*" *MLN*, LXXIV (April 1959), 311-313.

⁴ Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons* (New York: Random House, 1953), pp. 32-33. Hereafter I shall note the page references to this book in parentheses within my main text.

"Taller than any man," R. P. W. called it, as his "natural tremor of fatigue converted to the metaphysical chill" and his "soul sat in [his] hand and could not move." But being a representative of modern man, R. P. W. quickly assures himself that "after all, the manifestation was only natural." This was not, surely, the serpent whose archetype appears throughout the history of religion in various civilizations: "Not Apophis that Egypt feared . . . Nor that Nidhogg whose cumbrous coils and cold dung chill / The root of the world's tree, nor even/Eve's interlocutor by Eden's bough." It was not even a "Freudian principle": "Nor symbol of that black lust all men fear and long for / Rising from earth to shake the summer sky." (Warren specifically rejects the "Freudian principle," I am sure, in an effort to discourage those critics who insist on reading all literature as sexual allegory.)

But if the snake is neither a traditional religious image nor a Freudian principle of sexuality, neither is he (despite R. P. W.'s scientific classifications) "just a snake." His rising "taller than any man" evokes too many parallels in other parts of the poem for us to be able to dismiss his appearance so easily. The first such parallel, the beast-image rising "taller than any man," appears in connection with Jefferson's minotaur image at the poem's beginning. At that time, however, the image of man's unconscious self seemed to Jefferson, rapt in his folly of joy, not a beast but an angel:

I was nothing, nothing but joy,
And my heart cried out, "Oh, this is Man!"

And thus my minotaur. There at the blind
Blank labyrinthine turn of my personal time,
I met the beast. . . .

But no beast then: the towering
Definition, angelic, arrogant, abstract,
Greaved in glory, thewed with light, the bright
Brow tall as dawn. (p. 9)

As we shall see, Jefferson will have plenty of time to correct his mistaken impression of the nature of man's innermost self. This revision, in fact, will constitute the main substance of Jefferson's commentary until his final speech of the poem, where he finally accepts the beast within the self as neither minotaur nor angel but deeply human.

The third major occurrence of this beast-image in *Brother to Dragons* arises in connection with the third major character, Lilburn. The first two occurrences, noted above, represent the beast-image as seen by the other two of the poem's three main characters, R. P. W. and Thomas

Jefferson. What distinguishes Lilburn's version of the beast "taller than any man" is that Lilburn does not *see* the horrendous inner self; he *is* that darksome entity. I do not mean to oversimplify Lilburn's position in the poem, for Warren takes great pains to emphasize throughout the work that Lilburn is not *merely* the monster-self which Jefferson tries so hard to exorcize. Lilburn is, as R. P. W.'s consistent sympathy with him ("poor Lilburn") is intended to show, a real, recognizable, commonplace human being, motivated by an understandable though horribly perverted love for his mother. It is clear, however, that Lilburn does embody personally that dimension of unconscious evil which the serpent symbolizes and which is present, whether acknowledged or not, whether active or latent, in every man. Our authority for this identification of Lilburn with R. P. W.'s serpent and Jefferson's minotaur is the hapless Laetitia, seer and (aware or unaware) exponent of truth in the poem.

The occasion of Laetitia's vision is the scene where Lilburn persuades her to describe in words, and wickedly to relish such telling, the "awful thing"—something unspeakably carnal—he had done to her the previous night. ("Then he did it. And it was an awful thing / I didn't know the name of, or heard tell"—p. 75.) After she finally "said the words," and Lilburn answered, "Now didn't you like it some, and even to tell me?," this is what she saw:

And sudden rose up from my side,
And stood up tall like he would fill the room,
And fill the house maybe, and split the walls,
And nighttime would come pouring in like flood,
And he was big all sudden, and no man
Was ever big like that, and way up there
His face was terrible and in its dark . . .
His eyes were shining, but they shone so dark.

(p. 79)

Like the serpent "taller than any man," Lilburn assumes a symbolic superstature ("no man / Was ever big like that") that identifies him with the monster-self in the subconscious and foreshadows the greater "awful thing" around which the story is woven, the incident in the meat house.

