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Purity, Panic, and Pasiphaë in Brother to Dragons

JOHN BURT

Brother to Dragons is a poem about fallenness, and its aim is to see that fallenness in a political and historical way. Its critique of human nature is also a critique of American culture and politics, specifically of the ways in which Americans have used the promise of human perfectibility to define their collective sense of mission in the world. So dark is the poem's vision of American history that it presents America's sense of itself as a redeemer nation opening the possibility of freedom for all peoples as not only mistaken but also as a hysterical delusion in the service of an unacknowledged collective inner darkness. But even as *Brother to Dragons* examines the primordial American crimes of slavery and racism, sometimes alluding as well to class exploitation and imperial conquest, the poem's attention obsessively returns to sex. Its obsession is not with the sexual aspects of slavery and racism, although these would seem to be ready made for this poem and indeed are certainly not ignored by it, but with sexual passion itself. While it is possible to argue that this repeated shift of focus reflects an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to evade the charged political subject matter of the poem by shifting from a political and public register to a psychological and private register, it is hard in context to see that shift as evasive. For *Brother to Dragons* never sees its sexual concerns as replacing or obviating its political ones; indeed, the characters repeatedly insist that sexual and political fallenness illuminate each other, and they always treat politics as the tenor and sex as the vehicle, rather than the other way around. *Brother to Dragons* is not a coded argument about sex; it is an account of human darkness, both generally and in the American political context, which uses sexual passion, and more important, sexual revulsion, to illuminate general features of human nature which are also in play in moral and political life.¹

¹ All quotations from *Brother to Dragons* will use the 1953 version. Study of this text must begin with James A. Grimshaw, editor, *Robert Penn Warren's Brother to Dragons: a Discussion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983). My own earlier study, John Burt, *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), took a rather less dark view of this poem than I develop here. Alan Holder, *The Imagined Past* (Lewisburg: PA: Bucknell University Press, 1980) presents a treatment which is pointed and interesting but very different from mine. The essential book on Warren's treatment of racial themes is Anthony Szczeniul, *Racial Politics and Robert Penn Warren's Poetry* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002). I have

Sexual passion and sexual revulsion play roles in the poem that are so similar that they are hard to separate. The problem is not merely that revulsion and fascination so often keep each other company or seem to require each other. Nor is it even that sexual revulsion, in *Brother to Dragons* no less than in *World Enough and Time* (or for that matter *Measure for Measure* and *Hamlet*), seems under pressure to become not a horrified recoil against sexual passion but a dark version of it, not a flight from sex but an angry and sadistic sexual practice. The problem is more general. Revulsion seeks to purify the self through cruelty, and all attempts to seek purity through cruelty inevitably become merely instances of what the self seeks to purify itself away from.

The ironic transformation of the desire for sexual purity into sadism is in the poem taken as a pointed instance of the more general tendency of the longing for purity of any kind to transform itself into a form of the darkness it thought it opposed. Nothing is more liable to serve evil than a panicked and angry love of the good or a guilty but thrilled revulsion from evil. Lucy Jefferson Lewis, at the poem's climactic moment, insists to her brother that his horrified refusal to acknowledge his moral kinship with his murderous nephew Lilburn amounts to another version of Lilburn's crime. A similar destructive longing for purity also takes political form in the thinking of Jeremiah Beaumont in *World Enough and Time* and of Adam Amos in *Proud Flesh*, but in both of those cases that urgent longing for purity retains enough of its sexual character that it is still something of a question whether the political obsessions are merely disguised versions of sexual ones. Oddly it is in the revulsions of Thomas Jefferson in *Brother to Dragons*, which are if anything more explicitly sexual than anything in Warren's other books, that the connection between revulsion and fascination can be seen as a description not merely of a sexual predicament but as a description of idealism generally, so that the question becomes not why is it that the desire for sexual purity so often transforms itself into pleasure in cruelty, nor why desire for political purity seems so often to become a coded form of pleasure in sexual cruelty, but why every profound attempt to remake and purify human nature, from the Wars of Religion forward, has yielded only chaos, destruction, and despair.

Jefferson's thinking repeatedly veers, with the air of having finally discovered its true subject, from sex to something he calls *joy*, by which term he means the center of a dark transcendence which recruits and destroys those who come under its influence. Jefferson's panicked sexual thoughts lead him away from sexuality in two directions. First, it leads him to ask why it is that revolutions so often, in Hannah Arendt's phrase, eat their children, so that what begins in a crusading desire to redeem the human condition ends only by sowing death

been strongly influenced by the arguments about Warren's views of American history in Hugh Ruppersburg, *Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1990), William Bedford Clark, *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), and Jonathan S. Cullick, *Making History: the Biographical Narratives of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000). The religious ideas here owe a great deal to Victor Strandberg, *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), and to Robert S. Koppleman, *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995). My views on Warren's harsh Gnostic version of poetic sublimity owe a great deal to Harold Bloom's several essays on Warren, and to Calvin Bedient, *In the Heart's Last Kingdom: Robert Penn Warren's Major Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), although Bedient doesn't discuss this text. My thinking about Warren generally has been shaped a great deal by James H. Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

everywhere. Second, it leads him to ask why it is that the highest aims seem necessarily to bring with them all that is worst, and he answers that question not by adopting a chastened skepticism about human nature but by embracing a dark gnosticism about good and evil more thoroughgoing than anything in Hardy or Conrad and equaled only perhaps in Melville. The painful discovery, which *Brother to Dragons* struggles to assimilate, is that good is so often the occasion or origin of evil that the two are nearly impossible to tell apart.

