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“Always the truth, and always the lie”: Language as
Symbol in *Brother to Dragons*

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“Poetry is more than fantasy and is committed to the obligation of trying to say something, however obliquely, about the human condition”¹—at least, this is what Robert Penn Warren suggests in his foreword to *Brother to Dragons*, inviting praise for what Frederick P. W. McDowell calls Warren’s “moralist’s zeal,” his “tense brooding over human motivation and human destiny.”² No doubt there’s merit for such praise, but I would like to begin by taking very seriously the form and wording of Warren’s statement of purpose for poetry. McDowell takes that sentence to be about Warren’s choice of theme, and it is important to notice that, for him, poetry is admirably anchored in the human condition rather than the realm of fantasy. But the definition Warren posits here, I would submit, is more tenuous than solid. Indeed, he does not claim that poetry is *anchored* in the human condition at all, but rather that it is “committed to the obligation of trying to say something, however obliquely about” it. This is quite different. The link he actually commits to is not a solid one, is neither definitive nor asserted with moral “zeal.” Instead, it has a kind of hesitancy, strung through a parade of rather anxious and tentative verbs. I want to notice this peculiarity in the foreword, because it raises questions about the poem that follows. What is the relationship between poetry and human experience? And what do we do when we try to describe it?

Clearly, this is a problematic that fascinates Warren. The poet himself becomes one of the characters in *Brother to Dragons*—named R.P.W., described as “the writer of this poem,” and seen in moments of writerly distress, trying to find a form

¹ Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979), xiii.

² Frederick P. W. McDowell, “Psychology and Theme in *Brother to Dragons*,” *PMLA* 70 (1955), 565.

to fit the plot and interrupting Thomas Jefferson's sweeping metaphors about "the old charade where man dreams man can put down / The objectified bad and then feel good" to say things such as, "Yes, I have read the records, even intended / To make a ballad of them, long ago [. . .]." He then quotes that original version:

*The two brothers sat by the sagging fire,
Lilburne and Isham sat by the fire,
For it was lonesome weather.
"Isham," said Lilburne, "shove the jug nigher,
For it is lonesome weather,
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..."*

It began about like that, but the form
Was not adequate: the facile imitation
Of folk simplicity would scarcely serve.
First, any pleasure we take in folksiness
Is a pleasure of snobbish superiority or neurotic yearning.
Second, the ballad-like action is not explained,
If explainable at all, by anything in the action.
If at all, it must be by a more complex form, by our
Complicities and our sad virtue, too.

Such meta-poetry seems an invitation to view Warren's notes on the poem as extensions of the poem. But here, this writerly problem becomes the very meat of the moralist's problem that Jefferson has raised. Warren has scarcely opened the question of finding proper form when Jefferson seizes upon that discourse and deepens it. He says:

There is no form to hold
Reality and its insufferable intransigence.
I know, for I once thought to contrive
A form to hold the purity of man's hope.³

³ Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State, 1979), 30-31; subsequent quotations will be cited by page number in the text.

By problematizing the relationship of form to reality, Warren has drawn a parallel between the voice of Thomas Jefferson within the poem—struggling with the unfulfilled legacy of the Declaration of Independence—and the role of the poet himself.

But if this parallel is there, it is not perfect. R.P.W. and Jefferson are not having the same thoughts by accident; they're having a conversation. When they echo one another, it isn't necessarily due to any deep internal alignment; it's often because they hear one another speak, and are stealing words and metaphors, shifting their sense to make a point. Thus, what might look like a striking parallel in a novel with an omniscient narrator is shown here to be a coincidence of words that are always inadequate to what they describe, something latched upon haphazardly as the characters grope for explanations amid whatever is at hand. To put it another way, what might look like a real and deep connection between R.P.W. and Jefferson can be equally well-explained as a peculiarity of the form, or a coincidence of wording.

Warren seems to speak to this effect in his insistence that *Brother to Dragons*, though written in dialogue, is not a play. It is not a text governed by characters' psychology or motives, but rather a poem where, as he writes, the characters

meet at an unspecified place and unspecified time and try to make sense of the action in which they were involved. We may take them to appear and disappear as their urgencies of argument swell and subside. (xv)

Not the people, then, but the words themselves seem to have agency here, and the necessary action of the drama is not really an action, but rather the explosive expression of argument. Language does not describe action here, language *is* action. The characters grasp at goodness and truth, but like the poet, their groping is always confined to words.

