Robert Penn Warren's
Brother to Dragons
A DISCUSSION

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Among the vast assortment of manuscripts that Mr. Warren has put on deposit in the Beinecke Manuscript and Rare Book Library at Yale, those relating to *Brother to Dragons* have acquired a renewed topicality with the appearance of his "rewritten" *Brother to Dragons* in the fall of 1979. In this discussion I shall make some comparisons between the published and unpublished versions of the poem in order to look more closely at this remarkably prolific artist's creative process.¹

The manuscripts at Yale show that prior to the three versions of the poem which have entered the public domain,² the work underwent a number of substantial revisions. Presumably the earliest version was that which Warren refers to in the 1953 edition and which he repeats almost verbatim in the rewritten 1979 publication (cf. 31):

R. P. W.: Yes, I have read the records. I once intended
To make a ballad of them, long ago.
And I remember how the thing began:
The two brothers sat by the sagging fire.
Lilburn and Isham sat by the fire,
For it was lonesome weather.
"Isham," said Lilburn, "shove the jug nigher,
For it is lonesome weather.

A modified version of this paper was presented at the MLA convention's special session, "Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons* (New Version): A Discussion and a Tribute on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday," December 29, 1979, San Francisco, Calif.

1. In citing excerpts from the unpublished manuscripts, I risk offending the author's good will—for they are restricted sources—but this material should be of interest to Warren scholars and quite harmless, I think, from the author's point of view.

It is lonesome weather in Kentucky,
For Mammy's dead and the log burns low
And the wind is raw and it's coming snow
And the woods lean close and Virginia's far
And the night is dark and never a star..."

Disappointingly, no such ballad exists among the Beinecke manuscripts, evidently because the poet found the ballad form unworkable almost from the outset. According to the final two versions (1953 and 1979) of the poem, the ballad form failed to serve either the poet's philosophical or psychological purposes. Possibly one might also infer an interesting retrospect on "The Ballad of Billie Potts" in these lines:

Yes, it began about like that, but the form
Was not adequate: the facile imitation
Of a folk simplicity would never serve,
For the beauty of such simplicity is only
That the action is always and perfectly self-contained,
And is an image that comes as its own perfect explanation
In shock or sweetness to the innocent heart.

But first, our hearts are scarcely innocent,
And any pleasure we take in the folk simplicity
Is a pleasure of snobbish superiority or neurotic yearning.
And second, the action here is not explained.
But anything in the action. It is explained,
If explainable at all, by our most murderous
Complicities, and our sad virtue, too.

No, the action is not self-contained, but contains
Us too, and is contained by us, and is
Only an image of the issue of our most distressful self-definition.
And so to put the story in a ballad
Would be like shoveling a peck of red-hot coals
In a croker sack to tote them down the road
To start the fire in a neighbor's fireplace.
You won't get far with them, even if you run—
No, the form was not adequate to the material. (43-44)

But although Warren renounced the ballad form, his earliest manuscripts of Brother to Dragons show that, up through the Kenyon Review typescript, he retained the notion of a ballad in their title: Ballad
of the Brothers: A Murder Mystery. The first draft of the poem we now recognize as Brother to Dragons, written in the poet's almost illegible longhand, begins with notes scribbled on stationery of the Dinkler-Tutwiler Hotel in Birmingham, Alabama (no date). After marking an N.B. by his sources, Claiborne's History of Mississippi and C. J. Latrobe's Rambler in North America, Warren lists three notes under the heading "Material" ("1. Use in past 2. My acquaintance 3. Narrative") and then arranges the substance of the work under the heading "problems—":

1. Novel?—play—poem
2. Theme—light carrier etc.
3. Jefferson as key
4. Jefferson as narrator
5. Jefferson as a "role"
6. How convert Jefferson
7. Meriwether Lewis
   light carrier
   related to Jefferson
8. Jefferson's "Crime"
   parallel to Lilburn's crime
9. Negro as "dark parody" of self
10. Laetitia as "parallel"
11. Mother as "resolution"
Need for Perspective
   My visit—Smithland now
Need for "feel" of land
   December visit
   "common world."