Brother to Dragons, a “Tale in Verse and Voices” which first appeared in 1953 and which Warren extensively revised in 1979, concerns the true story of how Lilburn and Isham Lewis, two nephews of Thomas Jefferson, murdered their slave George with an axe in December 1811, on Rocky Hill near Smithland, Kentucky, on the day the Great New Madrid Earthquake shook the continent from the Rockies to Boston. The poem does not present the action directly, but has the poet and the shade of Jefferson, who is unable to rest because of the way Lilburn and Isham’s crime seems to repeal both his vision of the promise of human nature and his vision of the promise of America, confront each other and argue about its meaning. The other principal characters -- the Lewis brothers, their parents, Lilburn’s wife Laetitia, their cousin the explorer Meriwether Lewis, Lilburn’s ambivalent and darkly possessive African-American Mammy, Aunt Cat, and, in one brief but moving passage, the murdered George himself -- interrupt their colloquy as required, entering from an outer dark in which, until they speak, Jefferson and RPW are not aware of their presence, and in which it is not clear exactly how much of the colloquy they overhear.

The historical Jefferson apparently left no record of his thoughts about the tragedy; perhaps, as Warren surmises in the preface to the 1953 edition, because he was unable in life to face the facts Warren has him so obsessively brood upon in death. As Warren goes on, rather tartly, to remark: “If the moral shock to Jefferson caused by the discovery of what his own blood was capable of should turn out to be somewhat short of what is here represented, subsequent events in the history of America, of which Jefferson is the spiritual father, might still do the job.”

In its immediate context in 1953 the book had two principal moral aims. Warren speaks first of all as an ethically sensitive Southerner in the years immediately preceding the repeal of legal racial segregation by the Supreme Court in the *Brown* case. Not Twain, not Cable, not Warren himself in later works such as *Band of Angels*, not even Faulkner, presents quite so stark a picture of his region’s and his nation’s guilty racial past as Warren does in *Brother to Dragons*.

Indeed, the poet’s feelings upon this subject seem to be so raw that the book seems to be always careering out of his control both emotionally and artistically. The poet’s anguish on this subject may account for the poem’s almost shapeless architectonic, in which new subjects and themes seem to burst into the action, propelled by their own urgencies, sometimes for reasons that remain partly opaque, as in the case of the poet’s sudden recollection of how his friend Kent shot a Canada Goose, or his pang of guilt on being asked to describe his father, or the father’s digression on how his own father would every spring make him drink a potion made of whiskey and bloodroot called “percoon.” Even within single speeches, the characters are often ambushed by their own words, or tyrannized by metaphors they had seemed to adopt in an offhand way, and driven into making claims they had not set out to make so baldly.

The same tangle and jangle of feelings may account for those frequent moments in which the poet rounds upon himself and jeers at his poem, such as when he ridicules an earlier attempt to

render the story in the form of a folk ballad like his 1943 "Ballad of Billie Potts," or when, having elaborately introduced Mr. Boyle, the current owner of the property upon which the tragedy occurred, he rebukes himself for having worked so hard to make Mr. Boyle appear quaint. *Brother to Dragons* seems to have concerned Warren through the ten years of his poetic silence after 1943, and although there were certainly biographical issues other than the need to sort out his thinking about race that caused that silence, the poem repeatedly called him back to work on it, so that Warren revised it stem to stern in 1976 and 1979, and worked on yet another version of it as late as 1987.

Like *Piers Plowman* or *The Prelude*, *Brother to Dragons* is a text whose author could not cease worrying it, perhaps because the still unsolved problems at its center run so deeply into the regional conscience of the South and the national conscience of the United States. That the problem of racial crime generalizes into the problem of human evil does not suffice to draw its special and personal sting by de-emphasizing its specific instance, as generalizing treatments so often do, because the other instances which are drawn on to illustrate this generality -- strikebreaking at Ford, the suppression of the Ghost Dance, the plunder of the West -- are also specifically American and sting both author and reader in almost the same intimate and personal way. Even in its most general form, as a critique of human nature rather than as a critique of the South or of America, *Brother to Dragons* does not lose its specifically American and Southern focus, because the poet never fails to make this point without reminding the reader how much America's sense of itself has depended upon its denial of human fallenness and its sense of exemption from history.