And often, they must find that language is not up to the task at hand—the very centrality of words makes them unreliable. Jefferson is overwhelmed by his own knowledge at

the opening of the poem, but his effort to tell his story “quietly, in system” (5) is continually derailed by the symbolic weight of his own words. He begins:

In Philadelphia—delegates by accident, in essence men,
Marmosets in mantles, beasts in boots, parrots in pantaloons,
[. . .] tangents of our father’s pitiful lust
At midnight heat or dawn-bed ease of a Sunday [. . .]. (5-6)

Before he arrives at the meat of his sentence, he is thrown off track. Though he wants to talk about the grandeur of the Second Continental Congress, naming the essence of men loses Jefferson in the beast-like associations he has learned to draw to them, and lands him in pitiful lust and midnight heat—as if forced into free-association by his own words. “[T]oo much crowds in,” as he says, “To break the thread of discourse [. . .]” To be sure, climbing back on track is difficult. He says:

But what I had meant to say, we were only ourselves
Packed with our personal lusts and languors, lost,
Every man-jack of us, in some blind alley, enclave,
Crank cul-de-sac, couloir, or corridor [. . .].

Again, he tries to begin his story. and again, the rhythm of the passage gallops into alliteration. But he seems to stop himself this time—the rhythm changes drastically; he catches the metaphor before it gets dirty and forces it out of the gutter. It becomes, he says a

Crank cul-de-sac, couloir, or corridor
Of Time. Or Self.
And in that dark, no thread,
Airy as breath by an Ariadne’s fingers forged [. . .].

He lets the image of dark corridors land him, instead of in his father’s sweaty sheets, in the airiness of mythology, in Crete. What had been dirty and unspeakable is now made distant, elevated, poetic. But not for long. “Listen!” he says, “the foulness sucks like mire.” He cannot elevate his mind to speak about the labyrinth without finding, once again, the beastliness of

the minotaur within it:

He waits. He is the infamy of Crete.
 He is the midnight's enormity. And is
 Our brother, our darling brother.

Animal darkness is not only irresistible now; the myth has made it sympathetic. But this goes further.

[. . .] And Pasiphaë!
 Dear mother, mother of all, poor Pasiphaë—
 Huddled and hunched in the cow's hide,
 Laced, latched, thonged up, and breathlessly ass-humped
 For the ecstatic stroke. (6)

The mythological parallel, first intended to turn focus away from sticky and midnight encounters, has landed us in a kind of inescapable extended metaphor that bottoms out into bestiality. The myth extends and implicates beyond its own airiness, and there is no avoiding the breathless ass-hump at its climax. What's more, we're made to pity, even love its engineer. "We have not loved you less, poor Pasiphaë," Jefferson says. But here, again, he catches himself, jolts out of his reverie, and insists his way out of an implicating metaphor that has become overwhelming and uncomfortable, bringing himself back into the realm of fact. "But no, God no!" he says, "—I tell you my mother's name was Jane" (7). He struggles against the weight of his own metaphor, and only by renouncing it for bland fact does he escape.

There is often something powerful, but also frightening and uncontrollable, about symbols in the American romantic canon. We can think of Melville's white whale, or the birthmark in Hawthorne's story of the same name. But here, that inescapability is given another turn. Since there is no narrator, since the action of this text *is* its narrative, *Brother to Dragons* involves symbols that are never externally imposed, but always internally manufactured. The takeover of symbols becomes simultaneous to their creation through language, and fundamentally implicated in the act of communication. Though Ahab and Aylmer are subject to madness as described in

language, Jefferson's distress is positively architected by it. His metaphor catches him up in a pattern of thought as seductive and labyrinthine as the one he wants to describe, and he is lost until we catch him with his pants down, embarrassed, thinking of Pasiphaë. "Yes, what was I saying?" he says, "Language betrays. / There are no words to tell Truth" (7).

From Jefferson, that statement is a loaded one, stuffed with the fallen promises of the Declaration of Independence. If, as I've been trying to argue, *Brother to Dragons* is preoccupied with the way language operates as a symbol, Jefferson embodies that central ambivalence. We know him, historically, as a figure who built the foundations of American experience out of language, and symbolized man's potential with words. But in *Brother to Dragons*, the character we call Jefferson is always tortured by what he tries to say, and cannot control or trust it. Words have been Jefferson's way of building symbol, and envisioning change. As Warren renders him, however, his afterlife is tortured by that capability, for it spells the distance between the potentials of language and its reality. Language is no longer a foundational tool, no longer capable of exposing and elevating the truth of humanity. It has become instead an uncontrollable and malicious force, capable of betrayal.

But how shall we assess whether this idea, of being mastered by language, comes to more than an assertion of one of the common facts of words, that they have associations beyond their use on a particular occasion? "Certainly," as Stanley Cavell writes in *Disowning Knowledge*, "[. . .] we must not deny [this]":

A word's reach exceeds a speaker's grasp, or what's a language for?

This is to say: words recur, in unfortellable contexts; there would be no words otherwise; and no intentions otherwise, none beyond the, let me say, natural expression of instinct [. . .]. Unpredictable recurrence is not a sign of language's ambiguity but is a fact of language as such, that there are words.⁴

⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 231.