In addition to the above passages, the image of the beast within the self recurs at least a dozen separate times within the poem, the recurrence in each case being colored by the speaker's individual perspective. Jefferson always speaks of it in bitterness and sarcasm, his voice filled with loathing for both the conscious self, aspiring futilely for sainthood or heroism, and the monster-self within that thwarts such aspiration:

And as for the heroes, every one, . . .
 The saints and angels, too, who tread, yes, every
 And single one, but plays the sad child's play
 And old charade where man puts down the bad and
 then feels good.
 It is the sadistic farce by which the world is cleansed.
 And is not cleansed, for in the deep
 Hovel of the heart that Thing lies
 That will never unkennel himself to the contemptible
 steel,
 Nor needs to venture forth ever, for all sustenance
 Comes in to him, the world comes in, and is his,
 And supine yearns for the defilement of his slaving
 fang. (p. 42)

(Jefferson's description of the beast within as "that Thing," we may note in passing, probably ties in with the "awful thing"—again undefined—which Lilburn did to Laetitia and which subsequently gave rise to her vision of Lilburn standing "tall like he would fill the room . . . and house, maybe, and split the walls.") On one very important point, Jefferson is wrong about the nature of "that Thing" within the "Hovel of the heart." He claims it will "never unkennel himself" to the "contemptible steel," but the truth is that the monster-self continually unkennels itself (as its prototype did in "Original Sin" and others of the *Eleven Poems*), even at the risk of repudiation and destruction (and both befell Lilburn), in the hope of attaining acknowledgement and definition. It is only Jefferson's excess of revulsion which blinds him, until the poem's resolution, to the more redemptive possibilities of the deeper self.

Another recurrence of this master metaphor comes into view with the appearance of Meriwether Lewis, whose bitter accusations against his uncle finally bring Jefferson to an awareness of his own part in the universal complicity, and thus to an acceptance of Lilburn. Meriwether's recollection of having slain a wolf and a bear, both rather extraordinary creatures ("*This day a yellow wolf was slain,*" and "*We slew the great bear, / The horrible one*"), seems to tie in with the theme of the beast within the self, though the correlation is not explicitly indicated (pp. 179, 180). The connection, if there is one, would be ironic, since, as Meriwether finds out upon his return to civilization, no amount of dragon-slaying will avail against the dragon in the human heart. It is interesting to note, in this connection, the similarity between Bates and Jefferson's description of the minotaur, who "hulked . . . hock-deep in ordure, its beard / And shag foul-scabbed, and when the hoof-heaves— / Lis-

ten! the foulness sucks like mire" (p. 7). Bates's heart, "ordure" and all, is a suitable home for this creature: "And treachery gleamed like green slime in the back-water.— / That Bates, whose hell-heart is a sink and a bog / Of ordure—that Bates, he smiled. He stank in sunshine" (p. 182).

By far the most frequent and most significant references to the beast-image, the master metaphor, come from the tongue of R. P. W., the spokesman for modern man and the chief advocate of reconciliation in the poem. In his desire to effect a re-unification of the divided self, conscious self and unconscious (Jefferson and Lilburn), R. P. W. always speaks in a temperate voice, urging understanding, acknowledgement, and acceptance, even though he clearly identifies the inner self with the monstrous collective guilt of mankind which theologians call "original sin":

And there's always and forever
 Enough of guilt to rise and coil like miasma
 From the fat sump and cess of common consciousness
 To make any particular hour seem most appropriate
 For Gabriel's big tootle. (p. 64)

Probably the most obscure and complex, though a very significant, version of the "beast within" metaphor is that of the catfish with "the face of the last torturer" underneath the Mississippi ice:

The ice is a foot thick, and beneath, the water slides
 black like a dream,
 And in the interior of that unpulsing blackness and
 thrilled zero
 The big channel-cat sleeps with eye lidless, and the
 brute face
 Is the face of the last torturer, and the white belly
 Brushes the delicious and icy blackness of mud. (p. 94)

We have frequently seen Warren use water imagery—in "Billie Potts," for example—as an archetype for time flowing into the sea of eternity, but here the meaning of the river is, I think, quite different. Although the movement of time may be related to this usage, the primary meaning of the River is that which the metaphysical poets were so fond of exploring in their comparisons of macrocosm to microcosm. John Donne comments in "Meditation Four" that "the whole world hath nothing, to which something in man doth not answer," and in filling out the details of this comparison Donne makes, in passing, the exact analogy which Warren is driving at above: "If all the Veines in our bodies, were extended to Rivers."