But *Brother to Dragons* is not only an intervention in Southern thinking during the early years of the struggle over desegregation; it is also an intervention in the international crises of mid-century, a reflection upon some of the urgent moral issues raised by the Second World War and the early phases of the Cold War. To insist that American history and contemporary American culture are not free from their own specific forms of horrifying darkness serves an important moral and political function in the postwar era. For one thing, it demands of American readers that they do not see themselves as morally different in kind from their recently defeated enemies, however much their acts may differ in degree. It motivates a forbearing political settlement with the ordinary people of the defeated Axis powers based upon a shared acknowledgment of human liability, arguing not that the two sides were morally equivalent but that the urgencies and obsessions which drove the ordinary people of those powers, people not especially or essentially more demonic than anyone else, to do abominable things, are recognizably akin to urgencies and obsessions to which those who put a stop to those abominations are also liable. Indeed, it argues that an angry insistence upon settling moral scores leaves one open to evils rather like those one wished to extirpate. It is a hard lesson for a victor to learn, particularly a victor over such an enemy, but it seems to be a necessary one. To insist that all sides have a share in human depravity and must work out a forbearing habit of living based upon mutual acknowledgement of that fact is one way of making moral sense of and assimilating the horrible events of mid-century. Recent thinkers on these subjects may view this train of thought as sentimental or as lacking in moral clarity, but most of the available alternatives seem to have far worse problems.

The poem bears also on its immediate context in the early years of the Cold War, a conflict which, given the series of confrontations during the poem's composition in Greece, Berlin, and Korea, kept threatening, up to the death of Stalin in the year of its publication, to transform itself into a titanicly destructive global nuclear war. Anthony Szczesiul has shown that Warren studied Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* deeply during the composition of *Brother to Dragons*, and that he extracted passages from that book to help him clarify his own thoughts about the outbreak of metaphysical evil in political life (86-7). The poem is intended as a critique of the American sense of national innocence, which Warren fears may lead America, although legitimately in conflict with totalitarian powers, into a self-righteousness for which there is a high moral price to be paid in unreflecting brutality and in ends-justify-the-means expedience. The point is at best implicitly made, but it is hard to mistake.

Crucial as these themes are to Warren's sense of the poem and to our sense now of Warren as a poet with moral and political things to say, the sexual themes overrun the political ones, and they do so with the force of an urgent irruption of undesired thoughts. Consider for instance Jefferson's first outburst on the subject:

In Philadelphia first it came, my heart
 Shook, shamefast in glory, and I saw, I saw--
 But I'll tell you quietly, in order, what I saw.
 To Philadelphia we came, delegates by accident, in essence men:
 Marmosets in mantles, beasts in boots, parrots in pantaloons.
 That is to say, men. Like other men.
 No worse, no better. Only ourselves, in the end.
 Only ourselves, and what we then happened to be--
 Offal of history, tangents of our fathers' pitiful lust
 At midnight heat or dawn-bed ease.
 Why should our fathers' long-lost lust
 Seem pitiful? The twitch and gasp that was
 The fuddling glory of our begetting seem
 So pitiful? Is it not worthy of us?
 Or we of it?--Too much crowds in
 To break the thread of discourse and make me forget
 That irony is always, and only, a trick of light on the late landscape.
 (6-7)

Jefferson has begun to describe the redemptive ambition he invested in the great preamble to the Declaration of Independence as an example of both personal and impersonal spiritual pride. The personal pride is not only in his own eloquence as the author of that document, or in his power as a political agent changing the course of world history, but also in his transformative insight into the possibilities of a redeemed human nature, a vision of human possibility both embodied in and realized in action by means of Jefferson's own words. The impersonal spiritual pride belongs to humanity as a whole, whose highest ambitions are at stake in the project of American self-government, a project for which Jefferson himself serves as a representative man and his Declaration as the enabling instrument of freedom and self-culture. In the Declaration, Jefferson speaks for the possibilities of America, and America speaks for the possibilities of the world. The pride of the Declaration is the pride of the Enlightenment as a whole, humanity's

pride in itself as a race of beings capable of perfecting themselves through reason, a pride which Jefferson's words not only invoke and express but translate into a concrete historical action that transforms the world. The Declaration is not only a key document of Enlightenment belief, but also a key act embodying Enlightenment values, a key instance of Enlightenment hubris.

Jefferson wonders how such a transformative vision and such a transformative act might ever have come to a body of delegates who were after all only human, and as human beings were at least in large measure animals. Almost involuntarily Jefferson's tirade slips from the thought that the delegates at Philadelphia (and by extension all Americans, perhaps all humans) are men, no worse, no better, to a horrified reflection that whatever we are we are still the tangents of paternal lust. He cannot keep himself from imagining, in a passage which emphasizes at once the grossness and the irrelevance of the act, the scene of our begetting. Jefferson asks how is it that anyone who might think the thought of human greatness might owe his origin to such an act, so pitiful in its physicality and even triviality, and so ludicrously disproportionate to the idea that what is created by that lust might become that creature to whom God gives certain inalienable rights and a portion of his own immortality. That our being is a consequence of a strained and even ridiculous sexual act gives the lie simultaneously to any glorious vision of the human possibility and to our own credibility as shapers of that vision.

Jefferson's critique of the folly of humanist pride stampedes him into a rhetoric so excessive that he is taken aback by it. He retreats first into a facile reversal of his original formulation: is the thought of our father's lust in the orgasmic act of begetting us pitiful because we would like to imagine a less grotesque origin for ourselves? Or is it we who are unworthy of that act? Jefferson's thinking is running ahead of him, and he can't quite flesh out what this last possibility means -- it may prefigure the tie he is later to make between sex and that dark amoral transcendence RPW will call *glory*, *joy*, or *virtue*, but he drops that thread here as soon as he lays it down, and rebukes himself for being so foolish as to imagine that bitterness against the human limitations of human beings might grant him a personal exemption from that limitation. The sexual outburst seems to scatter his thoughts, and he has to remind himself that irony is not redemption, not separation from the fallenness it rebukes, but only a trick of light on a late landscape (another metaphor that is opaque in context but perhaps looks forward to Warren's own sunset last soliloquy at the poem's end).