That the question of genre heads the list—"Novel?—play—poem"—should not surprise us in a writer who began his career as a poet and whose most celebrated novel originally took shape as a play. The curious thing is how Warren conjoined the "play-poem" genres together to solve his problem in this instance. The other items in the list of "Problems" are interesting mainly for their early sense of design, centering on Jefferson's "conversion," and for their debt to Joseph Conrad implicit in the "light carrier" motif.³

If Conrad implicitly contributed to the genesis of the poem, War-

³ The fact that Warren was composing his masterly essay on Conrad at the same time he was working on Brother to Dragons helps explain the poem's general effect of an American Heart of Darkness, with Marlow's role as meditative witness emerging in
ren's more explicit thoughts at the start were fixed upon the literature of antiquity. Perhaps indicative of an "American epic" intention, the poem's first draft cites, with a sprinkling of N.B.'s, excerpts from the *Aeneid* and the Bible. Originally the epigraph to the poem was to be a Biblical analogy to the December, 1811, earthquake taken from the prophet Amos, VIII:9: "And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord God, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in a clear day." I suspect that the poet's eventual choice of *Brother to Dragons* as the title (from the book of Job) led him to shed this epigraph in favor of the one from Lucretius, so as to avoid too heavy a Biblical emphasis.

Warren's classical affinities—which gave the poem the Pasiphaë-minotaur episode, Jefferson's visit to Nimes, and a reference to Homer as "that vagrant liar from Ithaca"—appeared even stronger in the beginning than the Biblical flavor. In a passage marked N.B. and circled for extra emphasis, Warren's Prefatory Notes insist upon the theistic significance of the *Aeneid* (pointed brackets indicate illegible longhand).

N.B. As the Gods strove above the battlements of gods strive in ⟨per viscera?)
At end—realization of Aeneas in Virgil at fall of Troy that it was not a matter of the struggle of men—that Gods strive above the battlements.

Here, too, Aeneas appears as a "light carrier" of antiquity—"Aeneas then flees, but flees into 'action' . . . all men must 'found Rome'—etc."—and Warren relates the Anchises image, in particular, to his own work both past and to come:

Always we must carry Anchises (the "father") from the ruin of the human establishment—he is . . . the necessary burden of "piety"—one cannot flee to the "new land" without him . . . Cf. Billie Potts . . . N. B. Jefferson—the "Founding Fathers" in the strip of wilderness . . . .

Two final points of interest in the Prefatory Notes are (first) the "sinking into common day" that Warren hoped to achieve by returning to the Lewis and Clark expedition to discuss "the ordinary sol-
diers who went on out,” and (second) the empathy with Lilburne, which is built into the narrative design:

N.B. Everybody “betrays” Lilburne—his dog with the bone, his wife after she leaves the house, his mother in dying, his father in going back to Virginia, his brother in shooting before the count, etc.

Lilburn is a “victim”—

In the text proper, many of the finest poetic passages—the rape of Pasiphaë, the two visits to the Lewis homesite, the coming of the *annus mirabilis*—are carried over largely intact from the first draft (“Finished in New York City, October 5, 1952”) through the 1979 version. Nonetheless, the changes rendered over a quarter century result in so substantial an effect as to motivate the poet’s insistence that the recent version is a rewriting, not merely a revision, of its predecessor. Some of the changes in the published versions are obvious, like the division of the text into numbered sections; some are curious, like the disappearance of R. P. W.’s father from the poem’s coda (an ellipsis that occurred only after Mr. Warren himself became the father of two children); some involve subtle reworkings of meter and rhythm; and some changes represent a new departure in theme.