In the "catfish" passage, Warren does extend the collective "Veines" of mankind into a River (and the Father of Waters at that), at the bottom of which is the familiar face of our collective unconscious, the bestial, never-sleeping ("with eye lidless") inner man wantonly delighting in the "delicious" muck and ooze of the channel-bottom. The "unpulsing blackness" where he makes his home, far beneath the star-lit world of the conscious mind above the ice (the "pulsing" world of time), should remind us of the "blind dark" wherein dwelt Jefferson's minotaur and of the "earth's inner darkness" out of which R. P. W.'s serpent appeared.

The distinctive feature of the catfish image, that which elevates its significance above most recurrences of the master metaphor, is its extension from the psychological realm into the theological. In its perfect adjustment to its environs, primeval as they are, the unconscious self has attained absolute identity and, thereby, oneness with God:

there is no sensation. How can there be
Sensation when there is perfect adjustment? The
blood
Of the creature is but the temperature of the sus-
taining flow:
The catfish is in the Mississippi and
The Mississippi is in the catfish and
Under the ice both are at one with God.
Would that we were! (p. 94)

Repugnant as it appears, the inner self has something which the conscious self hasn't, and wants desperately. Its being "at one with God" ("Would that we were!") pretty well obviates its lack of respectability, in the end. In this synthesis of psychology and theism we are reminded of C. G. Jung's contention that "the unconscious [is] the only accessible source of religious experience."⁵ The way to God is not onward and upward, but the way back and the way down, until the conscious self besmirches its sanctity in the primeval slime, "the delicious and icy blackness of mud" where our catfish brother awaits "with lidless eye" our brotherly embrace. There, incredibly, unreasonably, may be found oneness with God, that state in which the unified self finds at last its absolute identity, which is all the surface self has ever longed for.

II

I have withheld up to now the major point that needs to be clarified about the master metaphor. That point concerns the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious self, a

relationship that was the central subject of *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942) and which continues to be the central theme in *Brother to Dragons*, where the drift of events hangs about the efforts of Lucy Lewis and R. P. W. to reconcile Jefferson to Lilburn.⁶ Up until the very end, Jefferson stoutly maintains his individual sanctity, for after all, *he* hadn't wielded any meat-axe:

JEFFERSON:

But I know this, I'll have no part, no matter
What responsibility you yourself wish.

LUCY:

I do not wish it. But how can I flee what is nearer
Than hands or feet, and more inward than my breath?
(p. 188)

Even up to three pages before his exit from the poem, Jefferson can recoil in indignation at the suggestion that he take Lilburn's hand ("take it, and the blood slick on it?"—p. 191), but he breaks down at last and begins to see the truth as Lucy and R. P. W. see it. This final vision of universal complicity, a vision espousing Warren's characteristic tragic view of the human condition, sees all human good not as "given," in the manner presumed by the Romantic utopians, but as earned out of the general human "wrath" and "guilt" and suffering "in the midst of our coiling darkness":

We must strike the steel of wrath on the stone of guilt,
And hope to provoke, thus, in the midst of our coiling
darkness
The incandescence of the heart's great flare.
And in that illumination I should hope to see
How all creation validates itself. (p. 195)

"Nothing . . . / Is lost," Jefferson goes on to say, and follows that fundamental Warren premise with another: "All is redeemed, / In knowledge." That such knowledge includes acknowledgement of the monster-self within, the catfish in the general human bloodstream, is clear enough, for Jefferson goes on to say that "knowledge . . . is the bitter bread." But bitter or not, Jefferson partakes at last of that communion symbol—"I have eaten the bitter bread"—and so earns, in his last speech of the poem, access to lasting joy:

⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (New York: Mentor Books, 1959), p. 101.

⁶ In his study of archetypes, Joseph Campbell, like Warren, follows Jung's lead in declaring the cleavage within the self to be modern man's most serious problem. In *The Hero with the Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953, p. 388), Campbell says: "The lines of communication between the conscious and unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two."

"In joy, I would end" (pp. 195, 196). This joy, which stands in contrast to the delusory jubilation when Jefferson thought man an angel (see above, p. 500), comes from his two-part reconciliation, involving, on one hand, an acceptance by the conscious self of the darker self, the beast in the labyrinth (Lilburn), and on the other hand, a return of the awakened, self-knowing individual to the group.

