THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT:

ROBERT PENN WARREN'S EXISTENTIAL JOURNEY

by

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(Under the Direction of Hugh Ruppersburg)

ABSTRACT

Over Robert Penn Warren's lifetime, he won almost every prestigious award a writer can win, for novels, volumes of long narrative poetry, volumes of lyric poetry, biography, social criticism, literary criticism, definitive pedagogical texts, drama. His work effected deep and far-ranging influences on American education, American history, and American literature. Yet, despite the fact that Warren declared himself to be a "philosopher-poet," critical scholarship on Warren has not persuasively established what sort of philosophy he embraced. My study argues that Robert Penn Warren was an Existentialist philosopher as well as poet, and close examination of what was in many ways his most important work, Brother to Dragons, yields clear evidence of Warren's truest philosophical affinities.

Brother to Dragons depicts the historical incident of Thomas Jefferson's nephew Lilburne Lewis, who was convicted of dismembering one of his slaves in a night of horror. Jefferson never spoke of this incident, and either did not know of it or would not admit to it. In Warren's epic treatment of the long poem, Jefferson, the icon of the triumph of Enlightenment and Romantic Idealism, must confront his nephew Lilburne, who is iconic of Naturalism's most debased possibility in human life. In this confrontation, Warren works through the dialectical problems that obsessed him, and we find them addressed in Existentialist terms. Life and death, existence and nothingness, freedom and finitude, beauty and horror, the light and the darkness, the individual and the community, past and present, truth and lies, the existential abdication and the heroic act, salvation and damnation: Warren uses Existentialist philosophy and conventions to explore and then resolve (insofar as paradox gets resolved) the innate absurdity and holiness of human life.

In a close reading of Brother to Dragons, my study centers on the theme of man's tragic nature, or original sin, and applies Existentialist philosophy and its writers to show how Robert Penn Warren developed and created Brother to Dragons as his own philosophical manifesto, declaring his ontology as well.

INDEX WORDS: Existentialism, Robert Penn Warren, poetry, Original Sin, Brother to Dragons

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For Peggy and Roy Thaxton,

the saint and the soldier

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INTRODUCTION

The trail of the human serpent lies over everything.

William James

In poetry Robert Penn Warren gained his highest achievement as a writer, and his truest voice as a man. For Robert Penn Warren, his poetry and his humanity were all part of the same phenomenon of being, the process of making sense of experience. Warren is not a confessional poet, but he does enact himself, risk himself, in the pages of his long lifetime of poetry. Harold Bloom says "Clearly [Warren] is not one of the poets who unfold, like Stevens, but one of those who develop, like Yeats" (Edgar ASRM "Sunset Hawk: Warren's Poetry and Tradition" 207). The comparison of Warren with Yeats is apt: both poets seem to carry on a life-long grudge match, limned in almost fanatical love, with a raw-faced, slouching sort of God and His terrible and wonderful material world. And neither poet would have himself distinguished between life and art. They even assessed their lives in and through their poetry; both poets express the agon of men who, entrusted with the birthright of the Fathers, contribute "for a barren passion's sake/ . . .nothing but a book"

(Yeats "Pardon Old Fathers"), and "the only/ Gift I have given: teeth set on edge" (Warren "The Leaf").

One of the reasons Robert Penn Warren can set teeth on edge lies in the nakedness of his longing to "know," his fierce commitment to seeing and hearing what he can recognize as truth, no matter how ugly or dangerous it may be. Warren saw himself as a philosopher-poet, inextricably both at once. In his excellent biography *Robert Penn Warren*, Joseph Blotner describes the young boy who loved to read such writers as Cicero and Virgil. As an undergraduate at Vanderbilt, the sixteen-year-old Warren chose to major in English and minor in Philosophy, and took extensive coursework in the latter as well as the former. Warren's continual scholarship of searching, resulting in his prodigious learning, was as much a part of his life-work as his own writing. Warren declares his definition of a poet-philosopher:

> The philosophical novelist, or poet, is one for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level [of knowing value], for whom images always fall into a dialectical configuration, for whom the urgency of experience . . . is the urgency to know the meaning of experience. (in Frank MCV "Romance, Reality in RPW" 49).

Just as Bloom described, Warren's work evolved as his knowledge and experience grew. And as his poetry found its own voice, Warren's commitment to both philosophy and poetry grew as well.

He came to believe that poetry could redeem lost knowledge, and further, a very lost American culture.

But Warren's corpus contains its own paradox. Though his work deepened and matured, and form and idea changed over time, his poetry contains an elemental impulse--a "nature" of its own--that does not fundamentally change. From the first to the last, his dialogues with world asked questions of temporality and eternity, history and the present, the self and the other, necessity and possibility, beauty and horror, emptiness and fulfillment. His earliest concerns remain with him throughout his life; his apprehension of these concerns changes as it grows. Warren's own motif for his life is the ancient metaphor of the journey, to “walk in the world.” Like many of Warren's images, this motif figures strongly in Judaeo-Christian tradition. Both the New and especially the Old Testaments contain numerous references to the self "walking" the road of actual experience. The metaphor implies volition and choice: it is an existential obligation of what Sartre terms engagement, being in, as well as of, world. Yet the walk is not wholly an end in itself, because it also serves as a means. Warren will refer to his journey as a mission, himself as a “witness.” He walks to find his peculiar place to come to, and for Robert Penn Warren the journey and its destination are the same. He seeks to know the Truth of Being:

> You stand in the dark, heart even now filling, and
> think of
> A boy who, drunk with the perfume of elder blossoms

> And the massiveness of moonrise, stood
> In a lone lane, and cried out,
> In a rage of joy, to seize, and squeeze, significance from
> What life is, whatever it is. Now
> High above the maples the moon presides. The first bat mathematically zigzags the stars.
> You fling down the cigarette butt. Set heel to it.
> It is time to go in. (NSP 23-85 "Rumor at Twilight" 18)

Long ago the boy Warren, immersed and intoxicated with the sensual loveliness of the night, cries into the darkness for knowledge of the meaning of his existence. On another night the man, now elderly, drinks in the same loveliness over which the moon still presides, and after all the experience of his years "heart even now fills." His heart cries for the same significance, even if he has by now learned not to wait for an answer. Warren’s existential questioning persists, and the answers remain elusive.

It is interesting that critics often fault Warren for moralizing, when in fact his "answers" are most often deliberately qualified ("perhaps," "it may be") and speculative. Warren refused the easy answers in his refusal to be linked with any received system of belief. Instead he relies on the hope that experience will teach him real lessons, if not quiet his unrest. And though Warren's political associations with the

right-leaning Fugitives are often misread and overstated, we nevertheless can see his ideological development, the relative regionalism of his earliest Agrarian ideas widening to a more universal outlook, and maturing to a more penetrating concern with whatever verities there may be in the human heart. Warren's own continual *crie de coeur* is "after virtue." But what do truth and virtue really mean to Warren? What are his categories, and upon what foundation of beliefs do his convictions rest?

Robert Penn Warren's life and his writing spanned most of a century of change, but despite his insistence on a kind of doctrinal privacy, the aesthetic and thematic preoccupations of his writing and especially his poetry reveal a remarkably consistent philosophy. It is a way of seeing, thinking, and acting that served him all his life: Robert Penn Warren embraced the totality of experience as his existential project. More than once Warren declared himself to be, not a believer, but a "yearner." The purpose of this study is to definitively place Warren's yearning, his philosophic seeking and the poetry that follows it, in the tradition of the philosophy of Existentialism. Warren would never have named himself as an Existentialist; but then, especially after his dissatisfaction at being called a Fugitive and a New Critic, he would never label himself in any terms at all. His work, however, reveals him to be joined with the tough-minded, strong-willed ranks of thinkers and artists who worked with the realm of Being. History insists on naming their inquiries Existentialism, yet, like Warren, all but a small few

of these writers reject any labels of goose-step rank or categories of "ism."

Several literary critics have noted the existentialist tenor of Warren's work. But the strength of the presence of this philosophic stance has never been fully explored in, or rigorously applied to, the body of poetry itself. I offer a new way to read Warren's poetry, not as sometimes-Naturalism or sometimes-Romanticism or any of the other categories that leave our readings of Warren too incoherent and partial. To see Warren as a sort of polyphonic philosophic borrower and to stop with his claim of being "only" a yearner does not take us very far into understanding the unity of his work. How he yearned, what impulses and convictions shaped his dialectic of world, and most importantly, what he discovered on this journey can be illuminated by surveying the existentialist orientation of his thought. My efforts are directed, simply, toward a better understanding of the fullness of the vision of Robert Penn Warren. Warren sums up his personal philosophy, and succinctly points to his existential criteria:

> [I am here concerned with] continuity--the self as a development in time, with a past and a future; and responsibility, the self as a moral identity, recognizing itself capable of action worthy of praise or blame. . . [these meditations are] an utterance of a rather personal sort, a personal exploration. . . For all of my adult years my central and obsessive

> concern has been with "poetry," and I scarcely find it strange that I should seek some connection between that concern and the "real" world. (Warren DP Foreward xiii)

Typically, Warren asserts that his philosophy belongs to an individual perspective.

Despite his alleged conservatism Warren is an iconoclast, taking careful aim at sacred cows. The philosophy of existentialism is similarly (and fundamentally) resistant to being defined or codified. Its primary characteristic is its extreme individualism, a mode of thinking that rejects imposed, external authority and instead demands that each individual be his own philosophy. Robert Penn Warren approved this maverick approach to knowing and made it his own, so much so that he is "the" existential poet of American letters, in the way that Rilke is for Europe. Cleanth Brooks called Warren's work "impassioned dialectic":

> not tailored to fit a thesis. . .it is inductive; it explores the human situation and tests against the fullness of human experience our various abstract statements about it (RPWBD "RPW: Experience Redeemed" 13).

John Crowe Ransom believed that with Warren poetics could not be separated from "statement." What Brooks and Ransom are describing is precisely the Existentialist method, a dialectic privileging experience and action as the basis of selfhood, and

thereby privileging art as method—“work”—as well as passion. In *Plato and Augustine*, Karl Jaspers describes the aesthetic dialectic:

> the movement of thought is kindled by opposition. . . the contradictions clash like flint and steel and the spark they strike is the sought-for knowledge. . . dialectic by intermediate concepts elucidates the divergent by establishing an intervening bond. Hence the importance of the "between" [and also] of the moment. Contradictions becomes a spur to motion, the medium in which opposites occur is being developed, and in both a driving power toward Being is experienced. (PA 38-35)

These contradictions indeed serve to drive Warren's thinking. Even a cursory examination of his writing, including his prose, reveals Warren's dialectical structures, as his sentences as well as his poetic lines configure themselves around oppositions (for example, the discussion of "past and future . . . praise or blame" above).

For Warren, Being is in constant tension. Trying to explain the culture shock afflicting twentieth-century Southerners, Warren also explains his own process, how his writing grew out of "imbalance" and the force it exerts:

> [Our] loyalties and pieties--real values, mind you—were sometimes staked against [our] religious and moral sense, equally real values. There isn't much

> vital imagination, it seems to me, that doesn't come from this sort of shock, imbalance, need to "relive," redefine life. (PAW 11)

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger posits the idea of "thrownness" (*Geworfenhelt*) by which human beings are foisted upon themselves, knowing nothing about who or what they are or what they are dealing with, yet utterly responsible for the resultant burden of "self." Humankind experiences thrownness as shock, terrible in that all we do know is that we are temporal, "Being-toward-death" (174). Heidegger terms this existential situation "ontological anxiety," and says that herein is the ultimate source of fear, or dread.

As every poet knows, poetry is all about reliving experience. Robert Penn Warren's poetry is especially animated with the life-blood of its poet, experiencing his thrownness. Heidegger distinguishes between Being (*Sein*), the "ground" of all life, and *Dasein*, conscious human being. Earlier the German Idealists posited Dasein, but set it against *Was-sein*, "essence." Heidegger always places existence before essence; moreover he holds that the division between states is illegitimate, since essence can and will only be understood as the human being participating in the world. Thus he says "Dasein always understands itself in terms of existence [and of] its possibility to be itself or not to be itself" (BT 55). The only qualifier or "horizon," the outer limit of this understanding, is time, and temporality. Warren's poetry reiterates the existential concept

of the possibilities and limits of Dasein as Heidegger explains it:

> Dasein [human existence] tends to understand its own Being in terms of that to which it is [most] closely related—the "world." In Dasein itself and therewith in its own understanding of being. . .the way the world is understood is ontologically reflected back upon the interpretation of Dasein. (BT 59)

Existentialism marks a radical departure from the influences of Descartes, and of Kant. We do not "understand" only through the *cogito*, because reason alone is insufficient to reveal the nature of Being. Rather, we feel, breathe, live Being as experience; we walk in it every day of our lives, and only thereby come to any knowledge of what Being might mean. Robert Penn Warren's existential seeking as a philosopher-poet is an ontological seeking. It is true that a few Existentialist apologists may seem to reject ontological questions, like Frederick Karl and Leo Hamalian in *The Existential Imagination*, who maintain that

> [existential] 'answers' are not technical problems in metaphysics, epistemology, or ontology, but those concerned with the welfare of man here and now, with that part of himself which he cannot escape (15).

Their remark describes a false opposition: why does ontological questioning, about the nature of our existence, preclude a vital participation in the "here and now"? The majority of Existentialist writers refuse such a division. In *Studies in*

Christian Existentialism, theologist John Macquarrie refers to Heidegger's language as a bridge from the exclusively existential to the ontological, and Denis Donoghue says that John Crowe Ransom, Warren's mentor, desired for a scholar to be "a critic who would assume that the writing of a poem is a desperate ontological or metaphysical maneuver" (SERPB Introduction). As conscious human beings, one of our great gifts is the desire to know meaning. Moreover, Robert Penn Warren is doing everything, all at once--ontology, epistemology, eschatology--because he is a true poet first, seeking after a poet's truth, and the "ologies" will be a part of what he ultimately finds. But, as Warren says, "I'd rather start with the world":

> You dream that somewhere, somehow, you may embrace
> The world in its fullness and threat, and feel, like
> Jacob, at last
> The merciless grasp of unwordable grace
> Which has no truth to tell of future or past—
>
> But only life's instancy. . .
> No word? No sign? Or is there a time and place—
> Ice-peak or heat-simmered distance--where heart, like
> eye,
> May open? (NSP 23-85 "Youthful Truth Seeker" 118)

If any hope for knowledge exists, it lies in concrete life. Warren longs for a revelation of life's instancy, the truth of Being, and he knows that it lies somewhere, somehow in the time

and place of reality. Not in age-old and idealized belaboring of essence, not in theories or postulates, but in the actuality of the sole avenue available to us -- ice peak, heat-simmered distance, the luminous moments of human being alive in the world. As James Justus says of Warren's stance: "If the great drama is religious and philosophical, the stage on which the soul undergoes its painful progress is relentlessly physical and complete" (ARPW 327).

Other critics can admit to Warren's existential longing, but believe that a holistic Existentialist reading of Warren fails to serve. One of the most engaging of these critics is Calvin Bedient, who in his book *In the Heart's Last Kingdom* notes Warren's affinities with Heidegger, Jaspers, and especially Nietzsche. Bedient applies Nietzsche's Dionysian/Apollonian approach to Warren's poetry in quite beautiful and provocative ways. However, Bedient concludes that

> Warren's work throws the label "existentialism" off like a wet blanket. . .The heart has its "place," after all: precisely the devouring world. Yet if the alarmed heart . . .hints at nothingness, its very persistence, its parrying beats and terror, constitute an "ontological" stand (123).

Bedient shares in the confusions about the ontological element of Existentialism. Although he argues for Warren's ontological stand, he too does not believe Existentialism provides for such a stand. Bedient's conclusion, though, is also dissonant with his

methods and readings, since he goes on to base most of his critical explications of Warren's poetry on the support of the Existentialists. Such a disparity in Warren criticism often results from the fact that the terms of Existentialism, e.g. "nothing," "self," "real," are subject to such varied interpretations, not least among Existentialists themselves.

Another difficulty in reading Warren's philosophy lies in the anxieties about influence. Richard Jackson's essay, "The Generous Time: Robert Penn Warren and the Phenomenology of the Moment," traces Warren's concept of time to Kant influencing Husserl, who taught Heidegger, who worked alongside the theories of Bergson. Jackson's study is a deft handling of weighty texts, but experiences with this idiosyncratic material points to an over-riding question: what essentially do all of the "isms" Warren won't formally acknowledge have in common? The answer is that they contain variations on Existentialist ideas; or Existentialist responses to other ideas. Walter Kaufman, Professor of Philosophy at Princeton, wrote much of the definitive American scholarship on Existentialist philosophy, as well as translating such writers as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Rilke. (His is the translation of Martin Buber's *I and Thou* that Warren cites in *Democracy and Poetry*.) In his comprehensive *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre,* Kaufman's best explanation of "the heart of Existentialism" is to call it a rebellion:

> the refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs. . . and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life (20).

Kaufman's definition tells us little, other than that Existentialists are a bunch of irritable malcontents.

Editors Frederick Karl and Leo Hamalian in *The Existential Imagination* are a bit more precise:

> [Existentialism is an] emphasis upon the alienation of man from an absurd world and his estrangement from normal society, his recognition of the world as meaningless or negative, his consequent burden of soul-scarring anxieties, bringing with it his need to distinguish between his authentic and inauthentic self, his obsessive desire to confront his imminent death on the one hand and his consuming passion to live on the other . . . the individual . . . fragmented and virtually destroyed by the exigencies of modern life. (9)

Their explanation is descriptive of a condition, almost diagnostic, but still not a cogent definition. And their focus on negation, including the remark that Existentialists find "the world meaningless or negative" is a destructive half-truth, and could not be farther from the ecstatic, passionate "yes" to the world of Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Berdyayev, Buber, Tillich-- or

even of Nietszche, Heidegger, Jaspers or Sartre. Existentialism eludes exact definitions in that it accommodates many interpretations, in extremely particularized ways, every time an individual embraces it. Yet it is a compendium of a way of thinking that is based on certain definite, and defining, key concepts. The Existentialists who believe in meaning, by no means a silent minority, have been saying so for a very long time. They simply believe that finding and understanding meaning is the Promethean task, continually (and intrinsically) set against the threat of dissolution:

> to understand existence out of the concrete experience. . . every individual does indeed stand before an imminent end . . .in his everyday decisions about the existence for which he is responsible, he is working out his own judgement; here and now, he either lays hold on his true being or loses it.(Macquarrie SCE 118)

Similar to the argument about ontology and existentialism is the controversy about the prospect of transcendence. Although a purely Platonic view of transcendence is utterly rejected by Existentialists, many do believe in transcendence, so that a different reading of the term is required. For our purposes--applying the philosophy to Robert Penn Warren's poetry--this controversy is pivotal, because Warren's work seems to decry transcendence while invoking its possibility:

> You are sure that virtue will triumph. Far beyond
> All the world, the mountains lift. The snow peaks
> Float into moonlight. They float
> In that unnameable altitude of white light. God
> loves the world. For what it is. (NSP 23- 85
> “Three Darknesses" 5)

In the poem’s movement the context of the transcendence is metaphysical darkness. The poet provides two vignettes of moments in which no illumination is forthcoming, only the nagging hint of it at his horizon of knowing. The third and last vignette shows the aging poet in the hospital enduring an episode of illness that he had feared was "the real thing" of his horizon, e.g. death. As this episode closes, the old man does not find any revelation. But he feels hope, and the hope brings illumination, an awareness of the white light, which is no less real for being “unnameable.” He hopes for transcendence, for the potential of a God who might love the world in all its fraughtness, and for the potential that virtue does mean something after all. But a careful reading of "Three Darknesses" must include Warren's last word on his subject: "God/ Loves the world. For what it is." There is no possibility that loving the world idealistically, romantically, can be genuine. If any love exists it must lie in the clear-eyed acceptance of reality, of all the absurd or horrible darknesses of Being that Warren's poetry insists on declaring. The crucial point in our reading is that Warren's transcendence is never separate from the reality of

Being: never an "above" or a "beyond" Being, but immanent in Being.

Warren's version of transcendence is Existentialist. Heidegger goes so far as to call transcendence the crux of the Existentialist schema. Since Being is the ground of all Dasein, "Being and its structure transcend every being and every possible existent determination of a Being. Being is the *transcendens*, pure and simple" (BT 85). Like Warren, Heidegger also uses the metaphor of light as a "place" where Being can be revealed:

> [Heidegger] assigns a special place to man, whose mode of Being is Dasein, being-there. . .man in the *Lictung* in Being, truth in the unhiddenness of Being--standing in Truth of Being, but also wandering in error and untruth. (Maquarrie SCE 90-99)

Over and over, Robert Penn Warren's poetry will investigate the error and untruth, the darknesses of Dasein, while reaching for the truth in the light of Being. Our Dasein is the only way into this light, and there the inevitable revelation or transcendence will be the immanent truth of Being, fully innate to the real. He will tell us that this longing for truth may be “a way to love God.”

The Existentialist writers who sought and struggled for a way to love God are Warren's closest antecedents, and provide insight into his own struggle. Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* (1864) is often cited as the seminal work of later 20th-century Existentialism. Nietzsche discovered the book in

1887 and declared "the instinct of kinship spoke up immediately. . .my joy was extraordinary" (in EFDS 52). The kinship Nietzsche felt was in part his accord with Dostoevsky's rejection of "the old Greek 'know thyself"; *Notes* begins with a man who knows himself, and what he knows is not reassuring: "I am a sick man . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." (1). Dostoevsky's Underground Man speaks to us about fear and nihilism, damaged selfhood, acute loneliness and isolation from any natural sympathies:

> that cold abomination of half despair, half belief, in consciously burying oneself alive for grief in the underworld for forty years [They will shout] "Nature does not ask your permission, she has nothing to do with your wishes. . .[they will say] it is a case of twice two makes four!". . .what sort of free will is left when we come to tabulation and arithmetic, when it will all be a case of twice two makes four? Twice two makes four without my will. (EFDS 60, 76)

Dostoevsky's intense concentration on inner states, the exile from "normal" life and attachments, the cry for some however small affirmation that human personality matters: what kind of story is this? It is the kind of story that has spoken to generations of isolated and alienated people, who feel, with Nietzsche, "kinship," that it is their story. Robert Penn Warren tells this story, too:

> That night you will lie in your bed, not alone--
> But alone. In dark paradox you lie
> And think of the screaming gleam of the world
> In which you have passed, alone, lost--
> (RPWR "Mountain Mystery" 433)

Warren will say that "[Nature's beautiful birds] do not know/ Compassion, and if they did,/ We should not be worthy of it" (RPWR "Audubon" 391). The screaming world will yield only dark confusions and aloneness if the purity of the *transcendens* falls away. Warren's poetry records his half despair, half belief, struggling in the "mathematical world"; and to that place--of his poetry--Warren brings his grief:

> I stare at the moon,
> And wonder why it has never moved all these years.
> I do not know why, nor know
> Why my grief has not been understood, nor why
> It has not understood its own being.
>
> It takes a long time for it to learn
> Its many names: like
> Selfishness and Precious Guilt. (NSP 23-85 "Doubleness in Time" 29)

The grief is the suffering of the Underground Man: private, interior, inexplicable. It does not understand Dasein, its own Being. Eventually the poet stumbles onto at least some of the many names of his grief, and selfishness and precious guilt are

the names he recognizes to explain himself to himself. Just as the Underground Man has succumbed to maddening self-absorption, Warren knows part of the existential grief is the petty yet dangerous inclination to self-centeredness. "Precious guilt" is the knife-stroke, though, cutting to the heart of things. Self-involved as well, "precious guilt" doubles: is it precious like the affectation of a small man; or is it precious like treasure, invaluable? I would argue that both readings apply. Warren and Dostoevsky delineate the threat of existential abdication, as the individual, fixated on its grief, blind to the immanent transcendence of Being, may reject the actualized self it might be for the impotent self of solipsism. In *The Problem of Pain* C.S. Lewis says that pain and guilt function as "flag[s] in the camp," to alert us to the fact that something is wrong and force the need to alter our thinking and behavior. The solipsistic thinker, the Underground Man, remains a step behind, stuck in the awful oubliette of self feeding on self.