One approach, perhaps the most efficient approach, may be to classify a number of revisions in terms of diction, tone (two somewhat interchangeable elements), meter and rhythm, imagery, and philosophic attitude. Of special interest to Warren scholars are such revisions in response to criticism bearing Allen Tate’s initials in the margins of the *Kenyon Review* typescript; I shall indicate this influence when relevant.

Of the many revisions in diction, by far the greater number had the effect of elevating the tone of the poem. The opening lines include a most engaging example of this principle. Originally the *Kenyon Review* typescript has Jefferson introducing himself as “he / Whose body yet, beneath the triple boast / On my green mountain, rots.” But by publication day, that final verb had vanished, to be replaced by R. P. W.’s discreet interruption: “your body still waits / On your green mountain.” A similar thoughtfulness toward diction produced a soft-

4. Allen Tate was one of four readers in this enterprise, and the only one whose suggestions were manifestly efficacious.
5. In the 1979 version, Jefferson’s body neither rots nor waits; it no longer rates a mention.
ening of expletives throughout the poem—e.g., "I scarcely held that meditation on the nurture of roses / Is much comfort to a man who had just stepped in dung" [1953, p. 37, 1979, p. 26]—and in one instance an excretory expletive was reduced to "Oh, fudge" before being deleted entirely.

Occasionally, a reader may regret this dignifying of tone. The manuscript line, "But hit the gas and pretty quick you're gone" ("omit?" Tate marked in the margin) seems more forceful and metrically appropriate than, "But touch the accelerator and quick you're gone" in the 1953 and 1979 volumes (p. 15 and p. 12 respectively). Elsewhere a sardonic little couplet (like T. S. Eliot, Warren sometimes rhymes to point up sarcasm) survived Allen Tate's doubts ("You want this rhyme?—A. T.") in the 1953 book, only to vanish from the 1979 rewriting (the occasion here was a D. A. R. marker that purified the Lewis family history): "But let that pass, for to the pious mind / Our history's nothing if it's not refined" (1953, p. 21; cf. 1979, p. 17).

The manuscript passage most happily deleted, I should say, is a digression I must refrain from reproducing here. Extending its ridicule of "a certain breed among professors of American literature" (the "hurrah America!" breed) to a dozen lines, it would certainly have diminished the main text of the poem, as Tate's reaction indicated ("drop?—A. T."). Another problem passage has been Jefferson's greeting to Meriwether (who had shot himself in the head) as "Crack-head." The 1953 volume, which added two more Crack-heads to the dialogue ("Yes I am Crack-head, but if I'm Crack-head now / You ought to recognize your handiwork"—p. 175), prompted J. L. Stewart's protest that one is tempted to lay aside the book in disgust, to see Jefferson so crudely travestied. In the 1979 version, the poet reduced his Crack-heads to two, and in the Kenyon Review typescript there was just one; in all three versions, however, the identical phrase is assigned to Jefferson: "Well, Crack-head, who are you?"

So far as meter and rhythm are concerned, one senses that—especially in a long poem—the urge to revise is an itch that is never satisfied. Warren himself stated, concerning his new Brother to Dragons, that to change a single syllable may sometimes alter the rhythmic effect of a line dramatically—a point he illustrated back in the Kenyon Review typescript by rearranging a line (at Tate's suggestion) from "[I] Sought the new world, tension and test, terror perhaps," to "[I] sought the new world, tension and test, perhaps terror" (1953, p. 13, 1979, p. 11). The major difference between the recent version and the met-
rics of the early 1950’s, however, stems from the onset during the intervening period of the “new American Poetry.” “I was caught in a blank verse trap,” Warren recently remarked concerning those earlier versions. The Beinecke manuscripts reveal a very strong allegiance to the blank verse tradition, but this form was already yielding to the loosening effects of the new style in the 1953 book version, as a comparison between it and the Kenyon Review typescript indicates:

The West, my West, the West I bought and gave and never
Saw, or but like the Israelite,
From some high pass or crazy crag of mind, saw,
Saw all, swale and savannah and the tulip tree
Immortally blossoming to May, Hawthorn and haw,
Valley’s vast and prairies idle and the land’s
Long westward languor lifting to the scarped day.