This reconciliation of Jefferson to his darker self within paves the way for R. P. W.'s lengthy synthesis which ends the poem. Here the serpent self, his recognition accomplished at last, sinks back into "earth's dark inwardness" again, imperturbable (like the catfish) in his timeless dark:

Down in the rocks . . . looped and snug
And dark as dark: in dark the white belly glows,
And deep behind the hog-snout, in that blunt head,
The ganglia glow with what cold dream is congenial
To fat old *obsoleta*, winter-long. (p. 208)

(The serpent's scientific name, we may note in passing, is particularly useful to Warren's purpose in an ironic way, for the whole scheme of the poem is calculated to show that "old *obsoleta*," as a symbol of something innate in human nature, is not really "obsolete" after all, even in an age which has repudiated the notion of original sin, the alleged brotherhood with mythical dragons.) Here, too, in his concluding synthesis, R. P. W. specifically identifies himself and his age with Lilburn's crime ("We have lifted the meat-axe in the elation of love and justice"—p. 213), and he later apprehends, as did Jefferson, something redemptive in such painful awareness of guilt: "The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence" (p. 214). "And our innocence needs, perhaps, new definition," Warren had said at the end of "The Ballad of Billie Potts"; here, at the end of *Brother to Dragons*, our innocence has achieved that "new definition," and has achieved it, paradoxically, through a descent to the ooze at the River's bottom, through an acceptance of guilt and complicity, through reconnecting the lines of communication between the conscious self, aspiring toward sanctity, and unconscious self, polluted, bestial dweller in darkness.

This matter of communication between the conscious self and the unconscious is, as I have said, the crucial issue in *Brother to Dragons* as in much of Warren's earlier verse. As in Warren's earlier verse, also, and with particular reference to *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*, the initial overtures are made by the deeper self, the beast

in the labyrinth, the serpent-self which the conscious mind tries so hard to repudiate. In contrast to the surface self, aloof in its pride and sanctity, the deeper self appears not so monstrous after all. Instead, it comes forward in shy, sad humility, begging and giving forgiveness simultaneously, asking only to be reunited with its brother self, the conscious identity. Unlike Jefferson, R. P. W. had seen this redemptive aspect of the deeper self in his first encounter with the serpent:

. . . he reared
Up high, and scared me, for a fact. But then
The bloat head sagged an inch, the tongue withdrew,
And on the top of that strong stalk the head
Wagged slow, benevolent and sad and sage,
As though it understood our human pitifulness
And forgave all, and asked forgiveness, too. (p. 35)

This remarkable passage may well be the most important key to the poem, for it anticipates the moral and thematic resolution of the tale. All that remains after this vision, this "moment of possibility" (as Warren was to call it in "Gull's Cry," in *Promises*), is to get Jefferson and all he stands for in the modern world to see it too, and thus to restore the broken lines of communication. The deeper self, "benevolent and sad and sage" under its brute countenance, patiently awaits the necessary, redeeming embrace throughout the remainder of the poem. Because of this redemptive humility and need, the monster-self transcends its loathsomeness in the end. The "sad and sage" head sagging in the above passage thereby takes its place alongside the similar brute faces we have seen in Warren's earlier verse, the "sad head lifting to the long return / Through brumal deeps" at the end of "The Ballad of Billie Potts," and the even sadder face in "Original Sin: A Short Story" (in *Eleven Poems*), the face that "whimpers and is gone" in the fashion of "the old hound that used to snuffle your door and moan."

Of the remaining recurrences of the master metaphor, two in particular deserve mention. The first of these shows that Jefferson's darker self, Lilburn, has his own inner self as well, and that both Jefferson and Lilburn are guilty of the same butchery in the end, though Jefferson's act of mutilation is spiritual, Lilburn's physical. It is Lucy Lewis who calls her brother's attention to the damaging analogy:

He saw poor George as but his darkest self
And all the possibility of the dark that he feared,
And so he struck, and struck down that darkest
self. . . .

And . . . in your rejection you repeat the crime.
Over and over, and more monstrous still,
For what poor Lilburn did in exaltation of madness
You do in vanity. (p. 189)

The other reference to the monster-self, and the last I shall consider, is the face whose "red eye" glares in spontaneous hatred at R. P. W. on the highway (p. 15). The occasion of this apparition, it is worth noting, is the ironic contrast Warren sets up between Jefferson's idyllic vision of the Promised Land, his West, and the actual waste land on which, amid flies, R. P. W. urinates (making appropriate answer to Eliot's prayer, "If there were only water"). Jefferson's vision of the West, "great Canaan's grander counterfeit," was originally paradisiacal:

. . . like the Israelite,
From some high pass or crazy crag of mind . . .
I saw all,
Swale and savannah and the tulip-tree
Immortally blossoming to May,
Hawthorn and haw,
Valleys extended and prairies idle and the land's
Long westward languour lifting toward the flaming
escarpment at the end of day. (p. 11)