Thus Dostoevsky gave Existentialism many of its central themes and motifs: good and evil residing in the same heart; the individual necessity of finding ethics "beyond" received law; the "logic" of senseless crime, usually murder; acceptance of guilt; punishment and inward suffering as redemptive, teaching responsibility and empathy and thus, greater love. These themes and motifs preoccupy Warren as well, throughout his career. The man Dostoevsky was an individualist, but never a nihilist, nor did he lay claim to any new philosophy. He was a political

dissident and prisoner; an epileptic and compulsive gambler, and a devout Russian Eastern Orthodox Christian, and despite his very painful life, his impasssioned credo was "thou shalt love life more than the meaning of life." Complementing the influence of Dostoevsky (and surpassing him in the ardor of his commitment to philosophy and aesthetics) was another nineteenth-century artist-philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, whose challenges to commonplace "belief" supplied much of the vocabulary of what would become Existentialism. Warren declared his indebtedness to Kierkegaard in Warren's own philosophical statement of the modern world in America, *Democracy and Poetry*. Soren Kierkegaard too was a radical Christian, a Danish Protestant, and Kierkegaard had already lived, and written about, the predicament of the Underground Man. By 1864, Kierkegaard had been dead nine years, and during his lifetime he was judged as a hopeless eccentric, a heretic, and socially maladroit. But in his case as well, the writer used the material of his experience to produce brilliant commentary on the nature of human being. Such works as *Either/Or* (1843) and *Fear and Trembling* (1843) established the Existentialist framework. Kierkegaard saw man's lot as the "anguish of Abraham," the unceasing necessity of free will, choosing our own fate at every living moment; of *sorge*, care, the blessing and the curse of a heart that must break if it is to be fully human. He called the existential condition the dual condemnation of freedom and dread:

> The possibility of freedom does not consist in being able to choose the good or the evil. Such thoughtlessness has as little support in the Scripture as in philosophy. Possibility means I can. . .[in reality, as possibility passes into actuality] dread is [experienced as] the dizziness of freedom when the spirit gazes down into its own possibility. (in EFDS 104)

Kierkegaard saw the mission of his own individual humanity as "witnessing for truth." Warren also speaks of the witness of a poet's life as an ultimate task, and uses the term for the whole enterprise of his poetry. Inherent in all Kierkegaard's ideas is the core belief in the inviolate integrity of the individual, the lone voice who must witness:

> [The modern world] does not realize that anonymity, as the most absolute expression for the impersonal, the irresponsible, the unrepentant, is a fundamental source of the modern demoralization . . . [let us] learn what it means to be a single individual man, neither more nor less (88).

Warren's poetry consistently repeats the single human step of dread, the step of Kierkegaard's individual who is neither more nor less than a human being. Warren's single step takes us into "the blind pass" that we negotiate with only the barest "dead reckoning." In volume after volume of poetry, he examines what it means to be human; "we are only ourselves," and human life is a

story of dread and terror, blind navigating, and, if we keep walking, the possibility of exquisite flashes of grace. Warren's blessing and his curse is that, like his Audubon, "the membrane between himself and the world" is so thin; that the corollary to the ability to feel intense joy is to feel intense pain; that loving life also means knowing death:

> But even in the face of the rumor, you sometimes shudder
> Seeing men as old as you who survive the terror
> Of knowledge. You watch them slyly. What is their trick?
> Do they wear a Halloween face? But what can you do?
> Perhaps pray to God for strength to face the verification
> That you are simply a man, with a man's dead reckoning, nothing more. (RPWR "Rumor Verified" 431)

Warren's simplified, almost banal language underscores the straight-forward, basic human question: how do we make it through life, only to face our death? As he will elsewhere say, reliance on the "simple truths" may be all we get to see us through.

The solutions of Warren's poetry, though, do not solve much, at least not in any form of final answers. Nor is there much that is simple about a poet who invokes such a wealth of diverse thinkers, ranging from St. Augustine to Jacob Boehme to William James to Martin Buber, and artists, from Theodore Drieser

to Herman Melville to John Milton to John Donne. Perhaps the only simple thing to say is that Warren's poetic-philosophic sensibilites are just too powerful, too encompassing, to easily reveal his inspirations and associations. Of course Warren's critical work is enormous and influential, and throughout his career he discusses writers and philosophies from all sorts of disparate traditions. Still, Kierkegaard is one of the few philosophers whom Warren directly cites as a strong influence on his own thinking, and whom he describes in depth. We have Warren's evidence, his poetry; but it is also worthwhile to note the progression of his thinking that contributed to the development of his Existentialist philosophy. Robert Penn Warren embarked on a philosophic journey, and he found his path in Existentialism.

CHAPTER 2

HEROES OF THE FALL

Robert Penn Warren began his literary career as a devotee of Modernism and of T.S. Eliot, and Warren never lost his generalized attachment to Modernist practices, although he adapted them to his own vision. One of Eliot's great philosophic contributions was his insistence that a writer must always be aware of his own literary inheritance; for Western tradition that inheritance is "the mind of Europe," and he and Ezra Pound sought a method of crystallizing the history of human experience into a vital present, "a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity . . . a way of controlling, ordering, giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of [modern] futility and anarchy" (SETSE "Ulysess', Order and Myth" 177). Not only Warren's early, more imitative poetry, but also his work in its entirety shows Warren's grasp, and use, of Eliot's Modernist methods of expressing the present juxtaposed with and informed by the past. One of the most consistent aspects of Warren's uses of the past is in his definitions of the heroic, informed by the ancient heroic epic, which is firmly Existentialist. Warren's personal "tradition" was shaped by the earliest Anglo-Saxon epic, and its seafaring, heroic fatalism. We can see in Warren what Morris Green says about the Old English elegies, that we see "the

overthrow of human effort by time and darkness"; but the overthrow may be prevented by the heroic, in the individual who will stand firm and do battle with the darkness, for himself and for his fellow man (OEE 10). Warren will seek to translate the heroic into modern life and Existentialist terms, finding models especially in his own Southern roots, and his own family. Heroism for Warren is a legacy of a particular way of looking at the meaning of human life, and what constitutes heroism in a human life moves and shapes Warren's poetics. Harold Bloom saw that Warren's art and his personal ethic of the heroic were not divisible: "I doubt that we will ever again have a poet who can authenticate so heroic a stance" (MCV Introduction). Indeed, Warren's poetic stance is its own heroism, in that as a witness, with a mission, Robert Penn Warren believed he had a serious responsibility to uphold:

> . . . poetry is more than fantasy and is committed to the obligation of trying to say something, however obliquely, about the human condition. Therefore, a poem dealing with history is no more at liberty to violate what the writer takes to be the spirit of history than it is at liberty to violate what he takes to be the nature of the human heart. What he takes those things to be is, of course, the ultimate gamble. (BD Foreward xiii)

His commitment to history reflects the Existentialist belief (which Heidegger explains in *Being and Time*) that man, as

temporal and defined by the limitation of death, exists in history and is contextualized by it as part of Dasein. Warren's poetry is infused with the presence of history, remote or close to the poet/persona. For Warren, the "obligation" to history functions as part of his obligation as a poet--and hence, of his heroic fulfillment of duty.

Warren's sense of the mission of the poet is also indebted to Modernism. He saw the world as afflicted with spiritual vacuity and passivity, soul turned mechanistic, smiling the idiot "accelerated grimace" of Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly." Modernists believed that the poet must be a warrior-priest in the struggle to be fully human; the poet must be fierce, unrelenting, because as Santayana declares, "a seer must do more than say Hurrah for the Universe" (IPR 228). Warren's poetry offers a philosophy very far from any Idealist hurrah. He believes that the self must differentiate from all other selves in order to find authenticity and power. And the seer cannot be blind: Warren, following the Modernists, always upholds the individual, not as an Emersonian paragon of "self-reliance" whose self-absorption can lead to narcissism, but the self that is at once uniquely distinct and in "vital relation" with other selves:

> The man of will who says “I please myself,” is the victim of the last illusion: he can have no self . . . the true self, among the many varieties of fictive selves, can develop only in a vital relationship between the unitary person and the group. (DP 25)

The difference between what Warren calls "navel-gazing" and responsible self-awareness hinges on the concept of man as tragic and fallen. In his discussion of Mark Twain's work, Warren calls our fallenness "man's infinite capacity for folly . . . for wickedness, in the face of all his shabby pretenses" (DP 22). His refusal to ally himself with any religious beliefs does not mean that he forfeits the concept of sin, or error. Rather, he follows the Modernist's view of human nature, as T.E. Hulme describes it:

> what is important, is what nobody seems to realize--the dogmas like Original Sin, which are the closest expression of the religious attitude. That man is in no sense perfect but a wretched creature, who can yet apprehend perfection. It is not, then, that I put up with the dogma for the sake of the sentiment, but that I may possibly swallow the sentiment for the sake of the dogma. (S 71)

Warren "swallows" the concept of guilt, and in a modern society trying its best to renounce the categories of guilt and even of the real, Warren asserts that "if nothing is real, there is no guilt," so that we all become "spooks" (DP 22).

Warren introduces his philosophy in *Democracy and Poetry* with an epigraph from St.-John Perse: " . . . it is enough for the poet / to be the guilty conscience of his time." It is philosophically tricky to reconcile a belief in a "guilty conscience" without having some kind of standard by which we

judge guilt or innocence--that is to say, some standard higher, ultimately, than our own self-interest. Warren's poetry sustains a deep artistic tension about the idea of God. He says "even if there is a god, his goodness is not always apparent, so another nightmare, as Hannah Arendt refers to it, comes--the *Dieu trompeur*. The Jokester God" (50).

> That boy was his boy. Not begrudging sweat. But who
> Could be sure about God taking care of His business?
>
> Wheat in,
>
> And maybe He'd go skylarkin' off this time,
> Like He does sometimes to pleasure Himself,
> Whatever He does. And lets
>
> A man's honest sweat just go for nothing. (NSP 23-85
>
> "Winter Wheat" 68)

Warren's farmer cares about what is real--his boy, help with his crop, how to survive. Meanwhile, God is off playing around, amusing himself with whatever He does, completely uninterested in the conditions of human life and death. "Winter Wheat" depicts God as Warren often sees Him: if He's there at all, He's not much use. Worse, He's culpable, since He could, at least in theory, help us if He did care. Warren, like Melville, could be neither believer nor infidel, and Warren dramatizes his struggle with these conflicting positions in his poetry.

Robert Penn Warren always thought of himself as a Southerner, a region that earns its name as "the Bible Belt.”

However, James Justus distinguishes between Warren's Kentucky and Tennessee roots, and the rest of the South. This is the country of hill people, independent, isolated loners who guarded their individualism and, in their everyday struggles, relied much more strongly on common-sense pragmatism than old-time religion. The religion held sway, but it was salted with skepticism (ARPW). Coming of age in such a tradition heightened Warren's abiding conflicts about his religious inheritance. Warren tells us that "I tried to talk myself into religion . . . but no dice . . . but I kept on reading the Old Testament" (Blotner RPW 32). To the end of his life, insofar as he tells us, religion was to remain "no dice" for Warren. But Warren did develop an ethical system steeped in the Old and the New Testaments, so that even his skepticism, as Bloom says, could not help but be "Bible-soaked." Justus sums up Warren's philosophic development:

> Put simply, [Warren's poetic vision] is an orthodox Christianity chastened and challenged by the secular faiths peculiar to the twentieth century: naturalism . . . and existentialism" (ARPW 1)

Justus ably places Warren's philosophy; yet he fails to recognize that Existentialism can and does embrace Protestant Christianity (or Judaism, or Catholicism, or other forms of the religious impulse). Critical study of religion yields the understanding that it is deeply existentialist in many of its applications. For example, Warren's concept of the self is heavily indebted to his

reading of Kierkegaard. And for Warren, as for Kierkegaard, the concept of the self is "a heritage of Christianity":

> every soul is valuable in God's sight, and the story of every soul is the story of its self-definition for . . . salvation or damnation. Or. . . we may say, every soul is valuable in man's sight (*Critical Essays* "Knowledge and the Image" 237)

This infinitely valuable self is the first-cause work of art, a sort of living narrative poem, of each individual's being. It must be created; it is not something we can "find," like "the Easter egg under the bush at an Easter egg hunt" (DP 88) or "something you find under a leaf. The self is what you do" (TWRPW 327). Or, as Scripture says and Kierkegaard asserts, we must each "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phillipians 2:13).

The Judaeo-Christian belief system was an inner culture of language, symbols, and meanings that never left Warren. He is a poet of the sacred. He may name the sacred other names, but his philosophy seeks to find what might be sacred in human life. For Warren, poetry itself is a sacrament, a reverence for the individual self and its concrete being:

> in the same act and the same moment, [poetry] helps one to grasp reality and to grasp one's own life. Not that it will give us definitions and certainties. But it can help us to ponder on what Saint Augustine meant when he said that he was a question to himself (DP 92)

Existentialists view the aesthetic and poetry in particular as the most valid way the existential condition of Dasein can be approached. Heidegger devotes a chapter of *Being and Time* to the necessity of understanding the role poetry fills in Existentialist philosophy, as well as globally in humankind's most heartfelt need: "Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of Being . . .the essence of poetry . . . is the founding of truth." (BT 85) The task of the poet is to speak truth, a task that becomes a suffering as the poet must himself wrestle with his own flawed, fault-ridden selfhood. He must bear witness to all that is true to Being, including Warren's thematic refrain of original sin.

For Existentialists, the "great danger," as Jaspers describes, is for man to refuse responsibility for his human guilt, and thereby objectify himself and others. If Warren finds the self to be a question, he yet insists on what the self must do to try to be genuine. Rilke's injunction that "you must change your life" is forced on readers of Warren's poetry. A primary technique for Warren is the use of his monsters, the psychomachia of man's inner demons let loose into the morality play of "world.” In *Brother to Dragons* the organizing persona/narrator RPW, normally sanguine and ironic, becomes terrified by the appearance of a giant snake at the old homestead of Jefferson's minotaur-abomination, Lilburne Lewis. Warren uses the snake frequently in his poetry, inviting speculation as to its pagan and its Judaeo-Christian archetypal weight. When RPW

recovers his aplomb, he laughs at himself: the snake was nothing but a harmless snake, no symbol, no "ictus of horror" marking the ground where Abel's blood cries out for vengeance. But Abel's murder, the true abomination, is real. Warren's private archetypes tell us that horror will out; that the human possibility includes the worst we can imagine, and more; they tell us that we must embrace the horror, the minotaur, as our brother, because he lives in every human heart.

Warren's Existentialism shows that a few certain truths apply to every human being: everyone is filled with dread, often faced with either the ictus of horror or nothingness, and required to choose, often between two equally undesirable outcomes. The dread-beset self suffers assaults from both the absurd world and the inner despair of alienation. Reinhold Niebuhr's description of the condition of man suggests that

> [sin results when] man becomes untrue to the being that is his . . . he refuses to take upon himself. . . an identity that includes both the poles of his freedom and his finitude (in MacQuarrie SCE 8-9).

For Warren, man's denial of freedom results in "murderous innocence." The "senseless crime," especially murder, is a major trope of Existentialism, and the anguish of the human "family" crime, a fundamental existential examination of human nature's transgressions first by and against the self, and then against others. Warren's poetry frequently explores the motif of the

crime, and resultant guilt and punishment. He often ties the crime to American history, and the "American" self:

> In the new land
> Our seed shall prosper, and
> In those unsifted times
> Our sons shall cultivate
> Peculiar crimes, having not love, nor hate,
> Nor memory . . . (ARPWR "History" 322)

For Warren, the self without love or hate or history is unrealized, and a "fictive" self can have “no story.” In his discussion of Joseph Conrad’s philosophic orientation, he describes the self with no story, who can commit these crimes:

> They live in a moral limbo of unawareness . . . their significance is in their being, not their doing [and] they have no story . . . [rather] the effort of the alienated, whatever the cause . . . crime or weakness or accident or "the mystic wound," to enter again the human communion . . . only by the fact of its having been earned, [is] significant (NSERPW "Mirage" 145).

Robert Penn Warren, along with Conrad and other witnesses for the truth, is interested in the real story.

For Warren, the "real story" is that the modern self is damaged, adrift in a willfully self-created "mathematical" confusion, so drugged by jaded appetites and spiritual listlessness that we are spiritually asleep, if not comatose. The worlds of his poetry embody many Existentialist commonplaces,

as he seeks "a way to live" in, and with, *le neant*, the nothing, always threatened by despair, what Kierkegaard calls "the Sickness unto Death." Warren reads in Conrad a new existential malady, "the mystic wound": "[the trauma] of life-emptiness . . . inflicted by nineteenth-century science" and suffered by us all, ever since (146-47). Man faces an encounter with a great darkness, within and without. Not only is he utterly alone, but he feels himself more and more expendable in society's machine. This is the place Warren names "cybernetic heaven," and where

> [Heidegger says] Being has been almost entirely replaced by. . ."calculative" thinking. . . the emptiness of a purely technological culture, the forgetting of Being, the closing off of the dimension of the holy, and the absence of the gods, [the predicament] the West presently finds itself in (in Macquarrie SCE 93)

Man faces an encounter with a great darkness, within and without. Not only is he utterly alone, he feels himself more and more expendable. Forgetting the sacredness of Being, forgetting the realm of the holy, man finds himself facing the abyss of emptiness. The word "abyss" is multi-valent for Warren, and his poetry often records our encounter with that gaping darkness. Existentialist literature often exploits this image of the solitary man facing an abyss as the moment of truth. It is the place of Melville's "Encantadas," the dark and bottomless waters we must navigate. Gazing into this abyss, as Jaspers says "where

reason suffers shipwreck," is so terrifying that many, and perhaps most, refuse to look. Warren, though, offers comfort for the fear:

> Knowledge of form [through poetry] gives man an image of Himself. . . gives the image of experience being brought to order and harmony. . . the image of a dance on the high wire over the abyss (*Critical Essays* "KA" 246).

The heroism of the poet compels him to speak, to write, and thereby bridge the abyss. Out of Warren's abyss--of self, of world--comes the human voice. If at first it is a cry of yearning and of loneliness, or of "fear and trembling," the voice is the language of our being.

Nietzsche devoted much of his work to the existential nature of the aesthetic, as did Kierkegaard and Heidegger. The philosophers believed that poetry could redeem that which was lost. Nietzsche talks about the creative force: "For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred 'Yes' is needed" (TSZ). The existential responsibility is to choose; the poet's existential responsibility is to write the truth. It is a special existential "duty" of self- actualization and authenticity. The artist who is true to his Dasein, and to Being, will not abdicate his personal condemnation to freedom, no matter how much pain his obligation will cost him. Warren's sacred yes to his mission as a poet is his existential act. Only hereby can he hope to gain the knowledge he seeks. Robert Penn Warren, the half-blind poet,

took his mission seriously. He could have said no--the "nay" is the other polarity of choice, and negation always lurks in affirmation--he could have saved himself a lifetime of the suffering his poetry caused him. But he would have forfeited the joy. And, in existential terms Warren knew that the abdication of his duty as a poet would mean forfeiting the possibility of the personally heroic.

Sartre describes the existential duty as fidelity versus *mauvaise foi*, bad faith: "the man of bad faith is half-conscious and self-deceptive; he fails to reflect about himself and his role in the world" (EI 17). Kaufman explains bad faith in the context of Sartre's "Portrait of an Antisemite": the man of bad faith wants to objectify himself and others, wants experience to be "as solid as a thing" rather than stormy freedom and choice, and by the time his mindless drift into folly (in this case, prejudice) is second nature, "the man has achieved nothing less than an escape from freedom: he has abdicated his humanity" (EFDS 44). Existentialists deny determinism, seeing in it the seeds of objectification of experience and Dasein, in that without respect for free will and subjectivity, we may categorize Being, and others, to become “things.” Or, as Martin Buber says, the I-thou relationship occurs between two subjects; furthermore, "the other person is not my object and is not at my disposal" (in Macquarrie SCE 14). Robert Penn Warren believes in good faith, in resisting objectification and determinism, in the human mission a poet honors when he seeks the truth.

Bedient says that "man has created glory to save [himself] from nothingness," and that Warren achieves "tragic joy" because he is "consecrated to the truth" (IHLK 185). For an Existentialist, freedom always means action. The existential hero is a person who keeps faith with his responsibility to choose, acts on his choice, and faces whatever outcome he must face. Warren's poetry often recounts his sense of loss for the basic concepts of decency, and personal honor, he so believes in:

> . . . "Grandpa,"
> I said, "what do you do, things being like this?" "All you can,"
> He said, looking off through the treetops, skyward. "Love
> Your wife, love your get, keep your word, and
> If need arises die for what men die for. There aren't Many choices.
> And remember that truth doesn't always live in the number of voices."(NSP 23-85 "Old Time Childhood" 45)

Warren, the man, loved his grandfather. The poet tries to capture the reality, and the message of the true being of a worthy man who spent his life working to keep faith with his obligations.

Robert Penn Warren's job is to be the poet, as guilty conscience, often as "bearer of bad tidings," and, in his

faithfulness to the truth, as the voice of praise and pure love for our Being, no matter how fallen, how finite:

> such a spirit who has become free stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the faith. . .that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole--he does not negate anymore. (Nietzsche "Twilight of the Gods").

Nietzsche called his "formula for greatness in a human being . . . *amor fati*" (EH 12). His *amor fati* means saying the sacred yes to all that Being offers, accepting the human fate of temporality and error and exulting in the possibilities between joy and woe. In a very real sense, Nietzschean *amor fati* describes Warren's life, and his art. In *Democracy and Poetry*, Warren cites Nietzche's "Birth of Tragedy" to describe how the poet's *amor fati* translates into vision, and virtue:

> [Art] provides the freshness and immediacy of experience that returns us to ourselves, and, as Nietzsche puts it, provides us with "vision, enchantment. . . an affirmation of [man's] sense of hope." (DP 72)

For both Warren and Nietzche, Existentialism's insistence on the sacred nature of Being and Dasein keeps returning us to experience and the real.

Warren's "Masts at Dawn," almost a statement of purpose for his poetry, declares "We must try/ To love so well the world that we may believe, in the end, in God". It is a love that requires

vigilance, because our human nature would seek cover. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, indicting God for the curse of free will, asks

> "Is the nature of men such that they can, at the great moments of their life, the moments of their deepest, most agonizing spiritual difficulties, cling only to the free verdict of the heart?" (EI 67).

Robert Penn Warren relied on and celebrated such a "nature" in himself, and never gave up hope that his fellow men would decide, too, to honor their own hearts, because, as Dostoevsky says, "man's nature cannot bear blasphemy, and in the end always avenges it on himself" (68). A close study of Warren's Existentialist philosophy as it speaks in his poetry will reveal his courage, his work well done, and his heroism.

CHAPTER 3

ORIGINAL SIN, IN THE LAND BETWEEN THE RIVERS: “BILLIE POTTS”

> . . . under ether, the mind is conscious of nothing–
> I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
> Which shall be the darkness of God . . .
> I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
> For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
> For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
> But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. . .
> So the darkness shall be the light. . .
>
> (Eliot, “East Coker”)

One can imagine the grand frustration of Warren’s close friend and mentor, John Crowe Ransom. A formidable poet and scholar, conceivably as fed up as all true poets can sometimes get with the overwhelming misperceptions of what poetry must be, vitally is, Ransom cuts though all the posturings of literary analysis,

throws up his hands and cries: ”Wanted: An ontological critic.” At least, I picture it happening that way.

Ontology is in fact the driving, usually harsh and unreliable task-master of every living person. We must all try by whatever lights to know what Being is, and thereby, what it means. One could even call it the heart’s compulsion of immanence, in the same way the body will try–-mindlessly, against all reason and odds--to stay alive.

Robert Penn Warren spent his lifetime in an ontological search. Insofar as ontology is a philosophic endeavor, Warren’s philosopher-poet avocation demanded the exploration of the nature of Being. He investigated Romanticism, Naturalism, Idealism, Pragmatism for a philosophic orientation to answer his needs for knowledge; he appropriated many of their ideas and techniques in his art. Still he sought a coherent philosophy that matched his own ideas. His poetic search is both intensely metaphysical and intensely physical, and in his dialectic his poetry invokes both “ways in.” For Warren, Being must conform to such a dialectic to accommodate oppositional truths of human nature. His personal belief system as revealed in his poetry (and other writings) interprets life as dual: full of fear and trembling, dread, anxiety, absurdity. At the same time he imagines immanence and transcendence and the possibility of virtue, primarily because he sees the human individual selfhood as being capable of heroism. However, he sought ways of thinking about the paradoxes and problems—-about the mysteries--of human nature and meaning, his

ontology, and especially about his belief (empirically-seen, evidentiary) that the nature of humankind is inherently tragic, and how humanity might cope with its nature and propensities; because Warren did not view the tragic in humankind as completely neutral (although he did see it as innate), not some sort of genetic marker we must just live with, visited upon us by the spirits or genes. Rather, it is tied to the dualism of our possibilites for both positive and negative existence, and the choices the selfhood makes in the context of its dualism. Jean-Paul Sartre speaks of Dasein, human being, as “haunted” by itself; and there must be some valuation, tied to the will, that makes each individual who he is, or we are impotent, helpless. As original sin includes, and Existentialism builds on, human kind is a “being toward Death,” which is our fate. The haunting describes our feelings of lack, of not being able to overcome our own natures. Robert Penn Warren believed in the construct of ideas which make up our concepts of original sin, and the ways we manage it, as that which haunts us.

Guilt is, put simply, one of Robert Penn Warren’s favorite subjects. Part of his poetic practice is the use and re-use of key philosophical ideas as motifs in his work. These ideas/motifs appear and reappear in all sorts of contexts and applications, woven into the textures of the poems. Warren conflates inter-related concepts: guilt, original sin, the tragic nature of human Dasein. Before Warren achieved the coherence of “Dragon Country” with its debts to Jacob Boehme’s vision, he worked through

earlier poems on guilt, culminating in the masterwork *Brother to Dragons*.