Jefferson's self-recovery lasts him only half a dozen lines. He begins to describe how each delegate, like each person generally, is lost in the dark mystery of his being, comparing our wanderings in the bewilderments of our nature and our time to those of Theseus in the labyrinth, except that unlike Theseus we have no Ariadne's thread to guide us:

But what I had meant to say, we were only ourselves,
 Packed with our own lusts and languors, lost,
 Each man lost, in some blind lobby, hall, enclave,
 Crank cul-de-sac, couloir, or corridor of Time.
 Of Time. Or self: and in that dark no thread,
 Airy as breath by Ariadne's fingers forged.
 No thread, and beyond some groped-at corner, hulked
 In the blind dark, hock-deep in ordure, its beard
 And shag foul-scabbed, and when the hoof heaves--
 Listen!--the foulness sucks like mire.

(7)

The thought that human nature is labyrinthine leads Jefferson, in a paroxysm of joyfully vicious alliteration, to the figure of the labyrinth, which leads him in turn by a kind of rapid and almost dizzy associative logic to the predicament of Theseus in that labyrinth. But Theseus as the paradigmatic human being is immediately replaced, in a further rush of the same associative logic, by the Minotaur himself. Although we listen with Theseus to the sound made by the Minotaur's foot as it shifts, hock deep in ordure, our minds are focused on the Minotaur, and Theseus is no longer seen as the Minotaur's slayer but only as his unacknowledged double. And since the labyrinth is the labyrinth of self, the Minotaur is the image of what is at the center of the self. The image of the Minotaur is the involuntary by-product of an apparently offhand metaphor run amok, but he is of course an apropos image of human nature as it actually is, since like the delegates at Philadelphia he is both beast and man. As the delegates are lost in the labyrinth of their own history, so Theseus is lost in the labyrinth of Minos, and so the Minotaur is lost in the foulness of his ineluctably dual nature.

The Minotaur is of course also the product of a sexual enormity, and still carries about him some of the horror of that enormity, both as its object (as the child of Pasiphaë and the bull) and, oddly, as its agent, since the image carries with it an obscure but unmistakable tang of sexual aggression. The description of the sucking sound made by the Minotaur's hoof ties this passage to Jefferson's later description of what it feels like to slip on ordure in a dark alley, a figure he uses at least three times as a metaphor for human fallibility generally. (Warren himself uses this same figure repeatedly in other poems, some of them much later.) In some hard to place way this image also is shadowed with sexual disgust, as if to slip on ordure and to be liable to sexual desire were somehow versions of the same thing.

Not much later, for instance, when Jefferson argues to RPW that he had never had a naïvely positive view of human nature, only a hope that human nature could transcend itself, he notes

I read the books, and know that all night long
 History drips in the dark, and if you should fumble
 Your way into that farther room where no
 Light is, the floor would be slick to your foot.
 (36)

This meditation on human fallenness, like the Minotaur and Pasiphaë speech, also immediately and involuntarily returns to the subject of sexual disgust, tying together three strains from the earlier passage: slipping in ordure, human beings as animals in disguise, and a grotesque vision of the human face at the moment of sexual climax:

For I was born in the shadow of the great forest,
 And though the slave's black hand bore me, an infant, forth
 From out that shadow, soft on the silken cushion,
 From Shadwell out to Tuckahoe, I always
 Carried the shadow of the forest, and therefore thought
 That Man must redeem Nature, after all,
 And if I held Man innocent, I yet knew

Not all men innocent, of darkened mind,
 Ape's tickle and hog's slobber, and the shadow
 Of the old trees, for he whom I sent forth
 To redeem the wild world far to the Western shore,
 My near-son Meriwether, wrote in his papers
 How the savage man wallowed in the horror of the *hogan*,
 And lust was communal ceremony in the murk-filled lodge,
 And such the reek of sour bodies and the contortion and pathos of the bestial face
 That nausea was in your gut even as, for sympathy, your parts twitched.
 (37)

Many of these same features, Jefferson rushes to point out, are hardly unique to the forest and the *hogan* :

And I have traveled in fair France, in that land
 Of sunlight and the sunlit spirit that once
 Itself shed light on all our faces and whatever face
 Susceptive lifted to that genial ray,
 But there--even there--I saw the abominable relics
 Of carved stone mountain-high heaved up by what
 Bad energy in what bad time, as though
 Chaos had spewed her vomit up in stone
 And frozen bubbles of disaster and contorted and crazed
 Cairns of archetypal confusion, and from every
 Porch, pillar, and portal stared
 Beaked visage of unwordable evil or the snout
 Of rapine, and fat serpents fanged themselves
 To the genitals of women, whose stone eyes bulged out
 As to distribute sightlessness on all, and the hacked mouth
 Gave no scream you could hear across the long time, and
 Vile parodies and mock-shows of the human
 That might be beasts but yet were men,
 Ass-eared, hog-hocked, and buzzard-beaked, and yet
 With the human face of slack and idiotic malediction,
 Stood about,
 And approved all,
 Approved
 The sway of the world and knew, and were, our doom.
 I'll tell you a secret--I've met them in the street.
 I'll tell you another secret--it is a breed
 That does not decrease in number or in exercise
 Of significant influence in your own time.
 (37-38)