But it was my West, the West I bought and gave and never
Saw, or but like the Israelite,
From some high pass or crazy crag of mind, saw—
I saw all,
Swale and savannah and the tulip-tree
Immortally blossoming to May,
Hawthorn and haw,
Valleys extending and prairies idle and the land’s
Long westward languor lifting toward the flaming escarpment at the end of the day.

Like the tone, diction, and metrics, the poem’s imagery sometimes yielded to the influence of Allen Tate’s criticism. “Not clear,” Tate objected when Warren described the town-site “where the Cumberland uncoils / To kiss the broad Ohio’s flank and pour / All that sweet poison up from Tennessee.” Thereafter, Warren erased his images in favor of a clearer though more prosaic and Latinate etching: “where the Cumberland discovers / The sober magnificence of the Ohio, and into that sweep pours / All its own wash and wastage up from Tennessee” (1953, p. 16; 1979, p. 13). In another instance the Kenyon Review typescript develops an elaborate metaphor—

ISHAM: But he leaned closer then,
And leans at me—

R. p. w.: And leans, and from his heart
That dark plant stands, and the buds now swell and pulse.
Yearn to divulge. They glisten in the light.
In that light of the late fire the plant's leaves
Glisten—bedewed by what?—by a dark ichor,
By blood, by tears? Or simply a splash of that stuff
From Lilburn's jug, no doubt just sprinkled there
Like water to refresh some widow-woman's pet hyacinth in a pot.
Well, anyway, it glistens there and grows.
And the night grows big with possibility. . . .

—to which Mr. Tate objected, "This bothers me a little. It's a symbol before it's a specific plant." Subsequently, Mr. Warren uprooted the plant completely out of the poem:

ISHAM: And he leans at me—
R. p. w.: And leans, and his heart knows
That the night grows big with possibility. . . .

(1953, p. 124; 1979, p. 78)

So as not to overstate Tate's influence on his fellow poet, it were best to include a few examples of Warren ignoring his old friend's counsel. "This strikes me as bad," Tate scribbled beside the following lines—

Broadhorn and keelboat and the boatman's hail
That shook the shallows while the fiddle skirled—
Half-horse, half-alligator, prodigal
Of blood, sweat, semen, and the God-damn world.

—but this rhyming quatrain survived unchanged from the typescript through the 1953 (p. 16) and 1979 (p. 13) publications. Tate also spotted an anachronism, and queried whether R. P. W. shouldn't be speaking these lines, but Warren continued assigning them to Jefferson:

Oh, it's always the same.
Always the same, and the dust always drinks blood,
And Bloody Angle, and the Bloody Pond—
Listen, flames crackle through the Wilderness. . . .

(1953, p, 136; cf. 1979, p. 86)

A final instance of resistance to change—a little favorite of mine—describes Jefferson's infanticidal rage toward his nephew: ". . . that parcel of unformed flesh. They should have thrown it / Out where the hogs come to the holler, out with the swill." One reviewer (not Tate)
took these lines as confirming evidence of Warren's hatchet work on our most intellectually accomplished President: would Jefferson have really said "holler" instead of "hollow"? But the reviewer misunderstood the word: Warren was not referring to a forest dell but to a voice hollering "hoo, pig!" and so the offending word carried over from the 1953 book (p. 61) to the 1979 rewriting (p. 42).

I have reserved for last what I consider a greatly important revision that distinguishes the 1979 rewriting from its 1953 predecessor. I quote the original passage at some length in this case, both to clarify the ensuing revision and at the same time to savor the splendid imagery in the last half of this:

... and I,

In that cold light, was impelled to apostrophize:
"O you [Ohio River] who have on your broad bosom borne
Man and man’s movement, and endured the oar

You who have suffered filth and the waste of the human establishment,

I take you now as image and confirmation
Of that deep flood that is our history,
Of that deep flood that makes each new day possible
And bears us westward to the new land.
I take you as the image and confirmation
Of some faith past our consistent failure, and the filth we strewn."