One of his earlier efforts,“Original Sin: A Short Story” is roughly contemporaneous (1942) with “Billie Potts” (1944). The persona in “Original Sin” finds that original sin is “the shadow,” in Jungian terms; the poor young man cannot escape this vexing presence:

> Nodding, its great head rattling like a gourd,
> And locks like seaweed strung on the stinking stone,
> The nightmare stumbles past, and you have heard
> It fumble your door before it whimpers and is
> Gone:
> It acts like the old hound that used to snuffle your
> door and moan . . .
>
> It tries the lock. You hear, but simply drowse:
> There is nothing remarkable in that sound at your
> door. . . (NSP 23-85 302)

In this early poem Warren’s original sin has yet to fully materialize into what it will become in his later poems: the serpent, the dragon, the Beast, the minotaur– and ourselves. At this point in the callow young man’s understanding, mankind’s innate dark shadow simply lurks as “nightmare,” a shuffling old spirit-familiar who wants to be noticed, “let in,” and will not go away. The young poet admits he “thought [I] had lost it” when he left home and the familial curse, in its inescapable realities

as well as its superstitions; left childhood’s nasty proofs of the inevitabilities of human awfulness, such as the “evidence” in the proturberant tumor on grandfather’s face. The nightmare of original sin, for a younger Warren, occurs to him as only “imbecile,” basically a spook sent by the family to hound the poet while he tries out his golden dreams in Harvard’s rarefied air of enlightenment; or frown at him during his sexual escapades; or subvert his high-flown poetry of "innocence to be stayed by." In this poem of "Original Sin," Warren’s original sin can consistently prevent his attempts at Idealism; it can dog his steps, but as yet it does not bite.

"The Ballad of Billie Potts," a long digressive poem about the sins of the Fathers, marked a seismic shift in Warren's poetics. Suddenly, Warren's terrain changed substantively. Whereas much of his earlier work resonates with influences, and derived techniques and images often frustrate the success of these poems, "Billie Potts" crashed through erudite self-consciousness into the raw authenticity of the Warren voice. Here, the intentions, attitudes, themes, symbols and strategies open into that peculiar world which Warren was to explore obsessively in his career. It was the world of good and evil, of bleak sorrow and ecstatic joy, and how human Being might find something redemptive in its entanglements.

Although "Billie Potts" may have freed Warren's poetic voice, this era in his life seemed to derail his poetic momentum

temporarily. After (1943-44) Warren shifted to fiction, and writing novels like *All the King's Men* (1946) provided him with a vast proving-gound on which to work through those elements of his art that "Billie Potts" had declared. *All the King's Men* employs the same shifting points of view, with digressive addresses to a "you"; it is also the "story," the history, of one man's life through which many other lives, and a much larger story, can be told. The novel is concerned with attempts to come to terms with individual selfhood, both its baseness and its glory, as the self is shaped by, and shapes, America. As such, *All the King's Men* is an epic tale, metatextual, with a “present” narrator working through the American past and our history. When he turned from the novel back to poetry, he sought to find poetic form for these same impulses, to examine the American character through the individual as well as through larger society, to find our “meaning” ontologically.

In his poem "Billie Potts" Warren begins at the beginning: with original sin. Warren structures "Billie Potts" within the framing of Judaeo-Christian allusion: Adamic naming, the sins of the fathers, the mark of Cain, the prodigal son. Warren's ontological "work" is his religious impulse, and most often it appropriates the religion of his own genesis and inheritance. It is within this framework that Warren seeks to find the truth(s) of human existence, or our existential realities.

Ontology seeks to start with experience and trace, backwards, a logic of first-cause Being. Religious seeking holds

in its essence the ontological search. As with Warren, the Existentialist philosophers recognize that their task is ontological and they too appropriate religious language and figures to articulate their philosophy: original sin cannot be lifted entirely out of its context, and Existentialism confronts original sin in the same ways Warren does. Herbert in *Four Existential Theologians* says that although Maritain (Catholic), Berdyayev (Eastrn Orthodox), Buber (Jewish), and Tillich (Protestant) are perceived as religious thinkers, they are more aptly named “ontologists not theologians” (Introduction). Martin Buber says that "the silent prayer of humanity" is "teach me to have faith in reality, in existence, so life will have an aim and existence will have meaning" (WMB 306).

Even philosophers like Heidegger, who judiciously refused to rely on religion, cannot escape the connections. For Heidegger Being is the only true *a priori* category, intrinsically the necessary and never the contingent. Being simply is--a state existent as the “ground” from which all reality builds. Heidegger’s Being sounds suspiciously like God; but Existentialist philosophy has close ties with Gnosticism, most closely in their interpretations of dualism (Gnostic Jacob Boehme, who influenced both German Idealism and then Existentialism, is called by Jaspers “The German Philosopher,” the one man who began the period of the great German philosophic achievements). Gnostics also believed that knowledge, not mere faith, was redemptive; they named God as a "fullness" (*pleroma*),

which Existentialists approve as a definition of Being-itself. Being is dual, light and dark, good and evil; and humankind is capable of both. Tied to this dualism is the idea of Original Sin.

In the topos of the mythic (Tigris-Euphrates) "land between the rivers," "Billie Potts" sets the stage for original sin in a perverted Eden, a foul cradle of civilization:

> . . . The fetid bottoms where
> The slough uncoils, and in the tangled cane,
> Where no sun comes, the muskrat's astute face
> Is lifted to the yammering jay; then dropped.
> . . . -- The slush and swill of the world's great pot
> That foamed at the Appalachian lip, and spilled
> Like quicksilver across green baize, the unfulfilled
> Disparate glitter, gleam, wild symptom, seed
> Flung in the long wind. . . (NSP 23-85 288)

As he does in *All the King's Men* with the narrator Jack Burden's assessment of human life as the "twitch," Warren often calls human life a wild symptom, a twitch, a sort of existential seizure; and this is its "home." This the land of the Father. Little Billie's father, Big Billie, gives the boy his legacy of sin and corruption as the old Adam. He teaches Billie half of the inheritance of the Father--original sin, but not the other half of fidelity to self-creation and truth. Having been taught only his corruption and fallenness, Little Billie learns to rob and kill, the patrimony, the "gift" so that Little Billie is "born to

hang." Mama, too, is more than complicit. In this land of lies, of no-truth, her mother-love is false sentiment and not authentic compassion, and in ugly contrast to any notion of love as redemptive: as a devilish Eve she instigates the familial murder, convincing the father to kill his own son-- "you wouldn't done nuthin hadn't bin fer me" (NSP 23-85 296). Together they raise their Little Cain, with his "mark that is his name," in their Eden, their "innocent savagery of time."

Warren's poetry occurs in concrete experience, in place and in time. Consonant with his allusive use of the Garden and the natural world, his poetry shows nature as the realm in Being wherein man strives. Moreover, Warren does not separate America the land from American history, and in "Billie Potts" Billie's corrupted Eden lies on the road to (inseparably part of the experience of, necessary to the experience of) the new land, another Biblical figure of the Promised Land of "the West":

> So Little Billie took his leave
> . . . And headed West to try his luck,
> For it was Roll, Missouri,
> It was Roll, roll, Missouri. (292-93)

The West is possibility, all that could be; but the land between two rivers is where the self begins, and lies between the self and its possibility.

In Warren's aggressively naturalistic world, the only potential transcendence--redemption--must come from a radical existential commitment to the truth of Being. His mechanism for

accessing truth is the Adamic naming that is the "good" legacy of the Father, the *in bono* gift to offset the *in malo* original sin. Man must do his job; God charged Adam with the duty of naming the world, of finding a way to call things by their right names, which translates to our duty to truth. The truth of Being sets us free; that is, telling ourselves the truth validates selfhood, and our choices and acts. Refusal to tell the truth, to name it, constitutes existential abdication, and a resultant alienation from the transcendence of Being (since Being is the truth).

Embracing the counterfeit, the lie, and rejecting the true means we cannot access Being. In "Billie Potts" the very first true name we must declare is the self, because consciousness presupposes awareness of the self, of Dasein (the I AM). If we lie to ourselves about ourselves, Being and thus meaning cannot be revealed. The false Adam and Eve and their son all thwart the truth. Little Billie spends his life under aliases:

> (There is always another country and always another
> place
> There is always another name and another face.
> And the name and the face are you,
> . . . The name and the face are always new. . .
> (292,92)

Here is the counterfeit self. As he frequently does, Warren constructs the lie around the figure of the dreaming self of Romantic idealism. It is a fiction of self, a willful lie. Little Billie's true identity and his selfhood do not exist in

reality, because he's lost in the solipsism of the mirror-gazing Narcissus:

. . . and the stream you gaze into
Will show the adoring face, show the lips that lift to you
As you lean with the implacable thirst of self,
As you lean to the image which is yourself. . . (292)

Later, Billie's face becomes the "one star," an image that should provide light but does not; he drinks from the spring and his darkened self-absorption, the star by which he navigates, and it fatally deceives him:

And one star in it caught through a chink
Of the leaves that hang down in the dark of the trees.
The star is there but it does not blink.
Little Billie gets down on his knees
And props his hands in the same old place
To sup the water at his ease;
And the star is gone but there is his face.(296)

There is no enlightenment in this kind of water-gazing; knowledge lies in the depths, not in surface reflection in our distorted mirrors. The gazing in "Billie Potts" is never Melville's deep dive, and it tells us nothing and takes us nowhere. No matter how we seek we merely

Move. . .
Back to the silence, back to the pool, back

> To the high pool, motionless, and the unmurmuring
> dream.

Dasein must be awake. The Romantic dreaming self, un-conscious, sees lies, becomes paralyzed in untruth, lost as it "dreams. . . and grieves." This self never finds the knowledge of truth of its own Being, or of any other.

Little Billie inherits a corrupted name, in original sin. Refusal to name the fallen self, rejection of the responsibility for our guilt, cause Warren's crimes of "murderous innocence," and here the refusal to tell the truth comes to a harrowing end. In the bloody aftermath of the Adamic transgression and its consequences, Big Billie insists his wife "tell me his name" when they slay the stranger that is their son; the mother asserts that the dead man "Ain't got a name and never had none--/ But Billie, my Billie had one." Finally, lost in the deluded horrors of her own self-absorption, caught in all her existential abdication of truth, she can no longer distinguish human relationship at all: "Oh, he ain't got none and it's all the same" (298-99). For Existentialists the solipsistic dreaming self and its cherished lies destroy possibility, because the subjective self and its relationship to truth must be held sacred. When the self is not personally accountable it is not free; when it is not honored as the subject of its existent reality, it cannot honor other selves. All relation becomes object-to-object, the greatest horror, from the greatest lie.

In "Billie Potts," people have no value, life has no sacredness. The naming of world and experience is all counterfeit, and thus has no existence. The "strangers" who visit old Billie are nothing more than money, horses, derringer, so that they can be disposed of with no guilt. Little Billie coming home is only "a big black beard," "a long black coat," not a human being. Adam, Eve, their son Cain in the poem, are all caught in a web of naturalistic determinism; none are truly free, because they do not know or face truth and gain possibility, refusing to call things by their right names, beginning with themselves and including other human beings. Original sin spreads an ontological darkness that possibility cannot penetrate.

But Warren's "story" of Being in "Billie Potts" employs a unique device of structure and narrative. As with much of "Billie Potts" this important poetic strategy will shape Warren's later poetry, its use coming to fullest power and efficacy in *Brother to Dragons*; the narrator in "Billie Potts" is a precursor to RPW in Warren's epic poem of original sin. In "Billie Potts" the search for ontological truth functions as a story within a story, a further mirroring of time, and of selfhoods who live parallel realities. Warren places a distanced "present" narrator/persona within the "past" of Billie Potts. Little Billie's story intersects the narrator's story, and the closest correspondences, places of intersection, point to those concepts Warren most cares about in the poem.

Every remark of the narrator occurs in parentheses. The main narrative of Billie's story is told in third person, distanced as a story about other people, another time. But the narrator/persona uses an incantory second-person "you" as an inclusive address: we are all seeking our true identities and our authentic names (who we really are, the truth of our being); we are all trapped in naturalism, trying for some kind of trancendence although mired in our own natures infected with original sin, and the determined avoidance of the horror of what those natures can be. The narrator/persona "lives" the reality of his own subjective history within the mythic history (from a safe distance: it is “you,” or them, and only distantly himself), and wants us to do so too:

> For nothing is ever all and nothing is ever all,
> For all your experience and your expertness of
> human vices and of valor
> At the hour when the ways are darkened. . .
> [though] you were assured of your innocence,
> You became gradually aware that something was
> missing from the picture,
> And upon closer inspection exclaimed: "Why,
> I'm not in it at all!" (295)

Avoidance of the valorous responsible self, facing its truths, results in unreality. The narrator lives with Sartre's haunting, the feeling that “something is missing.” Nothing can ever be everything; something always feels lost, or lacking in our lives.

The narrator/persona, from his perspective of living both in the past and in the present, says that even though you know experience, know its dual nature of "vices and of valor," you yet cannot find your way in the dark. Holding onto the saving lie that you are "innocent" correlates with the discovery that you do not authentically exist.

Like Little Billie, like the family of man in fallenness, the narrator's idealized (guiltless, and thereby unaccountable) lie of a life robs him of identity. The narrator has spent his life gazing into gleaming surface “realities”--the market was satisfactory, lovers were true, you knew your business--but he either has not sought authentic self-knowledge, or it has eluded him. His "subject: I" does not exist, any more than Little Billie's did. He knows no truth of Being, nor of his own subjective being ("over time, you had lost it”) (297). He must, in an imbedded metatextual exercise,journey back to Billie--"to retrace your steps from that point"--back to the original sin, the original ground of Being and knowledge of its doubleness, to be able to know, and tell his own story. "There's no place like home," he says, in wry irony. Another prodigal, the narrator goes back to the dark Edenic world, where he had slipped into the water-gazing dreaming self and lost his own reality. In the beginning of the world of experience, "the Father waits for the son." Original sin means Dasein's possibility for evil; it is not the abstracted and sanitized "virtues and vices" eddying around

us, but actual evil in our own hearts. And it must be dealt with:

> And you, wanderer, back. . .
> To kneel in the sacramental silence of evening
> At the feet of the old man
> Who is evil and ignorant and old,
> To kneel
> With the little black mark under your heart,
> Which is your name. . .(300)

The volitional acceptance of our natures is "sacramental." If we do not act on the existential necessity to seek and name the truth of identity, and accept responsibility for that truth in our subjective selves, we are never free. We will be forever caught up in our own dreaming, and forfeit the engagement in our own existence.

However, the narrator's epiphany at the end of "Billie Potts" does not balance the horrors we have witnessed. Life is dualistic: the possibility of good exists, as well as the possibility of evil. Although "Billie Potts" was Warren's wrenching breakthrough, a poem of shocking energies and powerful images, it suffers from this lack of balance. A triumph of beautifully resonating misery, it lacks nuance, that shading of meaning necessary for perspective. For all its motion the poem feels curiously static. We're not sure exactly where we've been, or what we've met there. "Billie Potts" seems to transgress Warren's own criterion for unity, that "[the poet] not abstract

one aspect of the experience and call it the whole experience" (NSERPW "Pure and Impure Poetry" 20-25). "Billie Potts" suffers from Warren's tendency to revel ghoulishly in Naturalism, even as his "yearning after virtue" demands some comprehensible hope of transcendence.

Warren creates his postlapsarian land between the rivers in "Billie Potts" too obscurely and too reductively. His irony does not focus or clarify; it intrudes, and his Potts family characters are beyond irony anyway. When Warren attempts his narrator's digressive parody of the religious emblems of the water and the blood it just feels like sarcastic indulgence, departing from the world of the poem:

> For they have been dipped in the healing flood.
> For they have been dipped in the redeeming blood.
> For they have been dipped in Time.
> For time is always the new place,
> And no-place.
> For Time is always the new name and the new face,
> and no-name and no-face.
> For Time is motion
> For Time is innocence
> For Time is West. (293).

Time does heal, but only in a convoluted metaphysical sense, and only with courage. Yes, regrettably, humankind does indulge in such silliness (“time is innocence”), our knack for moral relativism (and existential equivocation). Yes, we do avail

ourselves of our distance from the past to falsely "redeem" our actions, and editing history to rewrite our own culpability. But, really, beyond heavy-handed irony, what are we to make of this little word-play?

Certainly no one is healed or redeemed here-- but then, this is only ironic in hindsight, since no one in the story particularly wanted or expected to be. Little Billie has gone out West and gotten rich, but he squandered legitimate possibility to create a new selfhood and chose to be a criminal, too, and we have no evidence he's any different from the dim-witted and mean child he started out to be. If there is any "innocence," it's willful ignorance. And yes, most likely humankind will persevere in these same idiocies, on and on in our future, mostly because they help us to justify anything we do while protecting us from our own truths. But why such a self-conscious litany? We suspect these terms would seem as ludicrous to the Potts family as they are to us: "dipped in Time" is an awkward phrasing for a more awkward correspondence. Are we to see our own propensity towards dreaming idealism in the fallacy that Time can redeem these creatures, or that "new" but still false faces can really substitute for no-faces, in our own rejection of our identities and kinship? Did these people really make any progress, or are we doing so? Even as we reimagine our history to assuage and hide our guilt, who would entertain such stubbornly absurd convictions about anything redemptive in these particular bestial characters in the first place?

"Billie Potts" comes off as a one-note ballad. We are invited to consider these characters as part of our own idealized great tide of seekers going West:

> (Think of yourself riding away from the dawn,
> Think of yourself and the unnamed ones who had gone
> Before, riding, who rode away from goodbye, goodbye, and toward hello, toward Times' unwinking eye. . . (290-91)

Warren's lines do evoke an affecting portrayal of the continuum of history, and, yes, every inch of human progress had, and has, its costs. But Warren's appeal to us ("think of yourself") is contextually unsatisfying. The Potts family members are not travellers in fellow-feeling, nor even figures suitable for a critique of idealism; they are the single-minded but otherwise mindless ambush. When the musing narrator asks us to "think of yourself at dawn: which one are you?," the question feels disingenous. We are never tempted in any way to identify with people who are subhuman; we know, without thinking much at all, which ones we are, and aren't.

Brother to Dragons will suffer a similar problem, because Warren is so masterful at rendering the grotesque and unspeakable in human nature that we cannot see ourselves in these portraits. The existential imbalance occurs because "The Ballad of Billie Potts" shows us a human landscape devoid of goodness, the father's legacy only a "gift” from "that diservering hand," (297)

the blood gift of bloody severing, of a cut-off name and a face with only itself--a delusion, a reversed image--to hold; the poem's characters, and its readers, reduce to a disembodied "you," all destroyed by this inheritance. The narrator may learn a crucial first-step lesson in existential truth, but the world of the poem offers no perceivable solace for pain and error, no other-half of human being. There is no ‘star’ that is our true face, and the ‘mark’ that is our name is either a fiction or an indictment. When Being is not revered, when Dasein is not sacramental or meaningful at all, there can be no transcendence. We are left with nothing but determinism’s appetite, or idealism’s self-justifications, and Warren has not found his redemptive third way.

CHAPTER 4

THUS MY MINOTAUR : *BROTHER TO DRAGONS* AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTHS BY WHICH ONE LIVES

Brother to Dragons stands as Robert Penn Warren's epic poem of original sin. It first appeared in 1953, a decade after "Billie Potts"; and Warren worked more than another two decades revising the first edition to *Brother*, to publish "A New Version" in 1979. Although much excellent scholarship investigates the differences between the two poems, I am concerned with his final word on the subject, what he felt were “the right names” for his story. The investment Warren had in this poem clearly shows how vitally important the work was to him, and the labor of trying to get it right, to convey exactly what he wanted to say in exactly the right form, represents many of the most compelling artistic and philosophical convictions of his career.

The themes as well as the formal elements of *Brother to Dragons* were not new ideas in Warren's poetic development. *Brother to Dragons* was the vehicle by which he could finish what he began in "Billie Potts," sharpening and clarifying his philosophic vision. The central motifs of "Billie Potts," its nascently epic structure, its metatextual layerings, narrative voice and the mirrored framing of story-within-story, all reappear in *Brother to Dragons*, as it stands as Warren's most

passionate attempt to come to terms with existential guilt and humanity's tragic nature.

The historically true episode of Lilburne Lewis’s brutalization of his slaves, and Lewis’s ties to his uncle Thomas Jefferson and cousin Meriwether Lewis, all give Warren a framework for critiquing both the Romantic Idealism of America's mythic account of itself, and the Darwinian Naturalism that reduces humankind to being slaves of determinism. However, much of *Brother*'s dynamic force lies in the seductions and the lures of both of these ideologies, as Brother's characters give voice to first one and then the other position. Warren offers both of these alternatives in his "cat's cradle” of philosophy:

> Why do we feel the need to linger on this scene?
> The answer, I hazard, is paradoxical.
> We feel that the force now driving Lilburne on
> Is but part of the unhouseled force of Nature,
> Mindless, irreconcilable, absolute:
> But we also feel a need to leave that house
> On the headland, and lift our eyes up
> To whatever liberating perspective . . .
> The incalculable starlight serves
> As an image of lethal purity--
> Infatuate glitter of a land of Platonic ice.
>
> It is an image to free us from the human
> trauma.(BD 62)

Neither Naturalism nor Idealism explains Being. It does seem that we may believe that Lilburne succumbs to determinism; but if so, then why does the heart still yearn to "lift our eyes up" to the Platonic image? This Platonic Idealism, though, does not work either. As an "image to free us from the human trauma," Idealism poses a fatally dangerous, “infatuate” refusal to admit human suffering and error; denying the tragic in ourselves is not freedom at all, but its own rarefied enslavement.

Platonic Idealism does not free us because it is not the truth, and only the truth can reconcile us with the "irreconcilable." Only in awareness of life's duality can the wholeness of the world be manifested. Warren says that "in the ordinary course of things . . . man must try to comprehend the density and equivocalness of experience." (MP 18, 25). As RPW reminds Jefferson, "in the unity of life remember. . . / That life and death both enter by a wound." (BD 64). In *Robert Penn Warren and The American Imagination*, Hugh Ruppersburg says

> [Warren] confronts directly the reality of a world which contradicts and confounds vision, yet he senses in the contradiction a larger unity, a reconciliation of opposites which, rather than negating vision, sustains and propels it. (90)

Warren confronts reality-- not the implicit nihilism of determinism, and not a screen of Idealism to filter out all we would rather not see. Warren's transcendence is Existentialism’s

transcendens of the "perfect adjustment" of Being-itself, of ultimate reality:

> . . . The blood
> Of the creature is the temperature of the
> sustaining 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! (61)

Catfish and river are animated with the immanence of Being, which is also the transcendent. Nothing here is Romantically idealized: catfish is individually existent and concrete, as is river itself, contraposed to catfish. Still they exist together in a reconciliation, a part of each other in the totality of Being.

Essence rests firmly in existence. When asked to define essence, RPW's father instead defines existence: "But what's percoon? And he: Why, son,/ I just don't recollect. But it's percoon." (27). Being, Sein, simply is. It exists; it is the *prima facie* reality. Robert Penn Warren's Existentialism "demands reality." Existentialism answers to Warren's own needs of ontological seeking: we must seek, and accept, the real, and Idealism cannot answer because its philosophy is based on our bondage to fictions, selectively choosing to ignore whatever disturbs us in the real. Commenting on the messianic but

bloodthirsty fervor of John Brown, Warren remarked that "it is only natural that Emerson . . . should have understood nothing, nothing in the world, about a man like John Brown . . ." (quoted in Ruppersburg, AI). Warren's ambivalence in his contempt for the hollowness of Idealism form the core philosophy of *Brother to Dragons*; we often feel that Warren would be grateful--as we all are sometimes grateful--for some of Ibsen's "saving lies," but he cannot allow himself the false comfort.

Naturalism cannot answer to reality, either. It cannot explain human being, Dasein, because the determined being has no freedom at all, and feels that his own being is out of his hands:

> Ah, man must love his own necessity.
> But it is hard to find, so hard and slow,
> The last phase: the threshold of recognition.
> The last phase: the kiss of necessity.
> The last phase: the self fades into fate.(101)

Jefferson's nephew Lilburne self-destructs under the curse of his blood, falling prey to his own belief in his diabolical destiny. The necessity he believed himself to be was not the whole truth, until he chose to discard any reconciling (co-)necessity, as we will see. Yet he has capitulated to the lies of determinism, and his selfhood fades into fate, which is a grave existential loss.

Warren's *Brother to Dragons* continually wars against resigned determinism. The poem shows us incontrovertibly that Lilburne's acceptance of what he mistakes for his necessity and fate directly lead to his fall. Determinists can argue that

humankind will made predictable decisions based, at root, on inevitabilities; however Existentialism refutes such a belief:

> Acts of atrocity . . . do not come out of the blue. They are detectable in the types of choices used to justify earlier acts of insensitivity or cruelty. [Philosophy over millenia has erred because it has tried to] examine the character of some abstract notion of human nature and not the concrete, specific series of actions of a particular person . . . they have arrantly devalued the governing powers of our conscious mind, contending that the unconscious [of animal drives, appetites, et al] is the relentless ghostwriter of our life script. (Golden SWD 150-51)

In *Brother to Dragons* Warren painstakingly recreates the chain of events, and Lilburne's increasingly cruel choices, that lead Lilburne to the savage dismemberment of the slave John. As with the "gift of that disservering hand" of the father in "Billie Potts," Lilburne's tragic nature overcomes what could have been his capacity for virtue and wholeness, because he feels that his monstrous human fate is to tear Being apart in rage and grief, a “servering” monster. All along, Warren shows us how truth might have saved Lilburne; the failures of *Brother*'s characters to confront truth, as Jaspers says "the truth by which one lives,” is precisely the point of Warren's story (PE 3).