In the opening tirade, the Minotaur and Pasiphaë speech, Jefferson goes rather further than this. Just after introducing the Minotaur, Jefferson goes on to note, rather twisting the myth, that the Minotaur and Theseus are brothers. (Of course, the Minotaur is in fact the brother of one character in this scene, Ariadne, but Jefferson's thoughts have entered this scene through Theseus, not Ariadne, since it is Theseus, not Ariadne, who is lost in the labyrinth.) Immediately Jefferson's imagination again overruns his metaphor as he is in the midst of deploying it, shifting

his focus (with nothing more than an “and” to cover the shift) to Pasiphaë, and treating *her*, not Theseus the monstrous monster-slayer, nor the Minotaur, who is both monster and man, as the emblematic instance of the human being:

The beast waits. He is the infamy of Crete.
 He is the midnight's enormity. He is
 Our brother, our darling brother. And Pasiphaë--
 Pasiphaë, huddled and hunched in the cow's hide,
 Laced, latched, thonged up, and humped for joy,
 What was the silence then before the stroke?
 And then your scream.
 And through the pain then, like a curtain rent,
 In your mind you saw some meadow green, or some grove,
 Some childhood haven, water and birdsong, and you a child.
 The bull plunged. You screamed like a girl, and strove.
 But the infatuate machine of your invention held.
 Later, they lifted you out and wiped your lips in the dark palace.
 We have not loved you less, poor Pasiphaë.
 (7-8)

The subject of Pasiphaë seems to burst involuntarily into the poem. And the turn the poem takes over the next few lines is quite odd, because Pasiphaë's act does not resemble the other sexual transgressions in the poem. For one thing, every other sexual transgressor described in this poem is male, and every other sexual transgression involves aggression in some straightforward way. This scene looks forward to that one later in the poem in which Lilburn's wife Laetitia, under coercion, forgives him after some obscure act of sexual violence against her, and, again under coercion, confesses to him, probably falsely, that she enjoyed it. The rape of Laetitia episode even shares with the Pasiphaë episode an odd, involuntary return to a childhood memory of a nature scene. But the parallel inheres not in Laetitia's situation -- Letitia is motivated by fear, not by perverse lust -- so much as in Lilburne's bitter remark, hearing her words, that

But now I see when angels
 Come down to earth, they step in dung, like us.
 And like it.
 (80)

What Lilburn means by this is that if he is a Minotaur-like monster (down even to stepping in dung), then Laetitia is a kind of Pasiphaë, and that her willingness to forgive him testifies to an inner perversity all the more shocking for her apparent innocence. Poor Laetitia cannot win. If she does not forgive Lilburn she is (in the words of his last will) “fair but cruel Laetitia whose coldness unto me has brought on all,” a *belle dame sans merci* who drives men to madness through her distant perfection, a kind of standing and repetitive rebuke of obsessive desire by sadistic purity, a sexually charged escape from sexual feeling different only from Lilburne's sexual revulsion in expressing itself in magnetic remoteness rather than violence. But if on the other hand Laetitia does forgive Lilburn then she is complicit in everything he does to her, so

that her apparent purity only gives spice to her corruption, as Pasiphaë's worldly cultivation, not to mention the odd innocence of her mid-sex memory flash of "some meadow green, some grove, / some childhood haven" does for her. To desire a beast when one is not one is to be more beastly than that beast. To feel sexual desire is to step in dung (as both Laetitia and the Minotaur do). To be female and feel sexual desire is worse still, because it represents a perverse desire of the pure to become impure. To be male and to escape from sexual impurity, as Lilburne apparently seeks to do here, is to engage in sexual violence, which obviously does not purify sexuality away and indeed darkens it and makes it more horrifying.

The oddest thing about Lilburn's rape of Laetitia is that it is not an expression of sexual desire nor even an expression of desire for power but an the expression of revulsion against sexuality as a whole, an act of revulsion and disgust with self which only confronts the one who does it more sharply with that revulsion. Lilburn's violence against Laetitia has a similar logic to his escalating violence against George, for George's presence reminds him of his guilt for having beaten him, and Lilburn responds to that guilt by administering further violence. In both cases Lilburn's revulsion against his own inner darkness as a man and as a master motivates aggression which confronts him with that darkness ever more starkly than before. (This perhaps explains why the murder scene is itself invested with an out of place sadomasochist thrill.)