Through the handiwork of Jefferson's protégé, the Common Man, the Promised Land has devolved into a waste land by the time R. P. W. comes ripping over the highway a century and a half later, there to encounter the unforgiving red eye of New Canaan's present inhabitant:

We ripped the July dazzle on the slab—
July of '46—ripped through the sun-bit land:
Blunt hills eroded red, stunt-oak, scrag-plum,
The ruined coal-tipple and the blistered town,
And farther on, from the shade of a shack flung down
Amid the sage-grass by the blasted field,
A face fixed at us and the red eye glared
Without forgiveness, and will not forgive. (p. 15)

The ferocity of hatred in this red glare, casual, anonymous, and impersonal as the hatred is, carries forward the beast-image into the realm of time present, I should say, and into a permanent time present, moreover—into the "any time" Warren speaks of in his headnote. And though R. P. W. says, "But touch the accelerator and quick you're gone / Beyond forgiveness, pity, hope, hate, love," he knows very well that he can't really escape the red eye's pitiful malediction. As a matter of fact, R. P. W. himself helps to perpetuate the general cursedness of things when, the accelerator being abandoned by reason of a natural compulsion, he spatters the parched

earth with hot urine, while the sunlight screams and a million July-flies voice their "simultaneous outrage" at what he has done:

So we ripped on, but later when the road
Was empty, stopped just once to void the bladder,
And in that stunning silence after the tire's song
The July-fly screamed like a nerve gone wild,
Screamed like a dentist's drill, and then a million
Took up the job, and in that simultaneous outrage
The sunlight screamed, while urine spattered the
parched soil. (p. 15)

There are those who take exception to passages such as the one above, which are not unusual in Warren's poetry, on the grounds that such coarseness and crudity is offensive and unnecessary. With respect to such responses, I would like to conclude this part of my discussion by rendering a personal opinion. Most of the time Warren's humor, whether coarse or delicate, is absolutely functional; the passage above, as I have read it, is a case in point. But even aside from its organic function in any particular context, Warren's humor and irony deserve nothing but our deepest gratitude, it seems to me. In an age of carefully self-protective and self-conscious poets, Robert Penn Warren has written poetry with a broad, generous, manly irony that gives his work a refreshing, almost unique quality, by comparison with which even the work of so great an ironist as T. S. Eliot seems frequently lacking. Warren's irony, unlike Eliot's, is never petty, cruel, or superior. More than that, it is never (except in his very early poems) self-pitying. For all his involvement with the Puritan Mind, which is especially evident in his concern with "original sin," it is clear that Warren does not commit the fundamental Puritan error of taking himself (so far as his conscious identity is concerned) too seriously. His poetry is enriched, surely, by such unstinting, straightforward giving of himself to his art.

III

Up to now, I have considered the master metaphor, the motif of the beast within the self, pretty much on its own terms, exploring its inner meanings and implications in this and earlier poems. I think this has been the proper approach to the poem, for it is a work that deals primarily with the inner darkness of man, that sense of debasement which led Job to complain about being a "brother to dragons." The title allusion clearly indicates that Warren's central concern is what we might describe as the inner dimension of the dark night of the soul: a sense of moral anxiety.

Here as in previous poems, the search for identity begins with a journey inward and downward through fearsome pollution and darkness.

It is important to note, however, that Warren places this central theme within a larger perspective—within, ultimately, the largest possible perspective. That largest perspective would relate to the external dimension of darkness, that part of the dark night of the soul which considers the individual man in relation to final reality—an immensity of time and cosmos leading finite, transient man to despair of his own significance. This perspective is the main substance of R. P. W.'s lengthy concluding statement, which takes place after the poem's main issue has been satisfactorily resolved, Jefferson having acknowledged his darker self and the serpent having withdrawn into his primal, subterranean drowse.

Warren begins to develop this larger perspective quite early in the poem. R. P. W.'s first long speech, in fact, places the events of the story in the vast, minimizing perspective of time. Speaking of the long-vanished Ohio boatmen, who represent the generations of man on the river of time, Warren recapitulates the time perspective we saw in "The Ballad of Billie Potts." The narrator is particularly moved here by the hearty strength with which those vanished forefathers of ours undertook their one-way river journey:

Haired hand on the sweep, and the haired lip lifts for
song,
And the leathery heart foreknows the end and knows
it will not be long,
For a journey is only a journey and only Time is long,
And a river is only water. Time only will always
flow . . .