In a very particular way, Warren wants us to reexamine the choices all of us, but especially America and Americans, have made over the centuries. Warren prefaces *Brother to Dragons* by directing us to examine our past, so that we can know our present and our future. As "the earthly past of characters long dead," *Brother* follows the Existentialist privileging of history. Heidegger addresses

> the special emphasis on the historical character of [Dasein's] Being with attention to its factual rootedness in the everyday world and its 'manifold relations' with people and things (BW 22).

Existentially, all we can know of human life (Dasein) functions only in its temporality (its being caught in time) and the horizon of its possibility.

This is why Existentialism insists on regard for the temporal horizons of actual experience. As Warren says, commenting on the concrete end-time of the graves of his characters:

> That is all.
> It is abated. All is abated now.
>
> . . . No tread intrudes on the common silence
> And the jay's call is the index of indifference.
> The ferocious tangle of blackberry
> Is sovereign on the spot. (124)

The Dasein of the human beings is over; they are gone, and we cannot follow. The blackberry and the jay, still present in the here-and-now of Being-itself, preside; they alone, at this moment in this picture of the graves, are "sovereign," because they still exist. Death, which ends time for Dasein (but not for Sein) delimits our horizon of possibility. Yet while we live, past, present and future exist simultaneously in self-being. Sartre says

> Dasein has a history. More, it is its own past [as] it lives in the present . . . I pursue various possibilities for my future, bear the weight of my own past, and act or drift in the present (BW 22).

Existentialism must perforce concern time. If existence is the only really valid category for Dasein to look to, then the temporal limits on man’s existence must be of primary significance to us.

Modernist philosophy shows the influences of Existentialism. Philosopher Henri Bergson's theories such as the *elan vitale*, which is another term for immanent Being, and his idea of duration, describing "the prolongation of the past into the present," are indebted to earlier Existentialist philosophers Kierkegaard and Nietszche; and Bergson’s ideas often correspond to those of Heidegger, especially his theories of time. Bergson's philosophy articulates the Existentialist belief that if duration

is true, then the past is never really "over," as long as human life continues. As Jaspers says

> The truth of existence is unique, particular, and historic . . . because of the nature of our temporary existence this [truth] becomes accessible to us as one and whole only in historical form. (PE 43)

Robert Penn Warren's beliefs about history were soundly Existentialist; as he says, "Time will always flow" (BD 14). He chose the historical forms as a means of knowing the reality of the human condition. Continuing in his "Billie Potts" treatment of the American expansion, *Brother to Dragons* seeks to expose our past. Warren wants to strip away the veneers of Romanticizing about our nation's historical experience of conquest and growth, and of the principles driving us, in order to uncover the truth of the American identity, that past which is present, and future, in us. The stripping away of our illusions about ourselves appalls and shocks us-- and offers the only way we can attempt to be whole:

> How could I hope to find courage to say
> That without the fact of the past, no matter
> How terrible, we cannot dream the future? (BD 118)

Lilburne Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis: all of *Brother to Dragon*'s characters contributed to what America is, what and who we are, today.

Truly, there is nothing new under the sun. Human being participates in the race-memory of our natures, part of who we

are and who we have been. Warren attempts to make *Brother*'s story our story, as indeed in many ways it is. *Brother to Dragons* time-travels, back and forth between realities which are at once singular and temporal, and universal and enduring. Eras change, individual circumstances change, but human being partakes of its elemental blood-kinship. Existentialism's concepts about time reflect its deeply ethical foundation, a foundation that supports the belief that every single choice we make has ramifications for others, for the world at large; even as those choices must be made by individuals, and solely as the province and duty of the individual self. Warren tells us that Smithland's happy material gains of the present link across the world to war in Asia, as human history holds us all in relationship to one another:

> Who would begrudge such solvency?
> And who's to blame if there's a correlation
> Between it and the dark audit of blood
> In some Korean bunker, at the midnight concussion?
> Yes, who's to blame? For in the great bookkeeping
> Of History, what ledger has balanced yet? (127)

The painful mysteries of history, individually and collectively entwined, mean that time will never surrender the past to the present.

As RPW revisits Lilburne's house, he thinks of "another bluff and another river" where he had once loved a woman, "in the cold logic of hope and need" (129). He knows about "the track a man might make through time/ And how the hither coming doesn't

know the hithergoing" (129); knows that human being's consciousness keeps replaying the same dramas, and we keep feeling just as baffled, and making the same mistakes, as always. The Judaeo-Christian name for this perpetual reenactment of error, transgression and compulsions is original sin, a species-constant.

During his lifetime, Robert Penn Warren devoted many of his extraordinary powers of thoughtful examination to ethical problems. Although many of his readers did not realize the intensity of his investment, Warren was profoundly concerned with ethical issues. He always maintained that the individual and its existential choices were sacrosanct in the fabric of Being, and in *Brother* he reveals how Lilburne's crime "bloomed" into future atrocities:

> But long since
> The axe had been set at the root of hope,
> And as history divulged itself,
> I saw how the episode in the meat-house
> Would bloom in Time, and bloom in the lash-bite
> And the child's last cry, down in the quarters when
> The mother's sold. And for another joke,
> Ask the Christian Cherokee
> How the heart bled westward on the Trail of Tears.
> (85)

I am persuaded that one of the main reasons *Brother to Dragons* meant so much to Robert Penn Warren was because he hoped it could

be a cautionary morality tale, helping us to be vigilant in trying to overcome our worst propensities. Warren exhorts us to change our present so as not to doom our futures. I believe this is what he meant by his continual declaration that we must "redeem" Time. It is an Existentialist cry for humankind's call to individual and social responsibility, and the responsible act.

Warren instructs us in how to read the poem. Brother is polyphonic, "a dialogue spoken by characters." These characters are people from our past who must meet and talk, and who must "try to make sense" of experience and Being. Their meeting-place is "no place," "anytime," a between-space in the Melville-esque maelstrom of past, present, future, Warren's "interstices" of time. His brief directive is rich with philosophic methodology. His form is dialogic and dialectical, the back and forth of Dasein swinging from extremes of dual being. Warren's antipathy to Platonic beliefs ran deep, but with philosophy-poetry, neither Warren nor the Existentialists escape Plato's contributions to philosophy. The Platonic dialogue and the dialectical forms are the most appropriate philosophic apparatus for Existential injuiry:

> [dialogue is the way to truth] . . . all thinking is speaking. mind talking to itself, asking questions and answering them (Jaspers PA 26)

Plato's dialogues employ aporias, open-ended questions. In *Brother*, too, Warren's characters pose many insoluble questions,

seeking some measure of understanding. As Karl Jaspers writes of Plato's dialogues,

> They are portraits not so much of a psychology as of an intellectual mood. [Characters are] spiritual forces that meet in personal form . . . characters as living philosophical or unphilosophical realities . . . Plato guides our attention to something that cannot be understood or demonstrated by reason, something that is not analyzed but merely narrated, namely the myths (8)

Kierkegaard closely followed Plato in having characters in certain of his works represent a definite philosophic position, and in pitting these positions against one another, a strategy Warren employs in *Brother to Dragons*.

These dialogues occur within a dramatic frame, to be acted out. Although Warren declares that *Brother* is "definitely not a play," he did offer it as one at one point--and he shows indebtedness to Greek tragedy (as did Plato) as well as to Shakespearean conventions. The living narrator of the poem, the persona RPW, speaks for the present and tries to interpret the past. He functions in part as a chorus and, as we also saw in "Billie Potts," he frequently interjects asides. RPW must maintain "the story" in the fractured chaos of the voices telling it. In the end, he becomes Shakespeare's Horatio to Hamlet-- the only living voice left to tie together all the loose ends. By the time RPW has finished the story, both he and the reader have

undergone a wrenching catharsis. RPW must make sense of the story, applying narrative objectivity and distance to the subjective responses of the poem's other characters. In this way RPW is the ontological critic of *Brother to Dragons*. In Martin Buber's terms, he tries to "track meaning from existence" (WMB 6).

The seeming-story of Brother to Dragons is not, in itself, complex. Thomas Jefferson's nephew Lilburne Lewis, son of Jefferson's sister Lucy, was a land-owner, gentleman farmer and member of the privileged class of founding families in Kentucky. Lewis was young, strong, and in the poem handsome and charismatic, but he was a deranged and tormented man, and one terrible night he butchered a slave by dismembering him, then buried his bones. It was a heinous crime Jefferson either did not know about, or more likely, refused to acknowledge. A ghastly story, a horror-story, but nothing humankind hasn't seen often enough in our gruesome history. However the real story of Brother to Dragons is extremely complex, and the questions it raises challenge our sense of safety and equilibrium. *Brother to Dragons* depicts the earth-shaking collision of the oppositional poles of Idealism and Naturalism, casting us into the realm of existential and ontologic bewilderment.

Warren mines the literary and philosophical traditions of Romanticism as it reflects both Platonic dualism and the Existentialist dualism that is an inheritor of, and a departure from, Plato. In his "Symposium," Plato discusses the "tortured

souls of sundered beings" who forever search for their other half, their true soul-mates of self. Nineteenth-century Romanticism, heavily influenced by Neo-Platonism as well as by the German Idealists (Schopenhauer, Schilling, etc.) was enthralled by notions of the split-self. Existentialism, sharing some tenets of Romanticism while rigorously denouncing others, also used the split-self motif to explore dualism, although of a very different (and anti-Platonic, anti-Idealist) sort. Romantic Idealism provided a sure scape-goat in the mirrored double. In modern parlance, we can blame our transgressions on our evil twin. Such use of Platonic dualism separates Dasein from itself, splits its unity into mutually exclusive, and thereby nonthreatening, categories of existence. Existentialists see human existence as dual, but never divided. Personality is one, a unity, all facets of which we must own:

> Nineteenth-century Romantics [made the mistake] of believing that each of us has dual personalities, one good, one bad. [This] absolves us of responsibility. (Golden SWD 87)

The Existentialist double does not depict the *Symposium*'s superior beings seeking their soul-mates, nor the Neo-Platonic Idealist abjection of half of our selves. Rather, Existentialism's double portrays human nature struggling, and suffering, to acknowledge its own tragedy. We have to meet and negotiate with Mr. Hyde and accept him into our house of self; it's his house, too. As Plato himself suggested (and his

interpreters seem to forget), splitting the self is ultimately dangerous. For Existentialists, Dasein persisting in the willful compartmentalizing of split-selfhood causes no end of harm. Dostoevsky's seminal Existentialist work, *The Double* (1846), shows just such an existential error, as his protagonist falls prey to the seductions of the unreconciled splitting of self, and is driven insane.

Warren follows the Existentialist use of the double. Further developing the mirror-gazing self from "Billie Potts,' with its "mirror-face that is not your own,” *Brother to Dragons* is Warren's most refractory house of mirrors. Its characters rely on surface reflections of self and others, and must be pushed to desperation before they see the distortions of selves all around them. Warren pairs and doubles human roles and relationships in ricocheting flashes of images of the formula of the Fall: mothers, fathers, sons, brothers; as well as images of the societal relationships of masters and slaves, saviors and destroyers.

Jefferson and the persona of RPW are the principle voices in the story telling the tale, and they reflect and react upon each other, now paired in similarity, now reversing each other's images. On one level, RPW's cynicism serves as counterpoint to Jefferson's Idealism: RPW the Realist consistently reins Jefferson in, disputing Jefferson's Romantic pronouncements. Or, RPW's Naturalism counters Jefferson's Enlightenment Rationalism. Warren's Jefferson and RPW function as doubled brothers, intimate

twins, and some of their exchanges lends a black humor to their disagreements, as they co-preside (dually) over "reality." Describing the house of Lilburn, Jefferson says, "For the house is gone and not gone, and yet--"; "I assure you it is gone. I know the place," counters RPW.

The two argue back and forth in the clash between philosophic ways of seeing, changing human being's story as they recount their own visions. In Jefferson's emotional recounting of his inspiration at the temple at Nimes, he lauds the classical learning in the "just proportion," "the heart's harmony" of the "sun-gilt place." (BD 29) Jefferson proceeds to describe how such an example of man's achievement gave him hope for man's perfectability. Jefferson takes the Enlightenment position: as Plato says in *Protagoras*, educating mankind in goodness will mean that man embraces the good. RPW, though, is quick to point out that, on the contrary, Nimes' Roman architects were ruthless imperialists, and Nimes merely "organized rubble/ (I call it cold and too obviously mathematical)/ Thrown up by a parcel of those square-jawed looters" (29). RPW remembers Nimes only because "there's good wine there." RPW's scornful, ironic rejoinders undercut Jefferson and underscore RPW's own Naturalism. Even in a moment of Jefferson's grief over his nephew's savagery, when Jefferson cries "Listen-- it is always/ The dearest that betrays," RPW deliberately mocks him: not the dear blood-kin, but the family dog, "Oh, yes, the hound!" who dug up John's charred bones.

Thus one purpose in pairing RPW and Jefferson is to conduct the dialectic between Naturalism and Idealism, and between two systems of belief about human nature: man as a reprobate in this "sty" of the world, driven by animal appetite, who will easily fall into any and every abasement; versus man as a being suffused with divine light, who will reach perfection because he will choose the good if he apprehends it. These philosophical positions seem to be completely different; yet RPW and Jefferson are at the same time much more similar than different. RPW's Naturalism can seem merciless, his cynicism unmitigated. Talking about the history of his country, he sees America's historical hope in its progress as nothing more than the obscene "Glory be to Grab," all our efforts to build the nation only a "jolly trollop [who] spread her legs" as we exploited her, the bestial rutting of "blood, sweat, semen, and the God-damn world" (13). And Jefferson's shattered Idealism causes a bitterness that twins and echoes the bitterness of RPW. Until the poem's resolutions, neither man can believe in the redemptive act, or in the hopeful charity (*charitas*) and compassion that, as Lucy insists, could save us:

> RPW: What could it have changed, a gush of
> feeling?
> . . .To assume that some difference in tone or
> gesture
> Would have changed--"
> Jeff: Nothing would change nothing." (56, 60)

Warren shows us two versions of the Disappointed Romantic. RPW salves his pain with wit, disdain, irony; Jefferson salves his pain with rants, disavowals, rage.

RPW's enforced Naturalism overlays a heart that seeks transcendence. He still longs to believe in love, he still suffers because he cannot trust hope, and he achingly watches the natural world, as it moves him with its beauty and mystery, and longs for a sign that this beauty means something. Jefferson's Idealistic longings result in the same disillusionment and sorrow: "We are born to pain that from that…/ We may give others pain (83). RPW's Naturalism cannot sustain him, as his attempts to protect himself from suffering fail as fully as the solaces of Idealism fail Jefferson. In both cases, the philosophies they cling to, based on the definitions of humanity they have tried to uphold, are revealed to be lies.

Neither Naturalism nor Idealism can adequately account for our contradictions, our alienation, our mistakes; nor for our heartsick longings, the human need for hope in a world gone insane. Jefferson and RPW are Warren's "yearners." They can no longer trust the philosophy each has chosen to hide behind but neither can they stave off the pain and grief brought about by their disillusionment, a nullifying made exponentially more acute by the intensity of their yearnings for meaning, for what Warren calls "virtue":

> But still, despite all naturalistic considerations
> Or in the end because of naturalistic
> considerations,
> We must believe in the notion of virtue.
> There is no
> Inland path around that rock-ragged
> And splume-nagged promontory. . . past
> All appetite and alibi. . . (21)

Warren uses the old Latinate etymology of *vir*, the word for "man." Under the old philosophical "definition" of mankind, man is not a man (not a human being) unless he behaves with integrity. Jefferson and RPW examine the venality of human life, looking for virtue they are hard-pressed to find; and they function as mirror images of the two poles of yearning, betrayed both by the Naturalistic "appetite" and the Idealistic "alibi."

For both characters, the telling of the story offers them a chance at redemption, via a new definition, a "third way" to understand Dasein. The best answer they find lies in the acceptance of the reality of existence itself-- concrete, flawed, temporal, messy. But life, or Being, what Warren calls "the world" of existence and experience, is what it is. And perhaps, Warren avers, somewhere at the heart of immanent Being itself lies a *transcendens*:

> . . . the single lesson left
> To learn worth learning. . .
> And that lesson is that the only thing

> In life is glory. That's a hard
> Thing to learn, and a hard fact to face
> For it knocks society's values to a cocked hat,
> Or seems to, for the one thing that man fears
> Is the terror of salvation and the face
> Of glory. But that face is all. Yes,
> Like it or lump it, try to recognize
> It in the world's face when, however rarely,
> It comes. . .
> the world's magnificence
> To which your heart must answer if it can,
> . . . and man
> Can't live without some glory after all,
> Even a poor kind. (16)

In this passage of RPW's loving, tender memory of the boy Kent, Warren's real-life childhood friend, Warren rejects both Naturalism and Idealism. Warren's response is Existentialist.

Robert Penn Warren's use of his own name and identity as the persona of RPW demonstrates a special kind of courage. As strongly opposed as Warren was to Romantic Idealism (and, like Eliot, soft-headed Humanism), Warren allows us to see how it strongly attracted him as well. Harold Bloom addresses Warren's inner conflicts, and suggests that Warren was really more sympathetic to Romantic Idealism than he wanted to be. We do not have to speculate on the attractions Idealism held for Warren. He often takes shots at Emerson, as Bloom discusses, because Emerson

represents all that Warren denounces in Idealism, and Transcendental Idealism in particular; Warren snipes at Plato, too, as Emerson and Plato both represent a philosophical stance Warren rejects. In *Brother to Dragons*, though, Warren/RPW openly shows us the inconsistencies of his own longings. RPW describes himself as

> A fellow of forty, a stranger, and a fool
> Red-headed, freckled, lean, a little stooped
> Who yearned to be understood, to make
> communication,
> To touch the ironic immensity of afternoon
> with meaning
> While the sun insanely screamed out all it knew,
> Its one wild word:
> Light, light, light!
> And all identity tottered on that remorseless
> vibration. (20)

It is no coincidence that Existentialism shares some significant beliefs with Romanticism; this confluence of impulses explains how Warren finally found his philosophical moorings. As Existentialism partakes of the impulses and conventions of Romanticism (such as in its treatment of nature, the primacy of the individual, etc), it coincided with Warren's own Romantic leanings. As Existentialism departs from the Romantic, breaking with Idealism and insisting on the truths and dictates of existence and experience as the only ground for human identity,

it approves Naturalism's hard-edged honesty. As Reinhold Neibuhr says,

> We must therefore speak both a 'yes' and a 'no' to Naturalistic philosophies. [We] affirm them insofar as they insist on the meaningfulness of [concrete] historical experience. We refute them insofar as they believe that the temporal process [alone] explains and fulfills itself (*Beyond Tragedy* 2-5)

At the same time, as Nietzsche says, man's true virtue is "the reverse of the coward-Idealist who flees from reality" (TSZ 21).

Hope is one of the main philosophic confusions that Existentialism solves. For Existentialists, hope literally becomes, as Christian Scripture says, "the evidence of things unseen.” For Existentialists, Naturalism is reductive and limiting, failing to account for possibility. The temporal process alone does not explain and fulfill itself: the human spirit, or soul, is as real as the human body, and Dasein's experience of the reality of its own soul yields miracles and ecstasies (and miseries); human free will leaps beyond appetite and expediency, into a realm of possibility that achieves overcoming, heroism, self-sacrifice, love; and man can find transcendence, in Being-itself.

But on this earth hope is valid only when it rests on our acceptance of the horizon of limitation on Dasein, e.g. death, the ending of human life’s concrete existence in Being. Again,

this position parallels Judaeo-Christian original sin, whereby man's tragic legacy meant that he would die, and humankind is doomed to be mortal (versus Romantic Idealism and Enlightenment Rationalism, wherein man is latently divine). Humanity's possibilities, based as they are on free will and choice, are myriad, wide-ranging, filled with creative power and hence with hope. However our horizon of possibility is not unlimited. As Niebuhr explains, there is a part of us that thinks we are immortal, and as Sartre would say, part of Idealism's faulty promises is the *mauvais foi* in rejecting limitation and relying on the kind of false transcendence of immortality at the expense of existence. The godly Existentialists' belief in the immortal soul does not disagree with the philosophy's basic belief in our horizon. Philosophers like Kierkegaard et al (including Nieburh, a minister) insist that we must fully engage with our existence on earth, revere Being, accept our birthright of freedom and accountability, and never-- ever, in absolute contrast to the Platonic view-- hold the life of the body in contempt, looking to some spirit-world as the only reality while regarding concrete human life as meaningless and irrelevant.

One use of Warren's father-son paradigm in *Brother* disarms the death-grip by which we hold onto our desire for temporal immortality. For many thousands of years, fathers have made use of their sons in their own dreams of immortality. The son will "carry on" the name, hence perpetuate the identity of the father. Too often the father indeed sacrifices the son to such

patriarchal aspirations. The point is that such disregard for the temporal integrity of individual Dasein is existentially and philosophically unsound. *Brother to Dragons* shows Jefferson grasping for eternal life here on earth. He yearns to live forever in his grand vision, engraved in stone, etched into the blueprint of nationhood, embodied in Monticello, floating in the clouds. Jefferson does not love Meriwether Lewis for his own sake, because of the person Meriwether is; Jefferson admits that he loves Meriwether as an emissary carrying Jefferson's own deified personality into posterity. Jefferson enlists his “near son” Meriwether to insure Jefferson's immortal continuance. Meriwether remembers Jefferson's goodbye, "the only, first and last, unique/ Kiss. You from your towering greatness leaned/ To place it on my cheek" (9). By contrast, Jefferson’s memory of the encounter is that "Beyond affection and farewell glaze of tears, I saw/ My West" (10). What Jefferson remembers of Meriwether is--Jefferson.

> Yes, Meriwether had been a sort of son,
> And I saw him an image of
> The straight-backed and level-eyed men to come,
> Worthy of the gleaming miles of our distance (84)

Another man's life must not and cannot serve as "an image" mirroring the pictures of our own hopes and justification; another man does not, merely, confirm our own worth, his sacred personhood only "worthy of" reflecting ourselves back to

ourselves. Jefferson violates the limits of his own temporal existence, and violates Meriwether's selfhood in the process.

Arguably, Jefferson could be seen as wanting more than his own continuance; he could be seen as desiring the continuance of beliefs he held to be a higher good. Certainly many of us do believe that the principles of America's democracy are worth dying for, even as we might (paradoxically, to some extent) reject many of the Enlightenment principles that birthed our nation. Warren's beloved grandfather had told him a true man dies for what's worth dying for, and Warren's passionate love for America, even as he refutes many of the principles that underlie her character, definitely reveals one of the most persuasive examples of his own conflicted inner dialectic as it shapes *Brother to Dragons*. Warren himself declared his commitment to democracy, as evidenced by his belief that his own poetry should serve democratic ideals (as it does in *Democracy and Poetry*). It is another measure of Warren's willingness for fierce self-examination that he takes on his own conflicted feelings about Jefferson's legacy.

Meriwether, though, feels no such altruism: he wants revenge on Jefferson for sacrificing him to Jefferson's own dreams. Meriwether acts as Jefferson's chief intimate accuser. Jefferson, the self-styled father, has not nurtured his son with the truth. Instead, he has deceived his son with Idealism's lie, and demanded that his son be another emblem of Jefferson's beliefs. Meriwether indicts both Jefferson and his philosophy:

> . . .some pedant fool
> Had chopped his Latin for my garnishment
> And chiseled up the lie I'd never have spoken
> I'd never say: "Oh, Good Republic, live!"
> And happier live my lost years in your own."
> Oh, no. That Good Republic is of men,
> So let them live their own years and not mine.
> I solemnly curse them,
> The lies they live and the deeds of their hands . . .
> (115)

He refuses to stand as another lying emblem of Jefferson's cherished perfection. Despondent over the treachery around him, unprepared for the wrenching loss of "the last delusion," of idealized human nature, Meriwether murders himself instead. Jefferson has deliberately turned a blind eye to Meriwether's true individual humanity, a man troubled by the fears, disappointments, and failures we all endure. More, in dishonoring the sanctity of Meriwether's (temporal) selfhood, Jefferson slays him. To Jefferson, Meriwether's agon and eventual suicide fall into the same category as Lilburne's crimes: Jefferson may grieve privately, briefly, but then he turns back to "contrivance/ And the larger hope." He will not seek to know the truth of his broken sons, nor face his role in their dissolution. Meriwether calls Jefferson "the Great Betrayer," as Jefferson murders the true existence and real human being of the sons he idealized.