Lilburn's speech here to Laetitia is intended to assert that some intimacy of horror links victimizer and victim (a thought that will also occur to RPW's character in the poem) binding them into one identity, as if the victim's own nightmare side drags her into involuntary complicity in her own destruction. The character RPW will make a similar surmise about George at the moment he realizes that Lilburn is about to kill him. This surmise is in ordinary ethical terms hard to defend, and one which certainly gets those who make it into hot water. Jefferson is disgusted by it when RPW makes it, and RPW himself repudiates the claim but can't help but keep being drawn back to it. Probably underneath it all is what Paul Ricoeur described in *The Symbolism of Evil* as an almost primordial, pre-ethical version of evil, which sees it not as a transgression by an agent who must be held responsible but as an eruption of unclean *mana* that soils perpetrator and victim alike.² It is a primitive view of evil -- the characters of the *Oresteia* seem to labor to work free of it -- but one still with us involuntarily whenever we find ourselves in the presence of truly horrific crime.

That Jefferson insists on describing Pasiphaë's coupling with the bull from Pasiphaë's point of view is part of the point: she, not Theseus, the minotaur, or for that matter the bull, is the emblematic human being, driven by some inner compulsion and necessity to horrific abasement. (Perhaps the only thing more humiliating than to be the tangent of a father's pitiful lust is to be the tangent of a mother's horrifying one.) Even as the account is centered upon Pasiphaë, Jefferson recoils from the act in delicious and entranced horror at it (which is of course his version of her crime). It is hard not to hear as much excitement as disgust in the phonemic play of "huddled and hatched in the cow's hide," and in the rhythmic energy, radiating out from alliterating monosyllables into the little tattoo at the end of the line in "laced, latched, thonged up, and humped for joy."

Pasiphaë is emblematic in that she combines both the noble and the base, the vulnerable and the gross. She is to the bull, or to her desire for the bull, as human being's image of themselves is

² Paul Ricoeur. *The Symbolism of Evil*. Translated by Emosa Buckmas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

to their own inner nature, for clearly the point is not that we merely contain our own animal nature nor that we remain vulnerable to it but that our higher and lower aspects are somehow identical, that the one desires the other, that the beastly behavior is somehow the real meaning of the higher ambition. This is why Jefferson describes the artificial bull in which Pasiphaë awaits the bull's stroke as "the infatuate machine of your invention." Jefferson's language is finicky and latinate, sneering a bit in its distance, and yet despite everything torn by his unaccountable sympathy with her. "Infatuate" is a great eighteenth century term of abuse, more appropriate to enthusiasm, God-filledness, than to perversion, here implying in the extremity of the action a kind of Gnostic truth about what humans are and what their lives mean. Infatuate enthusiasm embodied in an elaborate contraption is close to Jefferson's own language about his fashioning of the Declaration. Jefferson means to see the entire elaborate superstructure of the Enlightenment's intellectual and spiritual life as an instance of just such an "infatuate machine." (Napoleon famously described Parisian high society as "a silk stocking stuffed with shit.") This is perhaps why there is an unmistakable undertone of pity, for all the horror and disgust, in "Later, they lifted you out and wiped your lips in the dark palace." That pity is itself hard to account for, or at least hard to see the end of, which is why it immediately modulates into an irony in which pity and contempt are nicely balanced: "We have not loved you less, poor Pasiphaë."

Jefferson almost physically pulls himself back from his own thought again, saying that he had well understood human nature when in Philadelphia he penned the Declaration, but that he had thought, not through wisdom or Enlightenment but through romantic genius, to transcend that nature:

I had not meant to speak thus. Language betrays.
 What I mean is, words are always the truth, and always the lie,
 For what I say of Philadelphia *now*
 Is true, but true now only, not true *then*.
 But this much then: We knew we were only men
 Caught in our errors and interests. But I, a man,
 Suddenly saw in every face, face after face,
 The bleared, the puffed, the lank, the lean, all,
 On all saw the brightness blaze, and I knew my own days,
 Times, hopes, books, horsemanship, the praise of peers,
 Delight, desire, and even my love, but straw
 Fit for the flame, and in that fierce combustion I--
 Why, I was dead, I was nothing, nothing but joy,
 And my heart cried out, "Oh, this is Man!"
 (8-9)

This proclamation represents not the Enlightenment ideal of critical rationality but the romantic one of transformational destruction, which not only spurns men as they are but indeed derives its energy from a sense of just how large a leap that destruction makes possible. In imagining a fierce combustion in which all of the unstable and transitory elements of the speaker's personal pride are incinerated Jefferson's rhetoric looks forward to the pyre of the books and talismanic objects of his youth that Warren, in an act at once of self-purgation and

fierce pride, commits to the flames in “Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth,” published more than a quarter of a century later. To behold man is at once to destroy and to inflate the self, to be nothing and to be nothing but “joy,” always in Warren’s lexicon a charged but ambiguous term, conveying as much transgression as promise.