.....
The last keel passes, it is drawing night.

(p. 17)

We shall see this river image several times again in the poem. One instance, which I have already touched upon, is the passage about the catfish in the Mississippi mud. Another is R. P. W.'s vision of "All men, a flood upon the flood," as the poem ends (p. 210). Still a different variation of this motif is the glimpse R. P. W. has, near the end of his first long speech, of a "lost clan feasting" at nightfall by the sea of eternity. This image parallels T. S. Eliot's vision of his ancestors' merriment in "East Coker." Whereas Eliot saw "Feet rising and falling. Eating and drinking. Dung and death," Warren sees "a lost clan feasting while their single fire / Flared red and green with sea-salt, and the night fell—

/ Shellfish and artifact, blacked bone and shard, / Left on the sea-lapped shore, and the sea was Time" (p. 21).

In addition to these images suggesting the immensity of time, there are also a number of passages in *Brother to Dragons* bespeaking the vastness of space, the purpose here also being to place "the human project," as Warren later calls it, in its proper perspective. Jefferson begins this motif when he says, "I was born in the shadow of a great forest" (p. 37). Although this dark forest may have Biblical allusions, most likely to the myth of Adam and Eve being cast out of Eden because of Original Sin, it is likely also that this "great forest" has naturalistic connotations suggesting, in a manner reminiscent of Faulkner's "The Bear," the vast unconquerable wilderness of nature against which the encroachments of human civilization seem negligible. R. P. W. takes up this motif a few pages later when, commenting on "the massive darkness of forest," he observes that "the forest reaches / A thousand miles in darkness beyond the frail human project" (p. 45).

This sense of nature's all-encompassing vastness reaches its consummation towards the middle of the poem when R. P. W. describes the coming of winter in the *annus mirabilis*. The lyric power of this passage and its breadth of imagination make it one of the most moving reading experiences in the book. Even the great forest, whose vastness swallows up the "human project," appears small and submissive under the onslaught of "the unleashed and unhoused force of Nature, / Mindless, irreconcilable, absolute: / The swing of the year, the thrust of Time, the wind." Primal forces of nature move in over the planet as "far north the great conifers darkly bend." Whereas the summer journey to the site of the Lewis house (the summer bespeaking the high noon of human life and energy) had afforded R. P. W. a glimpse into man's inner darkness (the serpent metaphor), the winter setting here and at the end of the poem serves to dramatize man's relationship to the outer darkness, the black abyss of nature. In the "glittering infinitude of night" the arctic stars' "gleam comes earthward down uncounted light-years of disdain" as the wide empty land lies waste and frigid in a scene deathsome and static as eternity: "in radius of more than a thousand miles the continent / Glitters whitely in starlight like a great dead eye of ice" (p. 95).

The fullest expression of this mood, this sense of time-space immensity, comes significantly at

the end of the poem, when R. P. W. makes his winter visit (December 1951) to the Lewis home site. Here, as R. P. W. stands near "the shrunken ruin," watching the "last light of December's, and the day's, declension" and thinking "of the many dead and the places where they lay," he sees how "winter makes things small. All things draw in" (p. 215). Underscoring this feeling of diminishment, as R. P. W. looks at the pathetic decay and rubble of what was once a "human project," are the vast "emptiness of light," or "cold indifference of light," and the great, vacant hush of afternoon in which the sounds of living creatures ("Some far voice speaking, or a dog's bark") are thin and faint, waning into nothingness. Even the river of time has a "cold gleam" in this perspective. Thinking how "the grave of my father's father is lost in the woods" and "how our hither-coming never knows the hence-going," R. P. W. sees that river for the last time as "that broad flood" on which men move, and are moved, together: "The good, the bad, the strong, the weak, all men . . . All men, a flood upon the flood" (pp. 204, 209).

Taken together, these images suggesting the immensity of time and space, images that seem to dwarf the "frail human project," effectively culminate the "naturalistic considerations" that R. P. W. mentioned early in the poem (p. 29). When first mentioned, these "naturalistic considerations" applied to the inner darkness of man, the psychological theory of determinism which, if accepted, would render virtue meaningless and non-existent, and which, consequently, R. P. W. rejects, though he has seen man's inner darkness: "But still, despite all naturalistic considerations, / Or in the end because of naturalistic considerations, / We must believe in virtue" (p. 29).