As with "Billie Potts," Warren's uses of the father-son doubling both personalize and universalize the issues at stake. As RPW retraces the past in Lilburne's story, his own needs in the present compel his reconcilation between father and son, the longing he feels to understand the "experience" of his own father's selfhood and his life:

> Now under the lemon light we move, my father and I
> Across the landscape of his early experience.
> . . .It is a fiction of human possibility past.
> (126)

RPW sees in his father's existent experience the age-old, very human and haunted desire for "more," the draw of hopeful striving as we try to maximize human possibility, make our lives real instead of fictive, and find meaning.

Warren's interlacement of motifs ties RPW's relationship with his father to Jefferson and Meriwether, Jefferson and Lilburne, and Lilburne and his father Charles. The individual father becomes the Adamic all-Father, as (in Warren's signature irony, and his taste for the absurd) the village drunk called "Pap" tells his story of truth:

> . . . We believe you, Pap.
> For we were there too, and saw it, and heard
> The mountain, like a bell
> Lonely, boom, though no geologist admits its
> possible.

. . . We have lifted the meat-axe in the elation of
love and justice.
We have seen a small boy, wide-eyed, stand on
the hearthstone
And accept from his father's hand
The bitter dose of percoon. (128)

Robert Penn Warren bares his conflicted love for his own real-life experience with his father. RPW takes his father with him to visit the ruins of Lilburne’s house. Like Meriwether in his account of the geologic mystery of the chiming mountains, RPW "was there too," witnessing the real experience, and not retelling a fiction, as he and his father confront the dark reaches of human possibility--the axe lifted, in all its appalling and damning repercussions--and challenge the deceptions we have all lived. Imagistically Warren pairs RPW's sonship to parallel Lilburn's long, wintry descent into prodigal lostness as well as Meriwether lost, sent by the father to freeze in the wilderness. But RPW's experience is redeemed by a father who nurtured his son with truth, and did not dissemble about what human existence is and means. RPW’s father did not abandon him, and the son is not lost; he is home. The little boy by the hearthstone receives the always-bitter but always-healing gift; with his own strengthening, steadying hand, RPW's father gave his boy the dose of percoon. Percoon is what it is, his father says: it is real, existent, true, although we do not even understand it. The father's medicine, so tough to swallow, offers the truth

and not a lie; it gives the boy a way to cope with existence, the way to survive reality even as "winter thickened boys' blood/ And made em fit for devilment, and mean" (127).

As much as Jefferson tries to name his heroic fiction of Meriwether as Jefferson's own legacy to the son, the real legacy turns out to be the postlapsarian sins of the father, as in "Billie Potts." In the dynamic between Jefferson and Meriwether, and between Jefferson and Lilburne, Warren declares that sociopathic Lilburne, fully as much as "noble" Meriwether, is Jefferson's natural inheritor. They all imagine themselves as "light-bringers":

> Lilburne and Meriwether Lewis [and Thomas Jefferson] entered the wilderness as heralds of civilization, as 'light-bringers,' and my story is about the difference with which they performed the role and their tragic ends. (BD Foreward xiii)

Warren acknowledges the appeal of the calling to help build civilization, to bring light into the darkness; but Jefferson transgresses against Dasein when he disavows the darkness, and denies the true inheritance of our tragic natures that the father passes down to his sons. Lilburne, desperate and maddened, fights to fend off the encroaching nothingness, as he "defends [Lucy's] spoons and civilization." And it is the return to the deceit and malice of civilization, and not the arduous sojourn in the wilderness, that defeats Meriwether (74). RPW's irony here conflates the two intentions of edification and brute coersion,

and reduces our dreams of transcending reality to a special hybrid of egotism and absurdity: what exactly does "civilization" mean? Lilburne treasures his mother's spoons, yet feels no remorse for murdering another human being. Warren suggests that this is ever the way of human "progress," as we allow our self-serving fictions to excuse all our means, from subtle exploitation and oppression of others to genocide. History pushes at our backs, all the millenia of rationalizing our leveling avarice and megalomania goad us on as we find good "reasons" to sacrifice other human beings to our determination to conquer the world.

Warren asks us to look to ourselves, to America and our culpability. The Trail of Tears, Manifest Destiny, "The White-man's Burden," our history accuses us, and evil underlies many of our greatest successes. *Brother to Dragons* shows that we must assume our guilt for the wreckage we cause, as well as recognize the rotten core of our best-loved "stories" of ourselves. The American Revolution established radical democracy for a new world, and its excitement spread to France, where Jefferson himself helped the French in their own revolution. Did the Enlightenment elevation of the common man in France, a revolt imbued with principles of freedom and equality which overthrew many centuries of despotism, justify the over-taxed guillotine, and the mob bloodbaths that killed thousands, including, and probably mostly, innocents? Does the French Revolution justify Robespierre? Jefferson believes that it does. Do we?

The sons in *Brother to Dragons*, kept in ignorance about the “costs of our complicity,” encounter nothingness, and the inescapable reality of the tragic in our individual natures and collective history. They face the truth of Dasein's doubleness; what Jefferson sees to be our "infamy" of the Minotaur, half-man and half-beast, the monster we have tried, and failed, to hold captive. At that moment of truth when the sons confront their own identities, the fathers Jefferson and Charles Lewis have lied, or fled. They fail their sons. Both consign their heirs to perdition by denying the primacy of Being and real existence and refusing the necessity of knowing the truth of the painful struggles of being human in the world, as we wrestle with the immense power-- for both good and ill-- of our possibility.

Warren shows the deadly, deadened nihilism and self-absorption of Lilburne's father, Charles Lewis, as he runs away from his wife, and from his responsibility to his sons:

> May my seed rot and the fruit of your womb.
> I leave them unto darkness and the dark land
> I have looked in the eyes of my son and seen
> The landscape of shadow and the shore of night.
> Let him fulfil my destiny. Farewell. (63)

It is no mistake that Charles says "let him fulfill my destiny" as opposed to the more-logical "let him fulfill his own destiny." Charles, like Jefferson, cannot live with his own encounter with the darkness within his son. He cannot endure or validate his son's selfhood. Again like Jefferson, in Charles's fatal

narcissism, his sons only reflect himself back to himself, in this case to his own doom. Martin Buber's ethics of truth and love articulate the problem with the abdicating fathers, and explain the knowledge that could redeem them:

> The man who has not ceased to love the human world in all its abasement [can see] genuine human form (WMB 82).

The fathers Thomas Jefferson and Charles Lewis cannot love their sons. For these fathers the sons function as the Narcissus looking-glass; and the fathers cannot accept that human nature is fallen and tragic, in the abasement of Dasein. Jefferson becomes disconsolate and turns his back on his family; Charles embraces nullity and emptiness, and renounces his family as well. They cannot love the world for what it is, and they despise it for not being what they dreamed it would be.

In contrast, the sons cannot forget humanity's tragic abasement. The son RPW also gazes into his father's reflection, his father's "face." RPW wants to know and grasp the truth of his father's being, the good and the bad, and reconcile the inheritance left to him:

> Yes, he had climbed his mountain years ago
> And met what face-- ah, who can tell?
> He will not, who has filled the tract of Time
> With rectitude and natural sympathy
> Past hope, ambition, and despair's delectable
> anodyne

What face he has met I do not know . . .
The failures of our fathers are failures we shall
make,
Their triumphs the triumphs we shall never have.
(21)

Warren's/RPW's father did not flee; yet Warren conveys the sense of longing for a greater depth of truth than his father gave him. His father's "rectitude," and his wordless, stoic acceptance of suffering, were part of Warren's relationship with him, and much of Warren's work (both in fiction and in poetry) shows his attempt to be reconciled with his father's restrained withholding, and with his desire, and need, to know his father's heart. Warren/RPW need to grasp their inheritance, and original sin is the birthright gift: we will reenact the failures of the father, in an endless perpetuation. But are we men enough to reenact their triumphs?

In the revelatory scenes with RPW and his father, in which normally-sanguine RPW is so vulnerable, needing so much of his father’s love, Warren delares the most awful irony of doubleness and the sins of the father: Lilburne, the monster, is just as much of a Disappointed Romantic, just as tormented by his inability to bear Being's duality, as Jefferson is:

"Your hair's all gold, Letitia, gold, and now
The stars are in it, gold. I put them there
. . .Oh you're an angel from the sky!"
And said: "Go back to Heaven if you can

> And if you can't, then try the Other Place
> For"--and flung my wrists down hard--
> "I tell you, even Hell would be better than this
> sty." (47)

Jefferson calls Lilburne "a sentimental maniac"—a description, in *Brother*, of Jefferson himself. Warren's characterization and use of language pairs Jefferson and Lilburne in their shared (Romantic) penchant for lurid, fantastic interpretations, and venomous and wrathful responses to what they perceive as life's betrayals. Their respective diction and tone veers into emotional hyperbole and melodrama. As existence becomes too disturbing to them, they become catastrophic. They are grandiose; along with Jefferson, "Lilburn would . . ./ Define the human mission." Soul-sick, neither Lilburne nor Jefferson will turn to existential healing: the knowledge and courage to accept the tragic truth of human life, and to proceed manfully in spite of the world's suffering. As Nietzsche says

> Said ye yea to one joy? My friends, then said ye
> yea also unto all woe. All things are enlinked,
> enlaced and enamored. (TSZ 322)

In the "encroaching horror" the faces of Jefferson and Lilburne truly do function as two sides of the same coin, illustrating the two poles of denial, both equally treacherous reponses to failed Idealism.

Throughout *Brother to Dragons* Warren's mirror-doubling reveals humankind's kinship, and presents faceted images of the

totality and irreducible connectedness of human being, which the characters themselves often cannot see. Aunt Cat suckles the Minotaur, and so does Lucy, underscoring Lilburne's natural double self as it degenerates into his pathological split-self. The two women raised him together, and both contributed to the man he has become. Warren gives Lilburne two mothers: black slave and white owner. The mothers signify the diametric opposition existing in an unexamined tension of unity. Lilburne was fed with the "black" milk; at the moment he spits out the "nigger milk" in hatred and spite, abjecting half of who he is, he seals his fate. Moreover, Lucy does not help the young black boy whom Lilburne has injured; and neither does Cat help Lilburne when he faces discovery and death. Had they stood firm in love and compassion, either or both mothers might have saved the young men, in body (John) or in spirit (Lilburne). Although the two mirror-doubled mothers love the son Lilburne, they act as agents of his destruction.

Brother's characters also gaze into the mirror and see the brother. The archetype of Cain and Abel (the good son/bad son; good brother/bad brother) reverberates in the pairings of Warren's characters. It is insructive to recall the details of the Cain and Abel myth: according to the Edenic story in Scripture, God wanted a sacrifice from each of the brothers. Abel accepted the necessary and paid what he owed, and submitted to the reality of the way of things, to the acknowledgement of original-sin guilt and the need for expiation. Cain, full of

denial and pride, decided he knew better than God (in a refusal of guilt) and offered his own kind of sacrifice, one which was a counterfeit and showed no acceptance of "cost" to him at all, in rebellion against the necessary. When God accepted Abel's offering and denounced Cain's offering, Cain, in fury and envy, killed his own brother. God cursed Cain to a life of alienation, pain, and lostness. And Cain's "face," his identity, brands him, and banishes him and all of his descendants from human community forever.

Cain's fratricide illustrates that the brotherhood of original sin unites us all in grief and error; and that, as Warren keeps reiterating in *Brother to Dragons*, we owe the cost of our guilt. The double-edge of original sin means that our possibility includes evil as well as good, possibility as the "fruit" of the knowledge of good and evil. In *Brother to Dragons* the characters of the brothers will not submit to the truth. The brothers are pitted against each other, in conflict; and at the same time mirrored in twinship as the self battles itself. Brother's portraits of brotherhood foreground Warren's philosophic points as the narrative builds. Meriwether and Clark, and the men who accompany them; Meriwether and Lilburn (as "sons" of Jefferson); Charles Lewis and Jefferson; John the slave and Lilburne; Lilburne and Isham. All of Warren's mirrored pairings of brothers confirm just how steeped in denial humankind can be, and how far we will go in refusal of guilt and necessary

atonement, even to the point of killing off any evidence of that which we abject in our twin/ourselves.

In *Brother to Dragons* the characters try to escape self-scrutiny, the honest attempt to see and know their true selves. (As the voices of hope, Lucy and RPW are exceptions; while they do try to escape necessity, they learn to turn and face the truth.) However, although *Brother*'s characters do not want to really see themselves, at the same time, like Narcissus, these characters are in thrall to delusional "faces," literally mistaken identities. Warren continues his "Billie Potts" strategy of invoking the Narcissus myth and its Looking-Glass self, for which "everyone we interact with serves as a mirror and in these mirrors we invent ourselves" (Golden SWD 114). Brother's characters persist in making others responsibile for their identities. Valid identity eludes them. Further, what they think they can see for themselves is distorted. Brother's characters live a received identity, their existence predicated on confirmation in the mirror of others' reactions to them. Charles Lewis cannot know he exists without the mirror of Lucy's love, wherein he can see that he's real. When she dies, he loses his own being. Isham, one of Warren's most consistently confused and un-conscious characters, exists "only [as] a mirror for Lilburne's loneliness" (BD 64).

For the characters in *Brother to Dragons*, the Other does not appear as a discrete personhood, but rather as the way for the characters to believe in their own existence. Hence Brother's

characters cannot solve the prosaic but profound problems of relationship with an Other; so that more insoluble aporias arise. How can they approach knowledge of someone else, and of the potential for understanding, compassion, and mutuality, when they don't know, or seek to know, who they themselves are? More importantly, how can they recognize the selfhood of others when they do not recognize their own? As William James says, the question cannot be “what is man?,” as abstracted essence; but must be “who am I?,” the truly ‘essential’ question of the individual existence, from which all else proceeds. Brother’s characters fail to ask the necessary question, or they choose to flee from its answers; and their individual selfhoods lack the “definition” they need to make them whole.

CHAPTER 5

KIERKEGAARD, KANT, AND THE SACRED INDIVIDUAL

Robert Penn Warren shows us an existential inter-subjectivity within human relationships, because his purpose is to examine what he considered the most serious, and sacrosanct, concern of philosophy: the individual subjective self (Dasein, the self in world). Throughout his career Warren maintained his commitment to the sacredness of the individual, and sought knowledge about what the self might truly be. In Soren Kierkegaard, Warren found a kindred spirit. In various works he uses and cites Kierkegaard (e.g. his poem “Fear and Trembling,” for example), and employs Kierkegaard's philosophy to augment and expand upon his own.

It may be whimsical, admittedly, but still interesting to speculate as to that meeting of the minds. Disgusted with the popularity enjoyed by Plato, Kant, the Enlightenment, Transcendental Idealism, et al, but equally suspicious of Naturalism or nihilism's answers to human being, Warren--finally--found a philosopher who articulated the kinds of ideas that could speak to his own. Kierkegaard married art to mission; the free self to responsibility; the mundane to the ecstatic; choice and the heroic act to our tragic anguish; unity to doubleness; and skepticism and criticism of the Church to a passionate faith, a sure belief in soul and redemption, virtue and love, to which

he devoted himself even as he reimagined it philosophically, seeking for and finding a personal experience of God. Warren was an agnostic, perhaps, but probably not an atheist; no one really knows another's secret heart, and Warren mostly maintained his privacy on these matters. Still, his work and practice are steeped in the old-time religion of his heritage. As a scholar who loved the Old Testament as well as such writers as St. John of the Cross and St. Augustine, it must have been thrilling for him to find a thinker who could interpret scripture in ways that he could accept. Arguably more compelling for Warren, though, is that Kierkegaard held distinctive and powerful beliefs about selfhood. Kierkegaard's nickname was "that Individual," the champion of the free and individual self.

Kierkegaard's and Warren's positions in the debate about the self rest firmly in Existentialist philosophy. Privileging the individual self as our first-cause state of being, both writers believed that without brave, clear-minded self-knowledge, we cannot access possibility, especially when we reject truth and cling to lies to protect ourselves from reality. Such hiding from truth is bad-faith, Sartre's *mauvais foi* of walling ourselves off behind illusions, and above all, excuses. We cannot live a good-faith existence until, or unless, we first honor our selfhood in truth. Put simply: Warren held *mauvais foi* in whole-hearted contempt, just as Kierkegaard did; and both raised their voices in renouncing such existential cowardice.

Existentialism views human society as being composed of sacred selves. As Warren explains in *Democracy and Poetry*, community becomes sickened and diseased when the individual is devalued or swallowed in what Warren (citing Kierkegaard) calls "the black hole of the public." Warren also quotes from Martin Buber's writings the idea that the subjective self must be the "cornerstone" of any social philosophy; without the wholeness of an "I," a "Thou" cannot be comprehended. Following Kierkegaard in *The Present Age* (1846), Warren alludes to our deliberate unconsciousness of self in his dire warnings to the then-modern age in *Democracy and Poetry*; I can imagine that today Robert Penn Warren rolls in his grave to hear, for example, the loud chorus of America's noisy public's "affirmations" that "we did the best we could at the time," no matter how base, selfish, immoral, hurtful or harmful our behaviors. Warren heartily dismisses (and, oddly, anticipates) such self-justifications: after Lucy refuses to do “the good thing,” she says "I did the best I could. No, that's a lie/ I did not do my best. . ." (BD 17). The kind of corrosive, evasive nonsense that in our modern world has made us all blameless, and thereby powerless victims and guiltless perpetrators, is precisely Warren's "murderous innocence," *mauvais foi*. Describing the criteria for good-faith existence, Sartre says "the human subject [Dasein] is . . . [honestly] concerned about its being" (SO 30). Such concern precludes lying to ourselves.

Solipsism endangers Dasein as the special enemy of the existential individual self, not least because it masquerades as decent and sincere self-appraisal. Solipsism offers a kind of spiritual shortcut, a way to cheat, by which we can go through the motions of self-examination while indulging in mere self-absorption. We can also convince ourselves that we have accomplished something in its exercise. *Brother to Dragon*'s nightmarish mirrors provide Warren with access to the literary and philosophical conventions of narcissistic solipsism. The Romantic (and Existentialist) penchant for mirror-symbols reveals what Narcissus is doing in the mirror-- which is slavishly serving his lovely delusion that the surface reflection of his face is the only face, his reality the only reality.

Another of Warren's signature uses of this narcissus-complex of metaphors is his treatment of the dreaming self, probably most famously with “The Great Sleep” of Jack Burden in *All the King’s Men*, who uses it to escape and assuage pain, and remove himself from the realities of his own life and selfhood, as well as to avoid doing anything about these realities. The existential self must stay awake and deal with reality on its own terms; we must not retreat into the comforting oblivion of unconsciousness, wherein reality loses its primacy and we drift in ignorance, lose touch with being, and refuse the responsibility to act. The single individual of Existentialist philosophy seeks knowledge and truth, a chore at odds with simple self-absorption; more to the point, in its reliance on (often

revised or reimagined, but nevertheless consistent) belief in original sin, Existentialism adheres to the quite unpleasant idea of guilt, and our responsibility for our actions. Hence, although solipsistic contemplation can be a sweet relief from the harshness of our lives as well as a panacea for all our mistakes, solipsism makes a mockery of Existential good faith. *In The Great Philosophers*, Karl Jaspers quotes Kierkegaard:

> In place of bottomless, endless reflection which leads to nothingness, stand immediacy, origin, actuality, authenticity, presentness (280).

Kierkegaard calls solipsism "poisoned reflection," that takes no account of anything the self does not wish to know, or suffer from; and Nietzsche takes an even stronger stand against the self-deceptive self: only "the decadents need the lie of Idealism. . .that degenerating instinct, anti-life. . .versus saying yes to reality, with courage." (GM 212). Endless, poisoned self-reflection cannot be courage, because courage means the willingness to face pain and difficulty. The dreaming self is simply "decadent."

Jaspers explains the confrontation with reality, which must, and always will, shake our pretty fictions:

> Confronting reality, therefore, is always like breaking out of illusion. . . I attain this experience of the real only as I become myself. Transcendence is inaudible as an experienceable

> mundane being; its voice is audible only to
>
> [those with the courage to live].(PE 78)

Mirror-gazing reflects illusion, a facsimile of reality that can subvert truth. The attempt to see ourselves and to know who we are is always valid; but we cannot see into the depths of our totality of experience (and our history) with our mirrors, but see only superficial glimpses, tricks of light, the outer and not the inner self. And we cannot know the difference unless we stay fully conscious, not in dreamy gaze but in vigilant soul-searching. We must stay awake. Kierkegaard contrasts Gethsemane's Christ, seeking self-knowledge and answers in the face of the horrors of human life from which he will not run—versus his friends, who instead of "watching and praying" with him continue to sleep their way through human history's crisis. Without our discipline in staying awake, the dreaming self "anesthesized by rationalization and denial [thus] erodes the sense of positive personal identity" (Goldberg SWD).

Warren repeatedly portrays his characters in *Brother to Dragons* as dreaming, asleep, either lulled by surface images or unconscious of what the mirror might potentially show them, if they were paying attention. *Brother*'s characters lose themselves in their dreaming, and Thomas Jefferson's lostness is all the greater because of the grandeur of his dreams. Jefferson's idealistic dream of a new nation of "new men" has been, as such dreams will be, purchased in blood, a cost he will not admit we

owe. Meriwether (and RPW) will not let Jefferson indulge in his bloodless, celestial reveries:

> . . .to build Monticello
> That domed dream of our liberties floating
> High on its mountain, like a cloud, demanded
> A certain amount of black sweat
> That cloud of your dream! (BD 70)

Meriwether indicts Jefferson's disjunctive, partial and mystical vision, his dream of reality, wherein the evil subjugation and exploitation of human being that Jefferson helped to perpetrate against other people, robbing them of their freedom, laid the foundation for Jefferson's personal dream-castle of "liberty." Meriwether reminds Jefferson that "We are men, and the self/ Is what it is and not/ What the self dreams itself to be" (27) .

The other characters in *Brother to Dragons* dream their lives away, too. Letitia so fears the disturbing reality of her marriage that she stays abed, literally hiding under the covers, or sleepwalks through the events of her days. She convinces herself to see Lilburne's abuse and depravities as "only a dream now . . . And this was the real-- /Firelight dancing so pretty in the dark room." (50) She casts herself as a romantic heroine with Lilburne as her swain. For barely-conscious and self-centered Letitia, anything that is "so pretty" must be real, and the baleful realities of their lives only the "bad" dream she has. Isham and Lilburne dream of their mother's love; for Lilburne the shared dream is much more important than actual experience.

Reacting as if his mother-dream is reality (and her temporal horizon non-existent, as if she lives forever because he wills it so), he rages against his brother because in their dreams, Lucy sings to Ishy, but not to him. Lilburne's "dark dream" of his growing madness, the "soft-foot nightmare," and Jefferson's "golden dream" prove equally murderous, in that both dreamers are so entrenched in their solipsism that the verities of their lives, and of their own actions, cannot penetrate.

Warren uses the dream motif in doubleness, as well, distinguishing between the *in malo* dream of existential abdication, and the *in bono* dream of hope, and virtue. The unconscious and cowardly self dreams to escape reality; but Warren does envision the dreaming that can edify us, those beautiful hopes we cherish that lift human effort into overcoming adversity, making things better for society, and elevating human effort into virtue, or even holiness. Warren's love for America, and his honesty, revere such dreaming; and without Jefferson's visions our country, its people, and the unprecedented power of its principles--this Great Experiment of liberty--might not exist at all. Warren does say that the dream of Jefferson and of America can uplift us to the degree that it unflinchingly guards reality, only if it never shirks our mandate of truth.

Having met his Minotaur, overcome with dejection and regret, Jefferson disdains his former dream of liberty. He comes to believe that he has been "lost who had dreamed there was a

light"(119). But Lucy will not allow Jefferson to gainsay this dream:

> Your dream, dear Brother, was noble.
> If there was vanity, fear, or deceit in its
> condition,
> What of that? For we are human, and must work
> In the shade of the human condition (118)

Meriwether, too, now purged of his need for vengeance against Jefferson's Idealism, sees possibility, "A nobler yet to dream." But nobility must be earned, Lucy says, and we earn nobility only when we embrace the existential truths of our darkness, our wrongs, and take responsibility for them. Then the dream will be "nobler because more difficult/ And cold, in the face of the old cost/ Of our complicities." The dream will not be the achievement of sentimentalized, reassuring lies or justifications: our vision will demand the truth, eminently valuable, full of anguish, infinitely more precious.

The unconscious self, adrift in dreamy solipsism, must awaken to community and culpability, action and authenticity. The subjective self is "the solitary, integrated, irreducible component of human nature" (Goldberg SWD 82) upon which all our hopes must rest. Brother to Dragons challenges the accepted commonplaces of our beliefs in who we are as a nation, beginning with who we are as individuals; Warren shows us what each self must experience in order to be authentic, as opposed to

fictional, and issues of authenticity lie at the heart of the poem.

> The greatest existential virtue is authenticity. To be an authentic person is to be one who faces the human condition, resolutely accepts his finitude and his death, creatively responds to life, and manfully assumes responsibility for all his decisions. (Karl, Hamalian EI 31).

In *Brother* Warren conducts the dialectic between the authentic and the counterfeit, as another manifestation of the philosophical questions about truth, and lies.