What I've wanted to call the uncontrollable nature of language, then, and what I've named Jefferson's torturer, could be seen as the fact of language itself—indeed, what allows for the kind of expansive possibility that he builds into the Declaration of Independence.

But surely, *Brother to Dragons* attests some consciousness of this. The poem, as we said earlier, is structured as a dialogue, where characters respond to and build rhetoric from one another's words, twisting and reusing them for their own purposes. Yet we need not write this off as a dumb coincidence invited by the endless ambiguity of language. It could speak, rather, to the powerful centrality of unpredictable recurrence, an inclusiveness of expression that is anchored deeply to both the form and content of the poem.

I'd like to think back, for an example, to the first instance of word-twisting in the dialogue. Jefferson begins the poem with a declaration of self, then spins into a lofty abstraction on his own narcissism:

Kneeling in that final thirst, I thrust
Down my face, I see come glimmering upward,
White, white out of the absolute dark of depth,
My face. And it is only human.

Have you ever tried to kiss that face in the mirror?
Or – ha, ha – has it ever tried to kiss you? Well,
You are only human. Is that a boast? (5)

R.P.W.'s first line picks up this last word, and throws it back at him: "Well, I've read your boast / Cut in stone, on the mountain, off in Virginia." Though he isn't quite shifting the sense of the word, he is, I would argue, grounding it in reality again. Throughout this passage, we might note that Jefferson's focus shifts into abstraction, leaving him unimplicated. Though he begins by admitting his own humanity, his rhetoric allows him to generalize away from his own specific person, and he winds up accusing a distant and universalized abstract pronoun. "*You* are only human," he says, then questions an imagined boastfulness

of his imagined subject. When R.P.W. speaks, it is with a violent counter-assertion of the concrete, the familiar. Jefferson's epitaph truly *is* at Monticello, legible, real, and cut into stone. R.P.W. uses the recurrence of language to bring Jefferson down from the clouds, attacking his epitaph as an embodiment of delusion, self-justification, and false solidity. What makes Jefferson so tragic is that he is painfully aware of this. "In senility / and moments of indulgent fiction," he says to R.P.W., "I might try to defend my old definition of man" (5). But the ugly and indulgent moments are magnetic to him, pulling him from glory and expansiveness. Here, that fact becomes our point of interest. *Brother to Dragons* forces us to confront the uncontrolled interrelation between the hopefulness of language and its ugly underside—both the potential for self-invention, and the tendency to slip into self-justification; both endless mutability, and a need for definitions set in stone.

But this manifests itself in unexpected ways. The earlier image of Pasiphaë and her bull, though Jefferson falls into it deeply and desperately, is quickly dissolved, as he reminds us of his mother's name. But, curiously, when his language runs away with him, it is his gross usage of the minotaur image, and not his subsequent return to the factual and controlled, that tells the story effectively. Indeed, the dark animality of the minotaur and the uneasy sexuality of Pasiphaë are the elements meaningfully echoed throughout the text. The moment that reads false is not the moment he falls into the magnetism of symbolic logic, but the moment he attempts to rein it in to protect himself from a true investment in the implications of his words. When he comes back from metaphoric heights, though we might say he returns to reality, he also returns to clear definition, and perhaps this is worst of all. By renouncing the Pasiphaë metaphor, Jefferson does something similar to the creation of epitaph—he shuns the uncontrolled and unpredictable quality of language as symbol, and uses it instead as a tool to create a reductive and self-justifying fiction. A poetic use of imagery, on the other hand, takes into account its unlimited recurrence, and breaks down the delineations between person and myth, brother and bull. Reliance

on concrete fact builds Jefferson a pedestal, and divides him from any experience that he might not judge to be his own. But his overwhelming metaphor does the opposite: it creates links, and enables the very identification and complicity with experience that is, in *Brother to Dragons*, is as close to salvation as you can get. Language can tyrannize with firm definitions, but it can also democratize narrative space with boundlessly implicating metaphor.

“[W]ords are,” as Jefferson says in an earlier version of the poem, “always the truth, and always the lie.”⁵ And a yearning for resolution to the problem presented by language, not the resolution itself, becomes the stuff of new possibility—a dialogue, and not an epitaph. Indeed, grouping the admirable and reprehensible around one extremely mutable signifier—language—is perfectly germane to the world of this poem. Rather than asserting the dominance of any one interpretation, Warren democratizes narrative space, and lets many interpretations of one event converse. But this is not paradox; it is something more considered. To put it as R.P.W. does to Jefferson, “[. . .]it is not paradox, but the best hope.”⁶

⁵ Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*, ed. John Burt (1953; 2008), 3.

⁶ Warren, *Brother to Dragons* (1953; 2008), 141.