This qualification of the "naturalistic considerations" applying to man's inner darkness has, as we might expect, a counterpart with respect to the naturalistic darkness exterior to man. Though he has seen both the inner and outer darkness, Warren does not accept the premises of naturalism as the final truth of existence. Just as "we must believe in virtue," despite naturalistic considerations ("considerations" implies something less than dogmatic acceptance), so, too, Warren would say, we must believe in an ultimate meaning to our existence despite the all-enveloping oppressiveness of external darkness.

Warren's answer to the problem of cosmic darkness is, in the end, theological. Since the inner darkness is his main concern in this poem, these theological implications are not very pro-

fuse in number or obvious in meaning, but clearly they do exist. There is, first of all, the concept of being "at one with God" which I have already discussed in connection with the catfish image. More important than this, I think, is the motif of natural calamity as an index of "God's Wrath"—a motif notably anticipating such poems in *Promises* as "Summer Storm (circa 1916), and God's Grace" and "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme." Warren uses the term "God's Wrath" in such a way as to direct sarcasm at modern religious skepticism in the passage where R. P. W. discusses the perpetual propriety, by reason of the world's moral corruption, of an immediate Apocalypse, the End of Time:

... that hour seem[ed] perfectly made to order
For the world's end, as this present hour would seem
To any of us if the earth shook now and the sun
darkened—

To any of us, that is, if we weren't so advanced
Beyond the superstitious fear of God's Wrath.

(p. 64)

Although Warren makes it clear that he is not speaking literally when he uses nature to dramatize God's Wrath, he does draw boldly upon natural calamity as an image of some spiritual reality. In describing the *annus mirabilis*, Warren shows how nature is out of joint in the Shakespearean manner, piling up myriad eerie details of natural disorder—a comet shedding "a twilight of shuddering green / Over the immensity of forest" and the beasts of the forest participating in the "peculiar dislocation," having "lust / Out of season, and lust for strange foods, as when / Rome shook with civil discord, and therefore the beasts, / Augustine says, kept not their order" (p. 101).

The use of nature to imply a supernatural reality, or at least a reality beyond visible appearances, becomes yet more explicit when Warren describes the hour of Lilburn's butchery as "that last hour indefensible, / When the stars sweat and the dear toad weeps in the hole" (p. 111). After the act is committed, likewise, Warren describes the subsequent earthquake in terms suggesting the supernatural: "the earth shook and oak trees moaned like men, / And the river sloshed like dish-suds and spilled out," and "God shook the country like a rug, / And sloshed the Mississippi, for a kind of warning" (p. 144-145). Warren immediately qualifies these supernatural implications by stating the secular view of things ("No, what great moral order we may posit / For old Kentucky, or the world at large,

/ Will scarcely account for geodetic shifts"), but his effect—and his intention, I think—is rather like that of the lawyer who makes an improper appeal to the jury and smiles blandly as the judge orders it stricken from the record.

The most significant theological content of the poem, and that which most closely approximates religious orthodoxy, is the series of Christian paradoxes that form the thematic resolution of the work. Both the style and the content of these lines resemble the resolution of *Four Quartets*, but the ideas are much older than Eliot or anything in the modern period. These paradoxes were a favorite theme of the metaphysical poets and preachers, such as John Donne and Lancelot Andrewes, and their ultimate source goes all the way back to the sayings of Jesus. The inner and outer darkness come together here, as Warren considers virtue and a permanent identity ("the beginning of selfhood") ultimately interrelated:

Fulfillment is only in the degree of recognition
Of the common lot of our kind. And that is the
death of vanity,
And that is the beginning of virtue.

The recognition of complicity is the beginning of
innocence.

The recognition of necessity is the beginning of
freedom.

The recognition of the direction of fulfillment is
the death of the self.

And the death of the self is the beginning of self-
hood. (p. 214)

We may note in passing, by way of explaining the abstract, prosaic style of this passage (poetry of statement, one might call it), that all these ideas were implicit in "The Ballad of Billie Potts"—there was the "recognition of complicity" and of "necessity" and the "fulfillment" through the "death of the self"—but critical understanding of that poem was very scant. For this reason, I believe, Warren undertook in *Brother to Dragons* to restate these fundamental premises of his art in explicit, prosaic terms, since subtler modes of communication had apparently failed in his earlier poetry.