Ineluctably, authenticity is a function of the characters' commitment to reality. Within such slippery antinomies as light and darkness, joy and sorrow, hope and despair, *Brother to Dragons* demonstrates that in every case we do not experience one without the other. Authenticity means that we cannot excise half of experience, and be whole selves. Letitia's name is ‘Joy,’ an authentic possibility made "invalid" by her sickly weakness of character. Rather than admitting, and confronting, her husband's anomie and angst, and trying to help him, she retreats into helplessness, and he sinks into darkness. Lucy's name is ‘Light,’ and Warren shows Lucy as the only true light-bringer; not the counterfeit "light" as mission has become for Meriwether, Jefferson, and Lilburne. Still, in her moment of truth with the slave John, Lucy also retreats from the truth the light reveals, and “goes into the dark.”

The antimonies of good and evil pose our most intensely difficult aporias, more so since current philosophic thought has become so swamped in moral relativism. When is good, evil-- and evil, good? When do other, related realities mitigate and explain, or even excuse, what feels like evil? In an age where Ur-crimes of familial abuse and slayings, infanticide, sexual assaults on children, collective terrorisms by fanatics, and all manner of loathsome deviance and viciousness can be ameliorated by "extenuating circumstances," we seem to have lost the ability to judge. Many today believe, as Modernist philosopher George Santayana claims, "We have surrendered the categories of better and worse. . . we have become mystics when we ought to be men" (IPR 228). Yet most significantly, many if not most people today choose to deny the existence of evil. They adhere to the Platonic spirit of trusting that everyone with sense will choose the good, so that evil is just some kind of bad mistake of faulty education.

In *Brother to Dragons*, although Warren may display sympathy for his devil, he does not excuse him. He demonstrates a strong conviction that evil exists, and that we must first acknowledge it in our own natures, and then wage spiritual warfare to control it in ourselves and our societies. What he does not do is indulge in the denial that says that evil is the not-me or Other. He insists that our inner dualism consists of both good and evil, and must be reckoned with. Here and elsewhere, as in his later poem "Dragon Country" and its dedication to Jacob Boehme, Warren

alludes to the Gnostic, heretical, but in some ways logically persuasive belief that God created evil as well as good. In "Aurora," Boehme says

> Thus I found there evil and good in all things, love and wrath in the irrational creatures as well as in wood, stone, earth [and] humans. . . that, in this world, the godless are just as well off as the pious. . . (in Jaspers TGP 212-213)

Boehme's epiphany shows him sunlight striking a pewter vessel, and he sees that "only when pure light meets with darkness does it become luminous. . . the unfathomable contraiety in all things" (118-119). This argument has raged for millenia; but the so-called heresies do have exegetical bases in Judaeo-Christian scripture. Writers and thinkers like Milton have wrestled with this conundrum, and Warren does raise the question again, but provides no answer, perhaps because it is not especially germaine to his aims in *Brother*. Instead he simply adheres to the belief that evil is as much the reality of Dasein as is good. Warren shows good and evil in the hearts of men, and argues that both are the necessary. In *Speaking With the Devil*, Carl Goldberg says

> Evil is but the shadow that, in this world, always accompanies good. You may have a world without shadow, but it is a world without light --a mere dim, twilight world. If you deepen the intensity of the light, you must be content to bring into deeper blackness, and more distinct

> and definite outline, the shadow that accompanies it (20).

Wherever Warren actually stood on this question is unclear, but he does push us to see the interrelatedness of the categories of the good and evil as manifested in the authentic versus the counterfeit, as well as truth versus lies. Warren's work calls on us to understand such pairings as two halves of human experience.

The same can be said of one of Dasein's most baffling and painful (if not the most baffling and painful) dualisms, one that we shrink from examining just because doing so causes so much misery and uncertainty. The predominant dualism Warren employs most vividly in his dialectic of the real and the counterfeit is love and hate.

Brother to Dragons will end with the salvific sacrificial (unselfish) love of Lucy, who offers the only hope of redemption. However, in every other instance *Brother*'s unsparing depictions of love are drawn in terms of its antithesis, to such pitiless degree that love seems like the most subversive fiction, intransigently inauthentic. Lilburne calls Letitia "beloved," but he despises her and torments her. Letitia swears love for Lilburne, and at the same time detests him, too, and can't wait to leave him. Cat calls Lilburne her “baby-bear,” yet she plays Judas, vowing unshakable love while she makes sure he will be discovered and executed. Isham loves Lilburne and shoots him dead; Lilburne loves Isham, and carefully manipulates him into the fratricide/suicide while providing that they be buried in the

same coffin, loving brothers together always. Lilburne loves his mother so much that he dismembers John; the slaves love Lucy, too, so much that they must despoil her memory. In the Lewis house of horrors, "We all loves each other," says Cat (BD 93).

Brother to Dragon's characters "do what they do and call it love" (53) because their love is truly blind. They do not see or admit to love's dualism, so that they commit the poem's ongoing existential sabotage of clinging to the lie and calling it truth. Such love proves treacherous in its duplicities, as they refuse to exercise discernment about the genuine possibility of hatred within their loving-- or loving within their hatred. Letitia, for instance, will not admit her justified angers and resentments toward her husband. She covers all her rage with insipid compliance. Each of the characters behaves similarly, refusing to look at and hiding their feelings from one another, unwilling to acknowledge that love and hate are two sides of one unity of relationship. They cannot come to such acknowledgment because this admission would threaten their treasured fictions of human being. Seeking to have only pure, unalloyed experience (which is a sham, an im-possibility) and rejecting the duality of experience (which is the truth), they rip each other apart.

RPW and Jefferson argue about the authenticity of love. RPW questions Lilburne's love for his mother. "I should say," he ventures,"that his black need requires some other word"(33). Jefferson, sunk in despondency and bitterness over what he sees as the failure of his dreams and his life, declares that love

doesn't exist at all, but only provides another lying mirror for the lying and solipsistic self:

> . . . love, all kinds, is but a mask
> To hide the brute face of fact,
> And that fact is the un-uprootable ferocity
> of self. Even
> The face of love. . .
> Is but a mirror
> For your own ferocity
> . . . cold eyes spy out
> From the mirror's cold heart, and thus
> Self spies on self. . .(33)

Here Warren's depiction of RPW and Jefferson quarreling signals a vital element of authenticity, one which Lilburne's persona, too, fails to understand: Lilburn and Jefferson do learn to see the darkness revealed by the light, the hatred exposed by love. But in so doing, they allow the darkness and hatred to overcome them, again in blindness to the equally-necessary need to see the equally-authentic light, and love. RPW retorts that Jefferson's new bleak view of love is "old fashioned [and] quaintly nasty," fully as one-sided and untrue as Jefferson's former idealism (34).

Coming to know in a significant way that human nature can hate can also mean we know ourselves to be, at the very same time, capable of the elevation of love, if we choose it. Warren

suggests that we must accept the Existentialist solution; as Goldberg decribes it,

> Competent human development. . . requires courageously facing our vulnerabilities. . . the only way to succeed is to realistically accept our human limitations (SWD 18).

Humankind has historically devoted much of our best efforts to denying our vulnerabilities. What humankind has valued is what we perceive of as strength and power, and vulnerability disconcerts us, and has been relegated to the province of the less-than, a sort of shameful feminine strain in our make-up that we have sought to purge. (A caveat may be the trendy present-day love affair with a morass of vulnerability, a most bizarre and historically unprecedented turn of mind privileging the wounded victim as our model for human behavior.)

Our greatest point of the vulnerability we have historically tried to vanquish comes from our very natures, as being somehow in rebellion against our ideals, vulnerable to temptations and demons of all sorts who call us to unspeakable behaviors, or crimes. This is Jefferson's "infamy of Crete," our hidden inner-beast, astonishingly part of ourselves, ever-threatening to escape into the world and cause havoc. Of course this "infamy" also conforms to the Church's view of original sin; it is St. Paul's lament, that we seem to do the things we really do not believe in doing, and not do the things we really believe we should do; and we feel completely powerless over ourselves, at

the mercy of some mysterious innate other half of our being that thwarts, or wrecks our best defenses (consider the phrases “get control of yourself,” or, conversely, “I lost control of myself”). When we are fortunate, our shadow might only make us foolish. When we are less fortunate, it might make us dangerous. In either case, we fear it.

Like a House of Atreus, *Brother to Dragon*'s fated family carries the seeds of its own destruction in its blood. Warren extrapolates the original-sin blood-taint as he shows humankind’s inexorable historic progress over the earth, leaving mayhem, folly, violence in our wake. Warren/RPW catalogues man's inexhaustible capacity for evil, and Jefferson admits that his disconsolate grief comes from the fact that, although he has always known evil lurked out there somewhere, he has managed, as every person has managed in moments of our lives, to see human wickedness as Other, and not his own, to believe himself invulnerable:

> There's no forgiveness for our being human.
> It is the inexpungable error. It is
> . . . the one thing we have overlooked
> In our cunningest contrivances (BD 19)

Although abstracted human evil is a cunning ploy, we recognize that it lets us off by explaining things too easily, and obviates self-assessment. But the corruption of our own blood is not at all easily explained: "We are betrayed/ and always/ In the house!" (19). With John’s charred bones buried outside, Warren's

echoic allusions to Cain return us to our spilling of our brother's blood, soaking down through the ages of our history, calling to us from the ground, calling on us to answer for our crimes.

Worse, and most horrific of all, by its very nature our innate corruption delights in our "filth." Elated with their psychotic torturing of John in the meat-house, both Isham and Lilburne feel "the agonizing sweetness of possibility [that] grows/ Grows now like love. . ./ vibrant as joy" (72). They find "sweet" fulfillment and "joy" in inflicting pain, in gory sadism. Joy in cruelty: no human heart is, or has ever been, exempt from the experience, however (blessedly) infrequent, inconsequential or repressed it may be. As often as human being desires to help others, it also desires to hurt them. And, as Warren unflinchingly reveals, equally persistent and consistent in this human impulse are our collective conspiracies to deny our own kinship in ruinous malevolence and error.

We have devised elegant philosophies designed to deny the evidence of original sin. We have eloquently "contrived" systems of belief that celebrate all that is rational and moral in human nature; and, in a truly weird example of extreme cognitive dissonance as well as any and all forms of logical fallacy, we tend either to deny or to explain, by using reason, all that is not. The various Western philosophical "isms" that failed to satisfy Warren, and Existentialists, proffer “better” versions of human nature to reassure us. Although each was touted as a

revolution in thought, we are concerned here with those philosophies that contextualize the background for *Brother to Dragons*--Platonism and Neo-Platonism, the Enlightenment, German and Romantic Idealism, Transcendentalism, and to some extent Modernism--all overlap, enmesh, much more like squabbling siblings than different lines of descent. Yet the main point of differentiation between them is basic, and essential, and this point of intersection also distinguishes Warren's Existentialist philosophy as well as his relationship to other philosophic and/or aesthetic systems of belief. The qualitative distinguishing characteristic can be seen in their respective beliefs about the power of reason and the irrational in human being.

Enlightenment Idealism and the Age of Reason deifed reason as the only valid avenue for knowledge. Romantics (including Romantic Idealists, as well as the Dark Romanticism of the American Renaissance) and Modernists believed humanity can gain knowledge through the sensual world as it colors emotions, intuition, subconscious states. Here is no new debate: Stoics versus Epicureans, Aristotle versus Plotinus, et al. The debate continued during the centuries of human development in the Western world, waged most rigorously in the evolution of the Church, as the Christian Church, not surprisingly using the same methods as classical Rome, appropriated and incorporated much of what it encountered in its conquests.

Church precepts contain and entertain much contradiction. St. Augustine clearly demonstrates how the soul loves and needs experience, concretely lived being, inherently and rightfully participating in and learning from material reality. And the heart-stopping gorgeousness of art and aesthetics the Church fostered (including the artistic self-expressions in the Gothic) testify to its investment in what the human consciousness could glean from the ecstasies of Being, beyond reason and rational thought. However, New Testament Christianity, (mainly via St. Paul, with both his personal antipathy to the flesh and early-Church encounters with Greek philosophy) also, concomitantly, often evolved to such Platonic excess of elevating reason to the total exclusion of the sensual world, as existence meant nothing and our ideas of eternal essence meant everything. (It is easy to see why Kierkegaard, and so many Existentialist theologians, have spent so much time trying to revise received Christian doctrine and restore what they believed were the existential principles of Christianity.)

However Eliot's mind of Europe, especially as we see in the Medieval *zeitgeist* and practice, found its third way more often than not. The Medievals looked to the Book of Nature, for example, as a kind of compromise between reason and the sensual or intuitive. Temporal and sensual life were still imagined as ideas in the mind of God, and reflections of God's infinite, omniscient reasons for everything He does; but concretely formed, experienced, as artifact/text. It is a beautiful concept to

consider, actually: holding an idea, a part of God's reasoning mind, in our hands, "reading" His thoughts with our touch, like spiritual braille. So that, just as the godly Existentialist philosophers, our forebears saw immanent evidence of God's handiwork in the world he created, and many revered the Book of Nature as a manifestation of Being-itself (Sein), partaking of and not incidental to Godliness. Many critics cite Warren's use of nature in assessing him as Romantic; but in Warren's treatment of nature, we see Romantic technique, but Medieval and Existentialist impulse. It is a nuanced but critical distinction. In general, Medieval man, at least the common man if not some of the disputatious clergy and the vociferous Scholastics, seemed to have had much less trouble with all this argumentation about experience versus ideality; and Dante, after all, was referred to on the streets not as the man who wrote the *Inferno*, but "the man who went to Hell."

Possibly no modern poet of equal stature loved or needed the physical world more ardently than Robert Penn Warren. Like the pioneering Existentialists, and like artists such as D.H. Lawrence with his belief that the human heart is a dark forest, and Dionysian poet Rilke, Warren spurns the Enlightenment conviction that man will be guided by reason, and adheres to a lifelong belief that the verities, and vagaries, of the human spirit are forged in the realities of existent being in experience. His voice in *Brother*, RPW, talks about "episode[s] in the long drift of human/ Experience . . . impressive chiefly in

their senselessness" (44). Yet we must keep in mind that Warren does not equate senseless with meaningless. He seeks to reconcile our (and his own) irrational choices based on the sensuous, with Dasein's obsession with meaning, which is to say, with making some kind of sense of things.

Existentialism best serves Warren's philosophy and his poetry because it does make sense of things, by a commitment to experience and being, but not by invoking the divine-right rule of reason. Indeed, sharing and reworking certain Romantic and Modernist aesthetic theories, Existentialism goes further, seeking no less than the overthrow of the tyrrany of the philosophy of reason. Over the centuries but particularly in the 19th, 20th and now 21st centuries, many aesthetic movements have challenged reason's rule. They are aesthetic theories, though, and not philosophic disciplines, and they do not treat the debate with philosophical rigor. In contrast Existentialism, although also aesthetic is above all a philosophy, as it seeks to depose the aescetic, and effete, reign of Plato, whose philosophy, abetted by Plato's incorporation into New Testament doctrine, controlled the development of Western thought for thousands of years. When the Church began to lose its absolute authority (for instance, no longer quite able to get away with the incredible iniquities of silencing any thinkers who asked too many questions, like, say, Galileo), "new" Platonists carried the torch. Beginning in the 1700s, Immanuel Kant's powerful hold on the field of philosophy reaffirmed and reclaimed the Platonic

hegemony; thinkers like Bergson, an important figure for Modernism and for Existentialism, and the earlier Existentialist philosophers themselves, from Dostoevsky to Nietzsche to Kierkegaard, had to contend with Kant in their efforts to redefine Dasein and readdress ontology. Kant and his many followers declare the primacy of human reason as the arbiter and *a priori* reality of human life. In its radical alternative Existentialism insists that we can find meaning only by first acknowleding the primacy of Being, existence and experience itself.

In accord with his background in Modernism as well as his affinities with the Existentialist position Warren continually frets over the failure of reason to account for the human heart and its works. As Bergson says "Our reason, incorrigibly presumptuous, imagines itself possessed . . . of all the essential elements of the knowledge of truth" (CE 55). Bergson blames the presumptions of Rationalism on Plato-in-our-hearts, as we are "born Platonists," and Bergson warns against what he calls "the mechanistic mind," a coldly scientific and mathematical, and artificial replacement for the ineffable mysteries and truths of human being. Kant's philosophy removed mystery and the ineffable from the realm of Being, and from our beliefs about the truth of our own being:

> The human intellect is enough: such is precisely the Kantian solution. [This intellect's] principle role was to give to the whole of our science a relative and

> human character, although of a humanity already somewhat deified. . . while assigning to knowledge an extra-intellectual matter, [still, knowledge was] either coextensive with intellect or less extensive (Bergson CE 390).

Even a cursory look at the canon of Robert Penn Warren's work shows his deep suspicion of the deified intellect, as well as his reverence for knowledge. In *Brother to Dragons* Jefferson's description of his delusional epiphany about humankind illustrates the Kantian reliance on the hegemonic definition of man as *cogito ergo sum*:

> . . .the towering
> Definition, angelic, arrogant, abstract,
> Greaved in glory, thewed with light, the bright
> Brow tall as dawn (8).

Jefferson's aggrandized, sterile, and ultimately frightening vision of what man is, though, is not the truth. Instead this abstract definition is his "infatuate encounter," his monolithic chimera.

Much earlier than Warren's *Brother to Dragons*, Kierkegaard had thrown down the gauntlet, announcing (in a somewhat eerie coincidence) that Existentialism would liberate philosophy. Monroe Beardsley, in *European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche*, discusses Kierkegaard’s campaign against Kantian Idealism, and Kierkegaard’s challenge:

> a declaration of independence. . . from the whole tradition of rationalistic 'systematic' thought which. . . held the stage in Europe for at least two centuries" (EPFDN 92)

Such thought had held the stage for much longer: Kantian Idealism just found novel, clever new terms to rework Plato. From Plato came Kant's theory of "the thing itself" that focuses on what Kant deemed the real (the ideal, in "universal mind") behind the illusory (the "phantom" of existence). It naturally follows that the corporeal life of the body would have little to do with true humanity.

Kant's thing-in-itself translates to mean essence, or the Kantian authentic, while sense-datum of concrete existence is the Kantian inauthentic, only the Platonic illusion of higher reality. Some Modernists liked Kant's phrasing of the-thing-itself, but used it for entirely different ends. They sought not disembodied idea, to the exclusion and disregarding of existent experience, but Bergson's *elan vitale*, the spark of Being in the existent, the purity of aliveness in the (only) existential transcendent of Being-itself. In contrast, Kant says that "in the Transcendental Aesthetic . . . all [and] any experience possible is nothing but appearance" with no independent existence without our thoughts (435). In Kant's scheme, then, the reality of existence in the world becomes temporally non-existent, as it becomes "idea"; and everything in man (including his horizon of temporality, and thereby possibility) that is not intellect is

also non-existent, or at best useless distraction, since the only legitimate existent in man is, also, idea. The entire world of human existence and being dissolves into one cloudy vapor of "idea."

Kierkegaard despised Kantian philosophy, and his writings are filled with jibes at what he considered to be an indefensible belief system. Most of all he deplored the fragmenting and splitting of the self that Kantian Idealism effects. In his disdain for Rationalism and Idealism called "Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the 'Philosophical Fragments,' An Existential Contribution," Kierkegaard succinctly defines his complete opposition to the Kantian/Platonic: "The question is really . . . the separation of the intellect from all else in man"; a separation Kierkegaard found not only ridiculous but abhorent (AKA 190-93; 95, 252). The Kantian assault on existence compels Jaspers to call for an entirely new attempt at ontology; he says that "since Kant, every ontology must be rejected" because the influence of Kant on philosophy so perverted our beliefs about the meaning of Being.

Existentialism refutes any argument that Being is contingent on intellectual comprehension. Being-itself is not contingent at all; it is the one and only *a priori* condition. Also, Existentialist philosophy views knowledge as more rich, substantive and even miraculous, than an extension or function solely of the intellect. Bergson's primacy of the Dionysian e*lan vitale* agrees with both the atheist Nietzsche (who rails against

"the Tartuffery of old Kant") and the devout Kierkegaard in the insistent call for our passionate response to existence, e.g. engagement. Bergson explains why only a passionate response to being will suffice, and exhorts us to extend and risk ourselves, beyond reason:

> Thousands of variations on the theme of walking will never yield a rule for swimming: come, enter the water, and when you know how to swim, [only then] you will understand how. . . swimming is connected to walking. . . You must take things by storm. You must thrust intelligence outside itself by an act of will (CE 212).

Robert Penn Warren's formula for the attainment of wisdom always depends on faithfulness to experience. First, Warren honors the experience itself, for itself; and if we gain knowledge, or wisdom, it comes as grace.

In *Brother to Dragons* he contrasts Jefferson's abstracted and deified intellectualism to images of what Nietzsche calls "the lap of Being, the concealed God," images Warren finds in nature (EPFDN). Jefferson's reason seeks to "redeem Nature"; Warren uses this same phrase often in his poetry, to speak of our need to try to find something explicable, meaningful, in the inexplicable; and to try to justify existence. He shows the paradox of this need, a problem in that meaning remains elusive, and rationales ineffectual. In *Brother*, he declares that, if anything, the vivifying Being in Nature might redeem us, and it

will have nothing to do with reason, and explain nothing, but only be itself:

> The red-bud shall order forth its flame at
> the incitement of sun
> The maple shall offer its golden wings for
> the incitement of air
> . . . the redbird whistles, the flame wing weaves,
> And the fox barks in the thicket with its
> sneezing excitement.
> The ceremony of joy is validated in the night-cry
> And all earth breathes its idiot and promiscuous
> promise:
> Joy (BD 95-96)

For Warren, the idiot and promiscuous promise of Being is an ultimate good and a heartfelt knowledge, no less beatific because it makes no sense and no distinctions about its revelation. Being announces its capricious, fleeting and wholly irrational immanence and transcendence. Being exists beyond Dasein; promiscuously, the sun shines alike on sinners and saints, rain falls on the just and the unjust. This existential gift of existence and experience from nature's lap of Being and the concealed God comprises the true *a priori* condition of life. And sometimes, he suggests, this gift is enough to sustain us; and sometimes it is the only thing that will sustain us. In the human wasteland of Lilburne's world, Being-itself promises legitimate

joy even as the insane machinations of human being has forgotten, or cannot know, that joy. Reason fails us; Being does not.

Kantian Idealism holds that reason is an *a priori* condition of our lives, and Warren aligns himself with the Existentialist refutation of such a notion. In Kant's Platonic schema of the categorical imperative, in our natural state we will--reasonably-- commit only those acts we know to be good, useful, and worthy enough of universal application. As his *Foundation of Ethics*, he claims the authority of a higher moral law, which he believes we all can recognize. Kantian critic Robert Paul Wolf says

> Kant utterly repudiates the suggestions that our moral judgements might be conditioned upon human nature. . . we must suppose [moral] judgements to be universally valid and binding no matter how our tastes, inclinations, sentiments, and dispositions might alter. . . Kant insists that Ethics, like Logic, must discover unconditionally *a priori* cognitions, or moral laws (FE xiv)

Kant declares that humanity shares ethical "cognitions," thoughts, as an *a priori* category for us, and these universally apply. Although most Existentialists would disagree, either in whole or in part, there may be convincing rationale for believing in some version of higher moral law, and our global historical development (religious, in particular) demonstrates a remarkable consistency in what we have deemed Ur-crimes, for example. This

much Existentialists, and especially those who are religious, might concede. Even though an *a priori* natural law does require a God-spirit of some sort who established it, outside or above (or, perhaps, immanent in or a part of) the *a priori* of Being-itself, still reconciling Existentialist philosophy and (non-rational, spiritual) faith in God poses far less problems than trying to rationally explain God in Kant's universe. In other words, believing in a “higher” moral law must attempt logical proof of the existence of some kind of a God, to accommodate Kant's theories of our *a priori* spiritually “logical” needs for morality, ethics, etc. This posed significant problems for the mathematical, scientific, and machine-enamoured Enlightenment, just as it does for many today.

But even if we accept a concept of an *a priori* moral law, the waters quickly become truly muddied when we talk about actually following such laws. Warren’s intensely thoughtful ruminations in *The Legacy of the Civil War* show that both Idealism and Pragmatism (based on the concept of Natural Law) are equally dangerous, explaining that the simple but treacherous problem with Natural Law is—-who gets to decide what that law dictates; and then enforce it? But further questions persist as well. For one thing, isn't what Kant describes, literally our conscience; and if so, isn't it feeling and intuition, and not reason? Or at best, say, half and half? And isn't any moral law conditioned on our too-intimate knowledge of evil, as well as of the good, and on our guilt? Because, wouldn't such *a priori* moral

law presuppose, again, an unreasonable concept like original sin, most certainly a function of human nature, wherein in order to authentically understand the wrong and shun it, we must, at some level, also possess the capacity of empathy, to imagine doing the wrong, even if we choose not to? Since how could we choose at all unless we know fairly exactly what both options, the fruit of the good and of the evil, really are? For example, a child must be taught to share with others. In his "natural" mental universe, reason tells him that sharing is bad, and selfishness is good; and for his purposes of "usefulness," he is right. Thus, (as all of *Brother*'s inquiry leads back to original sin) wouldn't evil (in this case, avarice, selfishness) then be fully as much, equally, an *a priori* "cognition" as good? And wouldn't that presuppose what Kant dismisses as the "inclinations" of each individual, in that we're free to choose, and our moral choices mitigated by circumstances (such as killing someone who was torturing our child, as opposed to killing someone for his wallet); and so how can ethics be *a priori* regardless of the individual?