But even as I experienced this mood,
I knew that though the great river might be
Image, it could not be confirmation,
For even the grandeur of Nature may not be
Our confirmation. It is image only.
There is, indeed, the bickering glitter of waters sun-bit to glory.
There is the taciturnity of stone black at the massif’s jut of noblest exposure,
Beyond the bloom-gaud of cirque, and the balsam’s silence.
There is the wing-whistle of bomb-plunge of gannet, and the moon-lit unwhisper of owl-swoop.
And there is, always, the philosophic peace of a certain pasture at evening, not seen since boyhood.
But whatever the gleam of massive magnificence or glimmer of shy joy
May be, it can only resemble the moon
And is but mirror to the human heart's steadfast and central illumination.
If there is glory, the burden, then, is ours.
If there is virtue, the burden, then, is ours.

And so I thought of the dead beneath my feet... (1953, pp. 210-11)

Deleted from the 1979 volume are the lines from the middle to the end; thus the new version reads:

... and I,
In that cold light, was impelled to apostrophize:
River, who have on your broad bosom borne
Man and man's movement, and endured the oar,

You who have suffered filth and the waste
Of the human establishment,

I take you as an image
Of that deep flood that is our history,
And the flood that makes each new day possible
And bears us westward to the new land.
I take you as image and confirmation
Of some faith past our consistent failure,
And the filth we strew.

And so I thought of the dead beneath my feet... (1979, pp. 129-30)

In this revision, we find Warren risking a very unusual transaction, one that is almost invariably a losing proposition in poetry: the richness of sensuous detail in the earlier version was sacrificed so as to permit a new philosophic mood in the sequel. What intervened between the deleted lines, which sustain the idea that "even the grandeur of Nature may not be / Our confirmation. It is image only," and the stripped-down sequel was the poet's growing conviction that Nature is not merely a reservoir of stimuli for "image only." From Promises (1957) on, Warren has repeatedly portrayed Nature as radiant with "vital meanings," a motif that has deepened towards a quasi-Romantic pantheism in more recent poems like Audubon: A Vision (1969), "Trying to Tell You Something" (1975), and "Code Book Lost"
(1978). In Warren’s total canon of poetry, now over sixty years in the making, this turning toward Nature for ultimate meanings has emerged as perhaps his most significant thematic development.

Eventually, when the definitive study of the Beinecke manuscripts is made—and a greatly ambitious project it will be—we are certain to have a much clearer picture of this artist’s craft of revision. For now, to conclude this fragmentary study, two overall impressions may be rendered. First, the lapse of time now permits us to see the earlier *Brother to Dragons* as a watershed in Warren’s poetic career. His lengthiest, most ambitious, and most experimental poem, it was the first major work in which he risked openly using himself—R. P. W.—as a voice in the poem. In so doing, he fashioned the persona that has unified the widely admired volumes of his later career—volumes such as *Promises*, “Tale of Time,” *Or Else*, and *Now and Then*. Now the rewritten version of the poem tells us something new about the person behind that persona. When *Brother to Dragons* was first published as a book in 1953, it received lavish praise from many reviewers, including such fellow poets as Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Delmore Schwartz; and some fifteen years later, speaking from the cooler distance of Academe, Hyatt Waggoner pronounced a judgment that many of us share, that the book is “certainly a major document in American poetry.” It is a measure of Mr. Warren’s dedication to his art that neither this reception of his work nor his prolific yearly output since that time has prevented him from reshaping that work of a quarter-century ago toward an even higher standard of excellence. In the end, the path from the Dinkler-Tutwiler stationery to the recent volume reveals something beyond the craft of revision: it bespeaks a remarkable career, a Jamesian will to pursue the prize.