It only takes the space of a stanza break for Jefferson to undercut that joy, and to tie it to a personal urgency, the necessity of responding to the sense of flagging vitality that goes with middle age. Yet even here the excitement of the destructive and transformative moment persists past the later attempt to minimize it, as the rhythmic energy of Jefferson’s chant, underlined by alliteration, shines through its ostensibly skeptical rhetoric:

And thus my minotaur. There at the blind
 Blank labyrinthine turn of my personal time,
 I met the beast. And the time I met it was--
 At least, it seems so now--that first moment
 When the alacrity of blood stumbles and all natural joy
 Sees Nature but as mirror for its fear,
 And therefore, to be joy, must deny Nature
 And leap beyond man’s natural bourne and constriction
 To find some justification for the natural.
 Yes, then I met the beast. Well, better, indeed,
 Had it been the manifest beast and the circumstantial
 Avatar of destruction. But no beast then: the towering
 Definition, angelic, arrogant, abstract,
 Greaved in glory, thewed with light, the bright
 Brow tall as dawn. I could not see the eyes.
 So seized the pen, and in the upper room,
 With the excited consciousness that I was somehow
 Purged, rectified, and annealed, and my past annulled
 And fate confirmed, wrote. And the bell struck
 Far off in darkness, and the watch called out.
 Time came, we signed the document, went home.
 Slept, and I woke to the new self, and new doom.
 I had not seen the eyes of that bright apparition.
 I had been blind with light. That was my doom.
 I did not know its eyes were blind.
 Therefore all followed: the fat was in the fire.
 Therefore all followed: and I who once had said
 All liberty is bought with blood, now must say
 All truth is bought with blood, and the blood is ours
 Or we shall have no truth, and only the truth can make us free,
 And doom is always domestic, it purrs like a cat,
 And the only traitor lurks in some sweet corner of the blood.
 Therefore I walk and wake, and I cannot die.
 (9-10)

The key to Jefferson’s disillusionment is not that his idealization was merely mistaken, that mankind is still more beast than angel; the key is that idealization is the instrument of beastliness and that the beastliness and the idealization share the same charisma. If the point were merely that Jefferson has discovered that he was mistaken about human nature the angelic apparition

would be unequal to some grim reality, Theseus would be unequal to the Minotaur; but in Jefferson's view the apparition is itself the Minotaur, and the promise of human perfection is the occasion and the energizing power of human darkness, which always seeks to free men's minds by cutting off their heads.

Jefferson's sexual revulsion is revulsion not only against physical sexuality but against love, and it is the fact that sexuality has something to do with love, not the reverse, which offends him. For love is vexed with what he refers to as "the essential polarity of possibility," which is to say, that it is bound not by paralyzing ambivalences but by extravagant acts which serve opposite purposes. Aunt Cat (surely the most horrible Mammy in Southern literature and a kind of counterexample to the idealization of that figure white people have sometimes consoled themselves with the memory of whenever they have wished to extenuate their racial complicities) loves Lilburn, but that love is contaminated by jealousy of Lucy, and it is that love which at last leads her, ambiguously, twice to betray Lilburn to the authorities, and then, unambiguously, to grieve over his death. Lucy Jefferson loves Lilburn, but can't forgive him for beating George, and indeed is so shocked by that first beating that it seems to cause her death almost immediately afterwards, a death which her shade interprets as a dark punishment of her son. Lilburn murders poor George as a kind of proof of his love of the dead Lucy -- George has been stealing her spoons and breaking her pitchers, and only by taking hyperbolic revenge can Lilburn shout down his doubt about whether he loved his mother, since his beating George in the first place seems to have caused her death. And Lilburn tricks Isham into murdering him as a way of proving his, Isham's, love for his brother.

Later, when Jefferson reflects on the way Lilburn's love for his mother had led him to murder, RPW rebukes him for bringing up the sentimental term. Jefferson's reply articulates one of the motivating claims of the poem:

Love!

I apologize for introducing that word
 Unthinking in some automatic and old-fashioned way.
 No, I'm now ironical at your expense,
 Or try to be--which is a way of saying--
 Of saying what? Of saying what I cannot say,
 Or bear to say. Well, God help me, I'll say it:
 I have long since come to the firm and considered conclusion
 That love, all love, all kinds, descriptions, and shapes,
 Is but a mask to hide the brute face of fact,
 And that fact is the immitigable ferocity of self,
 And once you find it in your blood, and find even
 That the face of love beneath your face at the first
 Budding of the definitive delight--
 That every face, even that one, is but a mirror
 For your own ferocity, a mirror blurred
 And breathed upon and slicked and slimed with love,
 And through the interstices and gouts of that
 Hypocritical moisture, the cold eyes spy out
 From the mirror's cold heart, and thus self spies on self
 In that unsummerable arctic of the human alienation.

Your cunning could invent or heart devise.
(29)

Under pressure, “virtue,” “joy,” “glory,” and their congeners turn into a kind of dark gnosis, which solves the problem of the duality of good and evil by transcending it. It is the concept of virtue which links the sexual and political themes of *Brother to Dragons*. The reason sexual thinking provides an entry into thinking about politics is that it presents the central duality of Warren’s thinking about both subjects in a stark and immediate form, for in it the highest and lowest, kindest and cruelest, most angelic and most vicious parts of human nature are so intimately intertwined that they are not only inextricable but indeed are hard to tell from each other. Prophetic and transformative political idealism, like that Jefferson describes in himself in his opening tirade, likewise has in it opposite but indissoluble tendencies.