Kant's categorical imperative gets even more vertiginous in the hands of his followers:

> Hume [follows Kant], and argues that our mind is so constituted that we are disposed to feel a natural sentiment of approval for actions, persons and objects which are agreeable to ourselves and others (FE xiii)

Wouldn't such approval and consensus, again, be contingent on the tastes and inclinations that Kant calls irrelevant? And even more unsettling, what if what we and others find so "agreeable" is bad? Kantian philosophy does not solve the unanswerable contradictions. Secure in the Platonic ideality, Kantian philosophy assures us that human nature will naturally conform to the *a priori* fait accompli of reason. Many have associated such an imperative of human nature with the concept of Natural Law, as if it spontaneously birthed itself out of the universe, like a spore, or like Wisdom springing full-grown out of the head of a god. Further, Kant and his followers also rely on Plato's conflation of the good with the useful, e.g. we will incline toward the good-- because it's good for us. And Transcendental Idealism spins away in its dizzy spiral of circular logic.

Of course, the worst problem with Kantian Idealism is that it fails to address the reality that we don't, and often and maybe usually won't, always seek the good, or the useful. As Robert Penn Warren's poetry declares in volume after volume, hideous image after image, we will seek the bad just as fervently, and nothing could be more clear from our history than the temerity and odiousness of the bad we will seek; and it will not be good or useful for anyone, including ourselves. We will seek it regardless of our educations and enlightened reason, either because our ravening emotions and appetites over-rule any semblance of reason; or, more likely, because our reason shifts

to justify whatever it is we desire, as we will seek the bad just because we want to, and we like it.

Kantian Idealism, then, maintains that morality operates according to reason: "It is clear that all moral concepts have their seat and origin entirely *a priori* in reason" (Kant FE 32). Warren's Jefferson must be contextualized in his history, in the beliefs surrounding his own personhood. Romantic Idealism in philosopher-writers like Rousseau gave posterity an ideal image of human nature, and elevated man to godhood; Enlightenment figures like Deism's Franklin, literary and philosophical minds like Diderot, Voltaire, along with other scholars and artists of the Encyclopedie in France, concurred, and added that our ideality and godhood emanated from our reason. In short, some of the most brilliant thinkers in Europe and America contributed to the ideological faith that reason, largely through education and science, will liberate humankind from its own insanities and suffering by insuring correct moral choices, lifting humankind out of error into our natural, God- (or Nature-) ordained state of ethical order and enlightenment. What a wondrous, enthralling goal to work towards, the perfection of humankind! What a thrilling and visionary premise of rightness, upon which America's founding fathers could create a new nation, of new men.

We cannot help but love them for the hopefulness, vigor and beauty of their ideals; and Warren loves them, too. Yet he shows, as Existentialism declares that the most perverse difficulty with Idealism's theory of reason is that it is unreasonable.

Existentialism does not separate the subjective self from its freedom to choose. The subjective self, in the end, does not base its moral choices primarily on reason; and sometimes reason doesn't factor in at all. Take any random example of spontaneous moral choice, such as a situation in which a young man runs into a burning house to risk and potentially sacrifice his life to save an elderly, ailing person such as his neighbor. Reason has nothing to do with such a moral choice. The boy has his life ahead of him while the neighbor, already sick and old to boot, has lived his life. The old man is not the young man's problem, and doesn't even figure in the young man's own life. Reason clearly demands that the boy should live, the old man die. Yet unreasonable indefinables, like love, honor, selflessness-- or for that matter hatred, villainy, selfishness-- supercede what is reasonable as we choose.

Brother to Dragons is the story of how, and in part why, humankind can and will make the most bewildering kinds of moral choices. Choices like murdering a person over the loss of some spoons, or, more accurately, murdering an innocent scapegoat because life has hurt you; or choosing to inflict illogical and even personally disastrous cruelties solely because we enjoy them. Consider Jefferson's description of a fully reasonable (and pragmatic) moral choice:

> Listen, when some poor frontier mother, captive,
>
> lags
>
> By the trail to feed her brat, the Indian,

> He'll snatch its heels and snap
> The head on a tree trunk, like a whip,
> And the head pops like an egg. (43)

Warren's irony sets up (and sends up) Rousseau's Natural Man/Noble Savage, and thoroughly blasts the image in his Naturalistic treatment. In accord with morality guided by reason, the Indian chooses the perfectly logical action. His act of infanticide is not "senseless" at all, as, say, Isham's brainless killings are. Rather, the captive infant slows the Indian down, burdens him with an unnecessary liability, risks his goals, and is not the Indian's concern. In the wilderness, the child probably endangers the travellers, perhaps several other people. Is this a truly moral choice, or a desired one, because it's so reasonable?

Kantian Idealism maintains first that morality is based on reason; and secondly that free will is based on the rational moral choices of the categorical imperative, as an *a priori* known system of valuation:

> Freedom is by no means lawless . . . Rather, it must be a causality according to immutable laws. Otherwise a free will would be an absurdity [and the criterion of applied universality as a test of values] is just the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality. Therefore free will and a will under [rational] moral laws are identical (FE 74).

Neither Existential philosophy nor Robert Penn Warren in *Brother to Dragons* believes that free will's choices rest in reason; both instead demonstrate that free will assuredly is, and must by definition be, "lawless," as opposed to reason-ruled. For Existentialists, the unacceptable postulate of Kantian Idealism stems from its distaste and disrespect for authentic free will. Existentialism argues that free will cannot be less than the subjective self thrown into full-blown and awesome anarchy, amidst which we are each forced to find our way to meaning, sanity, order, morality. This is why free will causes us so much trouble and is the worst thing about us; and also why it is our only path to what Warren calls "glory," and is the best thing about us. Of all the components of conscious human life, free will itself is the least likely to conform to reason.

Free will, its qualitative reality, refers to the necessity of having to make a decision. As St. Paul says, "All things are lawful to me [in my freedom] but all things are not expedient" (I Cor. 6:12). "All things" encompass the possibilities of free will, and not only the reasonable, or reasonably moral. Granted, we might hope morality and reason will condition our choices: the rest of St. Paul's explanation of free-will possibility is "But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak" (8:19). Exercising our freedom should, we believe, consider moral reason (Paul's "expediency"; and the needs of our fellow man). However what we should do is a different issue of moral development; what we can,

and as history vividly attests, what we will do, is "all things." Kantian Idealism says that the exercise of free will inextricably involves moral law, and that its morality guides our path to perfection; Existentialism says that free will resides in the wildly anarchic human spirit, thrown into Being from Nothingness. Free will is the great blessing and curse of our Dasein birthright. It is the necessary, just as original sin is necessary in order for us to know truth and redemption.

If human being is not wholly free, then it cannot be wholly autonomous and responsible for itself. Free will requires choices incessantly, and not only moral choices but choices in every area of human existence and intercourse. The pure quintessence of the dynamic of free will and responsibility must be unconstrained, unfettered. Otherwise, the dynamic itself becomes another fiction, or half-truth. When Kantian philosophy says that a lawless free will would be "absurd," it admits to the core of our existential paradox. Human life is sacred, and/but it is also absurd, and the choices we make reflect endlessly both our holiness and our absurdities.

In rebuttal to the blithe claim that man will improve his mind, make better and better choices, and perfect himself, Kierkegaard says mankind is "not merely in error [as ignorant] but actively; not advancing toward the light [of morality and truth] feebly, but running away from it as fast as his legs will carry him" (AKA 155). Kantian Robert Paul Wolff writes that "[if Kant is wrong] what it would mean is that . . . we are entirely

free to do whatever we might happen to want" (FE 100). His remark shows precisely why Kant is wrong, and points to the Existential burden. We are entirely free to "do whatever we want," and therein condemned to accountability for every single choice we make. Small wonder so many fear Existentialism and confuse it with nihilism, and with a terrifying free-fall of the soul; or that a fair number of evil but canny people have misused the philosophy of Existential free will to justify any lunacies or malignities they devise. But such people happily forget the Existentialist corollary of the inviolate sacredness of each self, by which immorality, and the misuse of free will, consist of usurpation and violation of the free will of other selves.

In *Brother to Dragons* Warren sets his human drama in just such Existentialist terms. Jefferson needs to believe in reason, as do we all. Reason does aid us, enhance us, and we hope guide us to better choices. Nevertheless, free will predicates our condemnation to choose regardless, choose with our whole souls, even, and often, when existence and the choices we face belie all reason:

> Jeff: Reason? That's the word
> I sought to live by-- but oh,
> We have been lost in the dark, and I
> Was lost who had dreamed there was a light
> . . .But can it be, can it be that we are condemned
> To search for it?-- (BD 119)

We do not "live by" reason; we live by the free-will choices we make, and the actions we take. Reason is another gift of Dasein, another part of the totality of our selfhood and human being engaged in our existent reality. But our existential condemnation is to freely choose. No matter how lost and far from reason we find ourselves, how bereft of any surety at all, every single human soul must either will to search for the light, or succumb to the darkness and nothingness that surrounds us.

Free will serves as a narrative and thematic agent of *Brother to Dragons*, the existential act its story. Warren wants us to think hard about the powers of passion and will, and he shows the failure of reason to redeem us. The characters choose their fates. Jefferson chooses to act in pursuit of the confirmation of his definition of man as perfectible, deified, immortal; he sacrifices others to this goal; then he himself becomes bitterly disillusioned. Lilburne chooses to act to confirm his definition of man as reprobate, wallowing in filth; he sacrifices others to this goal; then he is rewarded:

> At last, at last, the thrilling absoluteness
> Of the pure act. Year after year, to have yearned
> For the peace of definition. Here it was. (39)

We must contrast Jefferson's lost definition, proven so wrong, with Lilburne's confirmed definition, and the awful irony of this reversal of man's idealistic hope and expectation.

Warren's story in *Brother to Dragons* is anything but "reason"able, or logical. Both Jefferson and Lilburne confront

the necessity of anarchic free will, the will to believe and the will to act. The mechanism of free will cannot be contingent on reasonable morality. Such morality or its lack resides in the resultant act, emanating from the selfhood of the individual who chooses, the individual guilty of and responsible for every choice. Warren's story enacts Kierkegaard's Anguish of Abraham, the existential moment of agonizing choice from which no man, ever, escapes responsibility. Furthermore, Abraham's (and our own) agon is that so often the choice between our Yea or our Nay, as Nietzsche says, will yield equally miserable consequences. Jefferson can either lie to himself and be a coward and a fool, or accept his kinship with Lilburne in original sin, and admit to evil and guilt within himself; the worst kind of lose-lose decision. The Anguish of Abraham posits our good-faith efforts, as fidelity and faith may be the only answers we can hope for. We pay for our free will with our anguish, or put another way, with our humanness. As Lucy says, "How terrible to think that truth may be lost./ Bur worse to think that anguish is lost, ever." (118). We experience our existential anguish, in the agon of choice, as the common lot of all Dasein, as "one episode of anguish leads to all anguish".

Jefferson's problem in *Brother to Dragons* is not that he does not champion free will and choice, nor even that he refuses to choose. Thomas Jefferson was a man of enormous will; and Jefferson's own vision of democracy depended on the safeguarding of free and autonomous choice. It still does. However, Warren's

problem with Jefferson stems from Jefferson's rigid conviction that some ideal moral ethic of reason can nullify the realities of Being, and of humankind's existence in world. Jefferson admits that he has seen man's depravity. But he felt he had to convince himself our depravity was no more than a child's nightmare. And when reality can no longer be denied, Jefferson blames God for not coming to awaken us. But Jefferson does not see and cannot confess that we have, indeed, used our free will to choose to remain asleep: "I said, I must cling more sternly to the rational hope." (85)

Warren casts Jefferson, even more than Lilburne, as the villain of *Brother to Dragons*, a deliberate philosophical and aesthetic choice that makes sense only in Existentialist terms. Jefferson, the master-rationalist, would refuse our anguish, and convince us to abjure our necessary agon:

> And so to hold joy you must deny mere Nature,
>
> and leap
>
> Beyond man's bourne and constriction
>
> To find justification in a goal
>
> Hypothesized in Nature (8).

Jefferson wants to dismiss the "constriction" of our horizon of temporality, limitation, and necessary anguish. He says we must deny reality, existence. He would justify mankind in a magnificent "hypothesis," the Kantian universe-as-idea. Jefferson's leap of the rejection of the existent in favor of trust in an abstract realm of idea is the opposite of the leap of

faith of James, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Buber et al who insist we must accept and cope with our constriction, not deny it; and we must relinquish attempts to justify (rationalize) intractable absurdity and error, and accept Being for what it is. The opposition of these two philosophies runs deep; Nietzsche calls such "joy" as Jefferson seeks "despising life." Warren calls it murderous.

When Jefferson authors the *Declaration of Independence*, he says he became "Rectified, annealed, my past annulled." Warren's precise word choices achieve startling effect. Jefferson here proclaims that, through his deified reason, he has been purified, perfected. He claims to have been glorified, lifted out of Time itself and raised above the restrictions and flaws of our human condition, in his grand and holy "fate," his absorption into the divinity of abstract Idea. These are alarming meglomaniacal ideas for anyone to have of themselves, as idealizing the world leads to a scary degree of estrangement from reality. The legitimate faithfulness to principles twists out of proportion, to become a fervent belief that whatever goes on between our ears must be indisputably correct, and that our big ideas make us mini-gods. Real life, the concrete fact of our own and everyone else's existence, gets swallowed up in personal fantasy:

> We might take man's hand, lead him forth
> From his own nightmare-- then his natural
> innocence

Would dance like sunlight over the delighted

landscape" (29)

Ironically, Jefferson's reason that he loves so much seems to have flown; in his dreams of a bright happy-land of goodness, he sounds a little like an unhinged fanatic, and a fool.

Warren's language in "annealed, my past annulled" typifies his treatment of the hyperbolic excesses of Idealism. Warren obviously wants us to know that Jefferson's experience of the ideal dream is Kantian Idealism's perversion. Still, we cannot deny the worth of much of Jefferson's principles, nor condemn them wholesale. Jefferson, then and always, did author our democracy, and although he did not achieve his dreamed future-world of all-goodness, he did change the world for the better. He did articulate and work for invaluable truths, truths which Warren also held dear. In the stanzas about the ideal dream-world Jefferson imagines, perhaps Jefferson only sounds so extreme in his silliness because Warren doesn't excell at such lovely fantasies. We could consider that Jefferson's melodramatic characterization in these stanzas may not be fully intentional. The fault may be with the poet, for whom such a utopian dream-land is not really imaginable. However, the melodramatic tone of Warren's stanzas here, as well as Warren's strict control over his material suggests a strategy that deliberately sets an Existentialist approach in counterpoint to Idealism, while it respects the truths of Jefferson's vision.

When Warren's characterization of Jefferson's ideal future employs the Nietzschean paradigm (from *The Birth of Tragedy and the Spirit of Music*), he juxtaposes the golden truth of Apollonian harmony of the mind and spirit against the counter-balance of "our Brother, midnight's enormity," the equally-true Dionysian night of unihibited excess and the body, and emotions. Far from designing another Platonic schema for spirit vs. flesh, Nietzsche makes the point that both Apollo and Dionysus are the truth, at one and the same time; they represent the darkness and the light, existing in perfect wholeness. Both gods of art, their unity of truth impells and inflames the aesthetic, our art, which is our repository for and monument to the continuum of totality of human being. Warren incorporates the creative impulses of art into his philosophical discussion of self creating self; for him these are all manifestations of truth. Throughout *Brother to Dragons*, Jefferson rants against "heels that slew in ordure," the night-maddened, debauched truth of human existence, moving us, shaping our behaviors. During Jefferson's and RPW's argument at Nimes, Warren uses sunlit images of luminous perfection to describe the corresponding human truth of the light of inspired reason and how it, too, has shaped our existence. At Nimes, a triumph of symmetry and balance, in France, an iconographic marker for both the Enlightenment and the revolution of democracy and freedom, Jefferson rejoices in "that land/ of sunlight and the sunlit spirit/ . . . lifted to that genial ray." (27) At this place in mankind's history and time, Jefferson feels first-hand

(e.g., he truly experiences) the light he seeks. Jefferson experiences Nimes as oracular, its ideal achievement giving him the image of human possibility he desires:

> Why I was nothing, nothing but Joy . . .
>
> On all [I] saw the brightness blaze . . .
>
> And my heart cried out:
>
> "Oh, this is man!" (7)

Jefferson is right, and what Nimes has told him is true: this joy, brightness blazing is man. But only half of him.

As RPW is quick to point out, Jefferson's error at Nimes comes when he abstracts the sunlit spirit of reason, lifing it out of Dasein's physical (and temporal) existence because he cannot reconcile both sides of human being. He can cling to reliance on our Apollonian natures; but he cannot allow for our Dionysian natures. He will not see the costs of human glory. RPW admits, but Jefferson does not, the Roman slaughters along their road to Nimes, the slavery and exploitations, the merciless Roman versions of ideal bravery and fortitude that required them to relish the ampitheater's grisly sport, that helped them to spread the glorious triumphs of Greco-Roman culture even as they ranged far and wide for more victims to kill and enslave, more cultures to injure or destroy. Jefferson will not look at the Reign of Terror in his beloved France. Jefferson sees only the beautiful and edifying; and he decides that this is joy, and this is man, because Jefferson cannot bear to believe that man is anything

else. Jefferson's view of human nature must be pure light, the victory and transcendence of ideal spirit. But as Nietzsche says,

> I conjure you, my brethren, remain true to the earth, and believe not those who speak to you of superearthly hopes. . .that dehumanized. . . inhuman world is a celestial naught; and the bowels of existence do not speak unto man, except as man (TSZ 48)

Existentialism never denies that the life of the earth, existence, and man's nature can be unspeakably beautiful and miraculously joyous; just such reality infuses transcendent Being. What Existentialism does deny is that Being, and especially human being, can ever be "idea," separated from existence; such a notion is "dehumanized, inhuman," and prevents us from any knowledge of who we are or what our lives mean.

Certainly we might want to employ fictitious names for what we do-- "to call evil, good"-- perpetuating our self-deception. In a fundamental way, human beings cannot stand to think we are, or can be, genuinely bad people. (Obviously, this is why the Church demands adherence to socio-ethical rules, contrition, penance, and forgiveness; the dogma intends for us face the truth about ourselves.) We hate to admit we err. We hate to feel guilty. Even in varying degrees of neuroses and disorders of self-loathing, well-established in the familiar territory of feeling guilty for everything, the suffering spirit will strive for "reasons," or more accurately excuses, as to why we are so

flawed. It is too difficult for us, neurotic or not, to cleanly admit the truth that we have been mean-spirited, for example, for absolutely no good reason. And we view those very few who will admit such a truth as aberrant, abnormal. We marginalize them, if not lock them up, even though this same aggressive impulse afflicts everyone at one time or another, whether we act on it or not.

We have created a vast, powerful, lucrative and arcane profession of "experts" who can give us acceptable excuses (fancy lies, counterfeit names) for the kind of beings we are. Far from upholding fidelity to reason, we will strain our powers of intellect and belief to construct intricate, spurious justifications for whatever nonsensensical or deleterious things we think and do, in the adolescent compulsion to think well of ourselves. Thereby, we forfeit the honest self-knowledge that does lead to better moral choices, self-mastery, and a more excellent and responsible creation of selfhood. Embittered Jefferson says

> And for another joke, I've seen
> How vanity, greed, and blood-lust may obscenely
> Twine in the excuse of moral ardor and crusade.
> Yes, that's your funniest! (86).

RPW, ever the devil's advocate to Jefferson's pronouncements, suggests "For we might say that Lilburne's heart-deep need/ To name his evil good is the final evidence/ For the existence of good" (90). RPW has a point, albeit a convoluted one. Still,

neither the existence of good nor even our needs for the good equates with the idea that humanity will necessarily seek the good. Additionally, virtually no philosophy has really argued that good does not exist, and surely no Existentialists have done so. They only maintain that the existence of good must be discerned in its relation to the existence of evil. As Jefferson shoots back, in his and RPW's ongoing antagonism, "And if that's all, Why not say evil is evil, and not sweeten/ Your slobber with any pap of paradox?" (90)

Jefferson's question homes in on the problem with millennia of variations on the man-as-innately-good theme. We return to Santayana's categories of better and worse: our Western philosophies seem to have had (and indeed now have, probably more so today than at any other time in history) a great deal of trouble calling our own evil-- evil. Over the ages, we seem to perform the most elaborate tricks of rationalizing in order to keep from admitting to evil in the hearts of man.

Warren hated this ignoble spurning of truth. With the subjective self, both dual and discretely whole, as the indivisible unit of human existence, the dishonoring and finally dismembering of that self in our avoidance of knowing our own reality constitute the most devilish renunciation. Dostoevsky's *The Double* and other treatments of the split-self show this threat to the self:

> In all the double self stories, the protagonists are given the opportunity to reconcile themselves

> with the fearful and despised qualities of their hidden personality. . .they refuse, and their original personality is destroyed (Goldberg SWD 80).

Man can be good and he can be bad. As Kierkegaard says, each and every one of us can be *Either/Or*. But if we deny this obvious fact, the individual self breaks apart, resulting in the loss (and abrogation) of our own singleness and existential unity.

If Existentialist philosophy's foundation of belief rests on existence and the real, its means that without our commitment to our selfhood, the structures of our lives will collapse. Lilburne's soul-deep malaise comes from the knowledge that he has no selfhood; and so does not exist:

> For even Lilburne couldn't know-- knew only
> The incredibleness of each deed done,
> And he must strike though the fog, strike hard
> to find
> Contact with something real,
> Something that will perhaps scream out its reality
> And in that scream affirm, at last, poor Lil's own
> For all we ask in the end is that: Reality. (71)

We ask for reality, but we run from it in fear, in loathing, and never more than when the reality is "[our] own" identity.

Facing these realities is the Existentialist commission. Instead Warren's characters cling to Jefferson's Enlightenment, and to Rousseau-esque feel-good declarations that the very nature of human nature is "noble." Warren's juxtaposing of Rousseau's

ideas versus the belief system of St. Augustine illustrates the central existential conflict in *Brother to Dragons*. In Rousseau's *Confessions*, self-absorbed and self-indulgent, egotistical, the writer claims an innate goodness to justify man (and, mostly, himself). These "confessions" stand in bold relief against St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the writer assures us that the self runs away like an incorrigible prodigal who will as easily wallow in depradation as choose decency, and who needs and must seek contrition and redemption. In the philosophic disparity between these versions of human nature Rousseau argues to convince us of how right we are, contrasted with Augustine's unsparing catalogue of how wrong we can be.

Warren sets the battle between these two opposing views of selfhood. He deconstructs the Kantian idea that "the I is merely the consciousness of my thought," (EPH 418) e.g., as I am busy thinking myself into identity, I also am whatever I think I am. This imaginary-self plays out against Warren's own, very personal beliefs about the self as action and volition, beliefs we find also in Modernism, via Bergson:

> It is then right to say that what we do depends on what we are; but it is necessary to add that we are also. . . what we do, and that we are creating ourselves continually. . . creation of self by self. . .even so with regard to the moments of our lives, of which we are the artisan (CE 9)

Thus Kant is correct insofar as it is true that consciousness requires the self; but Bergson shows that Kant's formula also does away with the connection between selfhood and its acts. Our worries about our own behaviors satisfactorily solved by Kant, we enjoy the option of thinking ourselves and thereby creating ourselves as whole-cloth fictions, which the Existentialist position disallows, since it says that in order to be something, we must do something,in the creative act of self-creating.

Kantian Idealism gives us the lovely benefit of magical thinking, whereby we can indulge our narcissism and "believe in" ourselves, without having to honestly, and honorably, do anything much at all, beyond thinking. As Goldberg explains,

> We fashion masks with the aid of our mirrors, rehearsing them daily in order to conceal our secrets and self-doubts. This conscious refusal to be ourselves. . . provides a magical reprieve from our fears of ourselves. [Rejecting Dasein's horizon] there is no sense of negation of possibility in the unexplored recesses of the psyche. . .In this bargain, [we] are not allowed to experience ourselves consistently as being alive. (SWD 118)

Magical thinking can work any way we choose: we can think ourselves as perfectly fine, or we can think ourselves as unsalvagably reprehensible, and both poles represent a total Narcissistic self-absorption resulting in stubborn resistance to

realistic self-appraisal as well as the disconnection from our acts. Both responses (the good self and the bad self) provide a kind of selfish omnipotence. *Brother*'s Lilburne may crave reality, but he will not pay the price of knowing reality, and so does not experience being alive. Nursing his grievances, obsessively vilifying human nature including his own, he has buried his identity for so long under secrets, hatreds, fears, self-doubts, and delusions, that he has no idea of what his real self might be. At the end he feels no reality, as he has thought himself into being inhuman, a monster. When Lilburne finally "does" what a monster-self does, Warren makes the shocking declaration that Lilburne finally achieves "that perfect certainty of self" he has sought.