IV

Having now discussed both the inner and the outer darkness in *Brother to Dragons*, I would like to conclude with a comment about the relationship between those dual dimensions of the dark night of the soul. The relationship between the inner and outer darkness, or between the beast-metaphor and the "naturalistic considerations"

of the great forest and the "glittering infinitude of night," is rendered, as I see it, by means of an intermediary image—the "house" of the human psyche. We saw this image elaborately worked out in "Crime," one of the *Eleven Poems*, where the conscious self sat in the attic amid rubbish suggesting temporal identity ("the letter names over your name") while the deeper self lay buried (only to be humiliatingly resurrected) in the "hutch and hole" of the "cellar-dark." It may be fanciful to attach similar connotations to Lilburn's house, but there is some evidence that Warren intended such a meaning.

Jefferson first broaches this use of the "house" image when he speaks of "that sweet quarter of the heart where once . . . faith / Her fairest mansion held" (p. 24). The lines following this one, where Jefferson tells Lucy, "Sister, we are betrayed, and always in the house!" would strongly imply the concept of the house of the psyche, I would think. R. P. W.'s subsequent comment, "If you refer to the house Charles Lewis built . . . [it's] nothing but rubble," could be taken both literally and metaphorically. If taken both ways, it ties together the motifs of inner and outer darkness, for Lilburn and Nature between them have indeed reduced a nation's proudest household to "rubble," morally and physically.

If we assume that the Lewis house is indeed the house of the psyche—and every such house does in fact have its own meat house, Warren would insist—then R. P. W.'s first look at the ruins, in his July visit, has some very interesting, though not immediately apparent, overtones. First of all, there is the contrast between the "huddled stones of ruin," which is all that remains of the surface self, and the underground burrow where the serpent-self still endures (p. 32). This contrast is repeated in R. P. W.'s second visit—his December trip at the end of the poem—where we picture the serpent "looped and snug" underground, safely beyond the reach of naturalism's winter. The image of the catfish, perfectly adjusted to its utterly dark, frigid surroundings under the ice, also reinforces this contrast between the conscious self and the unconscious. What these images add up to, we may surmise, is Warren's concept of individual immortality: the conscious self, that part of the psyche represented by the "huddled stones of ruin," dies away in time, leaving the human hope for survival to reside in the collective human unconscious, the inscrutable bedrock identity which renders us "all one Flesh, at last" in *Promises* (see Lyric 3 of "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace").

A number of obscurities come clear, I think, as a result of this reading. It explains, for example, the urgent, repetitious insistence on accepting the inner self that we have seen as the central theme in much of Warren's poetry. Only the deeper, unknown self can hope to transcend time's decay; the conscious, temporal self is doomed to naturalistic oblivion. And such oblivion is hardly hope-inspiring, if we may rightly infer that Warren's description of the ruined house extends to the house of the psyche:

And there it was: the huddled stones of ruin,
Just the foundation and the tumbled chimneys,
To say the human had been here and gone,
And never would come back, though the bright stars
Shall weary not in their appointed watch. (p. 32)

The concept of the house as an extension of human identity appears elsewhere in the poem with similar implications of ruin. R. P. W. evokes his lyrical depiction of winter in the middle of the poem for the specific purpose, he says, of escaping the human house, dominated now by the dark psyche of Lilburn:

... we also feel a need to leave that house
On the dark headland, and lift up our eyes
To whatever liberating perspective,
Icy and pure, the wild heart may command,
To escape the house, escape the tightening coil.
(p. 95)

The perishable self is again identified with the house in the scene, late in the poem, where R. P. W. thinks of his vanished ancestors of only one or two generations ago. Riding with his father under the "lemon light" of December, R. P. W. looks out over "the land where once stood the house of his [father's] first light," and observes, "No remnant remains. The plow point has passed where the sill lay" (p. 204). The conscious, temporal identity, it appears, has disappeared into nothingness—"I do not know what hope or haplessness there / Inhabited once"—and so R. P. W. concludes that "the house is a fiction of human possibility past." Warren's feeling that "nothing is ever lost," an idea that Jefferson affirmed after his conversion ("It would be terrible to think that truth is lost"—p. 194) is tenable, I think, only because of the potentiality of the deeper, undiscovered self, the serpent serenely "looped and snug" under the ruins of the house above ground. This mysterious, undefinable self, our collective unconscious, is the sole repository of all experience, and our sole hope, against "naturalistic considerations," of transcending temporal limitations. This is the final significance of the beast-metaphor: there is not only shame but hope in acknowledging oneself a brother to dragons.

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