Warren turns to sexuality first because he wishes to head off a plausible but to his mind mistaken view of the political theme. Certainly at first glance the easiest use one might wish to make of the Rocky Hill tragedy is to argue that America has never been able to live up to its heroic promises. What Lilburn Lewis did is not in any way a consequence of the prophetic ambitions embodied in Jefferson’s Declaration; indeed, Lilburn’s immediate motivations -- defending his mother’s crockery -- seem trivial without the extended analysis of love Jefferson and RPW give it. Likewise, the other racially tinged crimes mentioned in the book -- the murder of the other slave in Smithland, and the murder of the Indian -- likewise seem the product of squalid humanity rather than acts of an angelic imagination gone sour. Similar cases could be made about most of the other political items in the poet’s bill of particulars -- the Pinkerton assassins at Ford, the plunder of the West, the Haymarket martyrs, the condemnation of Sacco and Vanzetti (this last dropped from the 1979 edition). Only the slaughter at the Wilderness in May 1864 (a subject of interest to Warren elsewhere in his oeuvre) lends itself to the reading Jefferson suggests in his opening tirade. Warren reads most of these other stories slightly against the grain, arguing that they show not a failure of the American democracy to live up to its ideals but rather that those ideals themselves have a demonic side. Only by treating sexual desire as something at once angelic and demonic can Warren make perfectly clear what he sees to be the price of similarly angelic political ambitions.

The point of the sexual theme in *Brother to Dragons* is to point out the fatal attraction of a certain kind of political idealism, the fatal attraction of a gnostic embrace of what the poem with dark irony keeps referring to as joy or virtue. Ultimately *Brother to Dragons* comes to redefine these terms in a more traditional way, seeking to turn this dark joy into a more recognizable moral wisdom. When Lucy asks Jefferson to take Lilburn’s hand and recognize both his inner and outer kinship with him, she is quite right to do so, and when Jefferson recoils from this she is also quite right to describe his act as a coldly proud repetition of what Lilburn had himself done in hot rage. While the logic of the rebuke to moral vanity here is clear, and while the moral grandeur of the recognition of complicity that the poem endorses, in a passage famously cancelled in 1979, as “the beginning of innocence,” is also clear, it is not certain that that reconciliation can completely lay to rest the urgencies that made it necessary. It is not that there is much room to doubt that moral wisdom has to begin in the mutual acknowledgment of fallenness, nor that the rebuke of that recognition is a necessary precondition for taming the

destructive pride of a heroic moral ambition and for saving one's self from the inner demonism of one's own idealism. Certainly if there really is innocence of a non-demonic kind the recognition of complicity is its beginning. Certainly if there is virtue of a non-demonic kind a chastened sense of one's own possibility of inner darkness is its precondition. The problem is that such a recognition would not seem sufficient to break the power of that demonic idealism if it is truly as attractive as the poem attests it to be. The chastened self-knowledge embraced here, like the chastened self-knowledge embraced by Jack Burden at the end of *All the King's Men*, has a strongly persuasive moral logic, but it is one that has compelling force only for those who are not at the moment in the grip of demonic idealism. For those who are within that grip, it seems to ask a fatal sacrifice of meaning, and must seem, as it seems to Jeremiah Beaumont at the end of *World Enough and Time*, a kind of counsel of despair. It explains why one should resist that kind of idealism but not how to cure one's self of it. Those would seem to be different things, as understanding how destructive addictive drugs are (something addicts perhaps know better than anyone else) and knowing how to resist their attraction once one has given into it are different things. One of the reasons the ending of *Brother to Dragons*, like the ending of *All the King's Men*, sometimes seems unpersuasive is that it imagines that an accurate diagnosis is a cure rather than an essential precondition of a cure. We are in need right now of a way to persuade ascetic idealists who serve the good only through death that it is better to live for ideals than kill for them, and it is hard to imagine how the argument about recognizing the complicity of all fallen humans, true as it is, might ever get across to people of such views, since it must seem to them only to be a form of abject self-abasement. If they know that we are all complicit in fallenness, it is one of the things they can't stand, one of the things that drives them to do what they do.

Characters who cannot separate the angelic and demonic aspects of their own political idealism (perhaps because they cannot really be separated at all) are a common feature of Warren's political thought. Jeremiah Beaumont of *World Enough and Time*, which Warren wrote during the composition of *Brother to Dragons*, is perhaps his fullest development of this type. Certainly the tendency of ascetic idealism to turn demonic is well attested -- one thinks of Cromwell, of Robespierre, or of Lenin and Stalin, and certainly our own age does not lack for similar figures.³ Warren was aware, as Melville was before him, and Hannah Arendt in his own day, of that natural history of revolution which seems to have doomed revolutionary traditions from 1789 to 1989 to repeat the stages of the French Revolution, the Terror succeeding the Gironde, and Directory and Empire following with a kind of inevitability. That the American Revolution might take this course was one of the fears that informed Melville's *Clarel*, indeed the temptation to align the terror and the Civil War, the Empire and the Gilded Age, would have been a hard temptation for Melville to resist. Warren is less tempted by this view than Melville is, more frequently citing American folly and materialism (as in "Brightness of Distance" in 1957, or "Bicentennial" in 1976, or "New Dawn" in 1985, where even slovenly materialism has its hellish aspects).

³ It is hard to say whether Hitler ought to be on this list or not. Unlike the others he seemed to understand that his motives were demonic and to embrace that demonism with joyful abandon, and if his followers saw themselves as sadistic purifiers they also saw themselves as beyond good and evil.

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