The other end of the magical spectrum is more typical, and thankfully, usually less socially deleterious. The self forfeits knowledge in order to remain safe and unchallenged, and thinks itself sufficiently good, justified, worthwhile without any work. In *Brother*, Letitia has retreated back into Edenic innocence, rendering herself incapable of the knowledge of good and evil required for mature judgement. Repeatedly she will say, in her magical incantation, that she "wanted to feel something, but I just couldn't" (59). She clings to her romance of Lilburne and their "love." But her version of love is a childish fairy-tale and holds no meaning, because it springs from her stubborn (and deliberate) untruths about human nature. Warren's effictio/characterization of Letitia is "angel"-- not original

sin's Dasein that has risked all to eat of the tree of knowledge, but some prelapsarian naif, floating above terra firma, like the Nietzchean celestial naught. At no time does Letitia question her own failure to be a true wife to Lilburne, to be a genuine person in her own right and take charge of her own fate, or to take any courageous action to protect her household; nor does she come close to admitting her own, or thereby anyone else's, inner conflicts.

Warren uses the term "knowledge" as interchangeable with wisdom. He esteemed knowledge as one of the highest goals of human being, for himself personally as well as for humanity at large. Any greater knowledge must affect, or be affected by, self-knowledge. One of our current self-improving maxims in American culture states that if we are not part of the problem, we cannot be part of the solution. Glib, a partial truth, like most of the insights of our popular psychology, yet we can glimpse a sound existential concept. Being is what it is, and we endure much that we cannot control, alter, or escape. During the experience of human being in world, our selfhood alone offers us any control, any chance for overcoming, learning, achieving. When, rather than adapting and fashioning our own selfhood so as to decide our own responses to our horizon of possibilities, we hide, then we have nothing left to do. Having done nothing to craft our selfhood, when we have reached the limits of our Dasein we can only sit and wait for the sky to fall in and hope we get lucky. We thereby stupify ourselves and neutralize our power over

our own destinies. We sit content to be victims of circumstances and never agents of creative action. Such acquiescence thwarts and inhibits knowledge; in Warren's lexicon, this kind of "innocence" is never good.

Warren's definition of the self agrees with the key concept of Existential philosophy's formula for finding knowledge. The formula cannot work without the creative and honestly seeking self, fully engaged. Existentialists believe that the existent self is all we get in this life. (The Ungodly Existentialists, especially, stress that beyond existence is nothingness). Sartre, who along with other Existentialists of the French Resistance suffered and endured under Nazism, learned that in order for nobility, heroism, and morality to exist at all, each individual must eschew a life dependent on external circumstance (that is, a life controlled by others, by all that is not-self), and instead pursue a life built on the reality of Being, beginning with our own.

Sartre describes how our "project," our one true job, of creating the self is critical to any meaningful understanding of Dasein's ability to know. Discussing philosophy's evolving search for knowledge, Kierkegaard insists that the self learns by doing, via aware existence:

> The Socratic position . . . precisely accentuates the fact that the knower is an existing individual, and that the task of existing is his essential task (AKA 155).

Kierkegaard describes the Platonic departure from the Socratic, a schism which for Kierkegaard marked a steady historical and philosophical erosion of the categories of both personality and possibility:

> This finds expression in another Socratic proposition, namely that all knowledge is recollection . . . Here the way swings off: Socrates essentially accentuates existence, while Plato forgets this and loses himself in speculation. Socrates' infinite merit is to have been an existing thinker,not a speculative philosopher who forgets what it means to exist (196-97).

This is what Warren means by the impotence and laziness of "navel-gazing.”

This raises another issue, of existential possibility. We might imagine that thinking the selfhood opens us up to infinite possibility: and indeed, day-dreaming provides us with a wealth of ideas of ourselves, and can potentially inspire us. But Warren's versions of navel-gazing do not yield inspiration. Rather, they provide a captivating story-book self we can convince ourselves to believe in, about who and what we are. As Kierkegaard so carefully explains, these fantasies actually rob us of knowlege, because they substitute illusion for the actual doing, or being, of, often, anything at all. In Warren's poetry, he shows how, for many, Kierkegaard's passionate, active and self-aware subjectivity falls prey to the enervating assaults of

Warren's nemesis, the "Platonic lassitude" that ignores and denies our tragic natures, floats in ideal/idea and spurns action.

Kierkegaard's 19th-century warnings about the Modern age foresaw our current crisis of the diminishment of authenticity. Today we learn to "self-talk," to rigidly (and mindlessly) recite the litanies that we are good parents, helpful friends, valuable workers, perfect children of God; no matter how much empirical evidence might show us to have betrayed trust, abandoned others in need, caused no end of damage or pain. Like Jefferson, we convince ourselves to reject reality (our "constraints"), to overcome any experiential proofs that we do not in fact act the way we dream ourselves. We tell ourselves we must get rid of anything "negative" in our thinking, excoriating guilt as being unhealthy for us, since it makes us feel bad. We must never be brought to task for any of the consequences of our actions, as all is first justified, then magically absolved in universal goodness. Thus we destroy authentic possibility-- to learn from our mistakes, to examine and remedy our bad choices, to be useful to ourselves and others, to "redeem" ourselves and acquire virtue. As Warren declares so earnestly in *Democracy and Poetry*, doing away with original sin has enabled us to reach an apogee of Kantian delusion and impotence, as it destroys the self.

CHAPTER 6

THE SELF WRITES THE SELF:

REDEEMING KNOWLEDGE

Warren insists that humankind must find and face truth. We owe the debt of truth first to ourselves, then to others. This mandate precedes every further development of selfhood and community. The narrative twists of Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons* all lead back to the inescapable responsibility of Adamic naming. In Warren's criteria for "pure" poetry, he describes the moment when

> The mist is rifted and we can look straight at the words, which, we discover with a slight shock of surprise, do mean exactly what they say (TWRPW “Pure and Impure” 179).

Existentially, the failure to seek and speak truth is the most injurious cause, and effect, of *mauvais foi*.

Sartre states the Existentialist position that the failure to tell things truly, with the right words--to name the world and ourselves--prevents our capacity for freedom, the highest existential good. Bad faith refusal to validate, through naming, the real, keeps us from being real, too:

> Bad faith occurs in connection with the anguish before freedom. I feel anguish and repress it, [refuse to acknowldege it] . . .I can [thereby] stand at a distance from what I am; I am able "not to be" the anguish that I am . . . In terms of bad faith I am not facticity . . . I am beyond what I have done. (SO 54; BN 44)

Warren's conviction that the self is what we do, not what we say, or think, or dream, means that, for him, spurning the facticity of the human condition and of Being-itself—-a refusal by which human selfhood can look "beyond" what it does, imagining and declaring untruths and deceits about both itself and concrete experience-- constitutes a grave transgression against human being.

Brother to Dragons chronicles Thomas Jefferson's bad faith. Jefferson refuses to name the anguish that he is. He renounces his obligation to name his own being, so that he "stands at a distance from himself," willfully ripping his own existence apart, splintering his selfhood. And, as he will not affirm and name Being-itself, or the being of others, he sows destruction. Warren's painful irony shows us Thomas Jefferson, our national symbol of freedom, committing the existential sin that will absolutely insure that we cannot access freedom.

In *Brother to Dragons* Warren returns again and again to the necessity of naming the real, and to the counterfeit names we reach for in order to hide from the realities of existence:

> And I who once said, all liberty
> Is bought with blood, must now say,
> All truth is bought with blood, and the blood
> is ours,
> But only the truth can make us free--
> Free from the fool lie (8)

Warren ties our fallenness, the tragic, bloody birthright of original sin, to the God-ordained "task," our primary mission, of Adamic naming. Warren's Scriptural declaration that "only the truth can make us free" correlates with the Adamic complex of patrimony he examined in "Billie Potts."

In Western Judaeo-Christian tradition, man created to share in God's nature ("in His image") must shoulder the burden of naming the world of experience (and his own Dasein, his own experience), in truth. To name gives us a way towards a creative evocation of reality; to ascertain true being and to speak it. Warren structures *Brother to Dragons* around the conjuring of naming, as characters appear when they are named, called into being by the invocation of identity. The poem conforms to what the poem declares: "For all life lifts and longs toward its own name,/ And toward fulfillment in the singleness of definition" (76-77).

The Adamic myth says that God created us to create, and specifically to create the language of our being. In this way we participate in the truth, and in creation of self. But like Faust, like Milton's Lucifer, our free will covets knowledge of the truth as God knows it, the full mysteries of good and evil (so that, as the Satan of Genesis says, we will "be like God"); but we pay for this truth with our blood, in perpetuity.

Robert Penn Warren used the leitmotif of Adamic naming throughout his career, and we can trace its development from its distinctive appearance in "Billie Potts," its continuation and further examination in *Brother to Dragons*, to its maturation in *Audubon* ("tell me the name of the world") and his later poems, in which Warren continually seeks "definition," the true name of experience. Martin Buber's elegant homage to Kierkegaard explains the Existentialist connection between original sin and Adamic naming, our speaking of reality:

> Plato believed his soul was perfect. . . Isaiah did not. Isaiah regarded and acknowledged himself as unclean. He felt the uncleanness which tainted his breath; and his words were burned from his lips so that those lips might speak the message of God. (WMB 235)

The Existentialist demand is to speak and to name truth. As the first-father Adam, Jefferson sends his son out into the world, passing on to him the Adamic responsibility to name experience: "But my own blood will go/ To name and chart and set the human

foot," he says of Meriwether (BD 9). Meriwether's tragedy begins when he realizes that Jefferson does not want to hear the true names Meriwether finds, and rather seeks "confirmation" of Jefferson's own dissembling, even as Meriwether will not lie.

The Adamic impulse also means that each of us, intrinsically, longs for the world to be named and yearns as Warren yearned for definition. Lilburne is arguably the most passionate yearner in *Brother to Dragons*. If he could but name his nature as dual, perhaps then he could have confronted it before it overcame him. But he does not have the character and the inner unity of heroism required in naming truth.

Warren explores the many facets of denial, as characters fail to fulfill their duty to name. Warren reprises the traitorous mother in "Billie Potts," she who swears the "stranger" she has killed cannot be her son Billie, because her Billie had a name and a "face," but the stanger "ain't got one and never did.” In *Brother* Cat says her terrifying "son" was "Not Lil, oh, no-- hit's some mean stranger, sly/ To come and steal yore name and face away/ . . . hit ain't my Lil" (124). Then the false mother Cat turns him in to be hanged. Warren shows us that Lilburne demonstrates more self-awareness than any of those who refuse to name him for what he is. He admits the darkness in his own identity; it is everyone else who shuns the truth. Lilburne "name[s] my dream": he knows the dream, in fact, to be nightmare. Letitia intuits Lilburne's soul-hunger for the identity no one would, or could, help him understand:

I saw the tears.

But I couldn't budge.

If just I touched him, just a finger-weight.

Or named his name, named "Lil," so sweet and low.

Then all might be different. . . (57).

But Letitia, like *Brother*'s other characters, goes mute at the very moment experience and existential responsibility call on her to speak.

Jefferson devotes his entire life to prevarication, to eluding the honest naming of Dasein and escaping the anguish of naming: "But I could not accept it. I tried / . . . but the pain persisted / And the encroachment of horror" (85). RPW castigates Jefferson's rigid refusal, even in death, to tell the truth and name the horror:

. . . you could not, apparently, bring yourself to speak

Of the family scandal, you continued to declare

The boast,

Cut in the stone. . . (84).

Jefferson's epitaph (his own name, carved in stone), lies. Refusing his existential duty to name accurately, Jefferson preserves his "indulgent fiction"; he "defend[s] my old definition of man." Jefferson further defends himself by retreating into a familiar excuse, that "Language betrays./ There are no words to tell Truth." (7). But in turning from the

necessity to try to seek the true words, he retreats into rejection of original sin, in his moral relativism calling man's possibility for wickedness only "provisional paradox" instead of its true name of evil. Jefferson's refusal, and, Warren warns by extrapolation, our own, intimates refusals to name, and brings dire, direct consequences: "And thus my Minotaur" (7). Only when Jefferson does name evil, evil--does he begin to move toward redemption.

A tragic suicide, Meriwether nevertheless exhibits more bravery than Jefferson, along with more wisdom in the search for knowledge. Meriwether accepts Jefferson's great commission to name and chart America. He faithfully reports on the mysterious mountains that chime like great bells, the Shining Mountains, "that is their name"; he hears his own echoing heartbeat, and asks "Is this the name of delight?" (112). Yet Meriwether's immediate counter-awareness admits to the suffering and pain also part of experience: "But tumors on legs. . .some spat blood. . ." (112). Meriwether endures his appalled anguish to know truth and to fulfill the inherited patrimony to name. In the end, Meriwether himself, like Lilburne--and unlike Jefferson--finally comes to know the name of his selfhood, and to speak it: "I rose alone and spoke aloud and declared myself" (14). At the end of his life, Meriwether has earned his knowledge and will name truth. Jefferson's mendacity extends from past into present into future, as he demands to the end that his epitaph maintain his idealized "name." Yet even the juvenile and hapless Isham, in

hiding, understands that a man must not die to lie beneath a monument bearing an alias, the falsified name the world might mistakenly give him: "He knew me, Isham, and they knew my name/ I died right easy when they named my name" (123).

Language does betray; and often it does seem impossible to identify and name the world rightly. Existentialist philosophy, though, upholds the conviction that we must try. If language betrays, it is still our best hope: As Jaspers says,

> Reality is that which can be narrated only in the form of a story; e.g., that anything exists at all rather than nothing, the facticity of the actual world, the primordial phenomena as an appearance of this reality. Only the language of the imagination. . . touches reality that evades all objective investigation (PE 83).

Warren calls *Brother to Dragons* the story of "issues [that are] a human constant" (BD Foreward). Employing a carefully crafted, controlled and complex strategy, Warren extends his mirrored doubling to accomplish a metatextual commentary of extraordinary effect. Existentially, *Brother*'s characters must not only create their selfhoods: they must also write them. The self becomes the "subject: I," the reality of Jasper's "facticity" as Warren shows the characters writing their own stories. In keeping with Kierkegaard, Heidegger, et al, Warren structures his story/stories so that language does literally function as the house of Being; and RPW, the humble persona/master of the house

is at the same time the poet Robert Penn Warren, who must also create and document his own personal story of selfhood as he goes along.

Warren's prefatory list of characters reiterates the language of Jefferson's monument, "Author of the Declaration of American Independence," and directly beneath this entry Warren lists RPW as "the writer of this poem." Warren thus announces that Brother will concern the writer, telling the story. Telling the communal story relates back to the individual, as Warren names the character RPW for himself: Adam most literally naming Adam. Warren employs the same thematic focus we saw in "Billie Potts" and in his narrator in that poem, but goes farther into a courageous self-revelation as the persona is named his name. At issue is the existential burden to name experience rightly, to then arrive at knowledge by having fulfilled the poet/writer's calling of fidelity to telling the truth.

Telling the story of Being animates RPW's selfhood and his own history, as "from the old times when, like a boy/ I thought to name the world and hug it tight" (BD 25). For as long as he can remember, RPW has searched for meaning. As Heidegger says

> We are, after all, meaning-oriented beings. We create our personal identity in the stories we tell ourselves about what has happened to us. [These] reveal a paradigm of how we see ourselves in relation to world. . . because we cannot empirically discover any absolute truths, we

> derive our stories from a wide variety of sources--events, legends, myths of family and society--in order to create a reliable guide for existence (BW 132)

RPW/Robert Penn Warren, a "real" existing writer as well as mythic persona, struggles with getting the words right, to get the story straight. Warren's poetic and philosophical obsession with naming the world of experience encompasses his view of art as mission, and responsibility.

As Warren/RPW tells the story, he goes so far as to show himself in the throes of the Adamic (and writerly) process, revealing both the difficult discipline of finding and telling truth and how easy it is for us to be deceived, mainly by ourselves. He allows us to witness the Socratic existing thinker, juxtaposed with Jefferson's Platonic speculative; we see the poet-storyteller's struggles first-hand, hear the inner debates and dilemmas he undergoes. Significantly, Warren invites us most fully into this process during RPW's confrontation with the snake, one of *Brother*'s archtypal emblems of original sin. When RPW meets the big serpent coiled in the ruins of Lilburne's home, RPW's first reaction is purely Romantic, melodramatic, veering into hysteria. He sees the snake as mythic and metaphorical, "as though those stones/ Bled forth earth's inner darkness to the day--/ . . .the scaled belly of abomination" (24). The man falls prey to paralyzing fright at what feels like a demonic

visitation, “converted into the metaphysical chill, and my soul/ Sat in my hand and could not move".

But RPW is a writer and committed to the good faith of his calling. He knows we live in bondage and injure and defraud ourselves when we fail to call things by their right names. Recovering from his initial fear, RPW steels himself so that as the existent thinker he can focus on reality, and not on speculation. He forces himself to address the snake as itself, and not as his fever-dream:

> 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. . .
> No, none of these, no spirit, symbol, god,
> Or Freudian principle, but just a snake. . .
> (24-25)

Then, RPW must do as we all must do, and never with more determination than when we face our deepest confusions or fears: in an exercise recalling Melville's extensive cataloging of the whale (as another—falsified--symbol of evil, the leviathan of apocryphal scripture), RPW needs to jettison the illusory and identify the real, carefully elucidating the snake's true name.

> Black Snake, Black Pilot Snake, the Mountain
> Blacksnake,
> Hog-snout or Chicken Snake, but in the books

Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta,

And not to be confused with the Black Racer. . .

(25)

RPW's diction and voice change as his comprehension and response change. The extreme, overwrought language changes. Naming the real, he speaks directly with the straightforward assurance of authenticity and concreteness that truth brings: "This really happened," RPW tells us, and the giant snake "reared/ up high, and scared me, for a fact." Yet now, having freed himself from the imaginary (deceptive) names for experience (e.g., freed by real experience in that "this happened"), RPW also frees himself from the paralyzing terror. Armed with truth, he can reasonably cope with fear, and reconcile with reality: "There's no harm in them, though."

Warren pairs RPW with Jefferson, the other half of the twinned narrative voice telling and writing the story of *Brother to Dragons*. Jefferson and RPW serve as the two trustees of the interpretation(s) of the story; and they are each other's equals as writers of stature, but also as scholars and philosophers. As a writer, Jefferson must live up to the lofty role of being the author of American democracy. The poem examines and raises questions about the writer's responsibility to speak the truth, and how Jefferson bears culpability for failing to truly name the human condition, either in his egotism and blindness to, or his well-cultivated ignorance of, the real truth, or in deliberately using language to manipulate and shade truth. As readers caught

up in *Brother*'s narrative, Warren's metatextual aims and methods with Jefferson are so subtle and interwoven that at first we don't even see Warren's hand; but Jefferson is that consummate politician, a political leader so powerful that he could, and did, indeed change the world with language.

Overall *Brother to Dragons* confines Jefferson largely to the personal crises of his own family, as he must seek to understand what those events might teach. Jefferson and RPW, though, engage in lengthy philosophical debate about many of our most cherished and most difficult concerns about our humanity: morality, freedom, the truth about human nature, how a person can live a virtuous life in this often-pitiless world. When Jefferson slips into hyperbole, shading remarks emotionally, and other rhetorical habits, the persona RPW helps to strip away inexorably Jefferson's own created persona to find answers. That is to say: Warren wants us to see that we cannot always trust Jefferson's (or any political) rhetoric. Jefferson's avocation of grand assertions and an emotionally charged writer's style is suspect. When does a politician tell the plain truth? Jefferson is also an intellectual, and a philosopher as well as a statesman. His powerful ability to persuade people with his language cannot help but invest his remarks, even herein where his remarks are so, very, personal. Hence for Jefferson to announce that "language betrays" is another of Warren's highly complex and multi-layered and ironic pronouncements. Considering the shady and not-quite-sane state of political rhetoric in America today, with our

elected officials and policy-makers, Warren's treatment of Jeffersonian (political) rhetoric that needs the leavening of good sense, honesty, and intellectual and ethical rigor is particularly apropos, as it presaged the convolutions, mistaken judgements, and general obfuscations we hear from our own politicians, every day.

Jefferson and RPW are both philosopher-writers of the human experience. But whereas RPW forcibly exorcises his Romantic tendencies (as well as his Naturalistic tendencies) to try to tell the truth, Jefferson does the opposite. Jefferson wills to expunge the truths he sees in experience, trying to make truth conform to his romanticized idealism:

> I knew we were only men,
> Defined in our errors and interests. But I,
> a man too--
> . . . stumbled into
> The breathless awe of vision. . .
> So seized the pen, and in the upper room
> . . . wrote. . . (8)

Warren sneaks more Judaeo-Christian allusions into Jefferson's remarks. Jefferson places himself in the story of the upper room of (the risen, the revealed) Christ and the early Christians, heroes devoted to changing the world and redeeming fallenness, caught in celestial "vision." Jefferson seizes on the awe of a divine light through which he views humankind, even as he sets aside experience's evidence of the actual definition of man.

Jefferson, too, would redeem the world. However, Jefferson's blinding "light" does not reenact a Damascus-road experience of expiation, nor contain the message of necessary sacrifice and atonement personified in the experience of the upper room. Both of these scenarios reaffirm man's tragic nature (his sin), and his responsibility for its consequences; and all hope proceeds from this essential premise. Whereas St. Paul's vision on the Damascus road blinded him with awareness of his own guilt, Jefferson's light blinds him to the fact of man's guilt; and so comes from a faulty premise, deceiving him:

> I had not seen the eyes of that bright apparition
> I had been blind with light.
>
> I did not know its eyes were blind. (8)

He does not, will not, "see" that his vision of mankind results from blindness, and his vision has in turn blinded him to the truth. Only in retrospect can he admit that what he has felt as vision turns out to be "apparition."

RPW and Jefferson share a dual agenda. Both men write America, trying to discover and articulate meaning, for individual Dasein and for the common weal. So, too, does Meriwether Lewis, who also impacted and altered American history and the American character with words, as his words attempt to recreate the existent. He and his co-author Clarke, his “brother,” he says, committed themselves to documenting the American continental “West,” the land settlers longed for, but

feared as that great unknown. The journals from the Lewis and Clarke expedition fascinate readers as much today as they did long ago, their writings an encyclopedic diary of everything man experienced--via seeing, hearing, tasting, touching--in the Promised Land of West: "We were soldiers,/ And simple. But recorded all days,/ The little and the large" (111). From the infinitesimal details of minutia to the sweeping broad strokes, from the individual to the universal, the real-life writer Meriwether kept faith with his commission.

The writers all try to envision truth and to record it, but the story of Being will not perfectly cohere, not logically nor aesthetically. There is art; and then there is life, and the former can only serve as commentary for the latter, but never replace it. Even Meriwether's scrupulous recording cannot yield the fullness of the truth of his experience, just as Jefferson and RPW cannot recreate the fullness of the truth of theirs, or of Lilburne's. The truth will not stay straight. *Brother to Dragons* is very much about being a philosopher-writer, a double-edged duty; and the biggest burden is to seek and articulate truth, if truth indeed exists, or can be found, or can be spoken. How do we ever find *le mot juste* for the inherent mysteries of life? Explain the unexplainable?

> RPW: Yes, I have read the records,
> Even intended to make a ballad of them. . .
> . . . But the form was not adequate:

. . . If at all, it must be by a more complex form

By our complicities and our sad virtue, too (31)

Jefferson replies that his form of the story--for his purposes, the ideologic document of America--was inadequate, as well:

There is no form to hold

Reality and its insufferable transigence.

I know, for I once thought to contrive

A form to hold the purity of man's hope. . .

[but] foulness

Flows forth. . . (31, 32)

RPW and Jefferson must find a form to hold reality. But the story of reality is baffling and feels inexpressible, the more so since the writers must now face the abyss, that precipice between something and nothingness, as they follow Lilburne's fall.

Existentialist philosophers use the word “abyss” in many ways, and its meanings change with each treatment of it. Metaphorically, though, the idea of a great yawning darkness is the same. Some writers talk about the abyss as the nothing. Yet the abyss is also a dead silence and a blankness (over which, as Warren says, the writer walks the "tight rope" of meaning), and the Existentialist metaphor becomes even more acutely realized in the context of the writer, facing the blank page. Camus refers to the unreasonable silence of the world; Warren comments on the creative blankness that afflicted Conrad; and Melville worked and reworked the metaphor of the great white blankness, from the whiteness of the whale to Bartleby's "dead letters." While it may

be true that man's need for meaning can lead him to evil if "the great blankness of life is filled with terrible forces," Warren also knows that his seeming-emptiness, outer and inner, can offer a fullness of potential, as *Nostromo* "rose out of a feeling of blankness" for Conrad (SERPW "Mirage" 161).

We speak, we write, to bridge the abyss. In "Why Write?" (1949) Sartre calls writing itself "black marks on white paper," and Warren loads the image with a multiplicity of meaning. We make Warren's (and Melville's) "hieroglyphs" on the blankness as we write, with the experience of our being. Warren uses the image of these “black marks,” as a sign of the Logos, and the fall into language of the father, as well as a marker for the self. We have seen the image in "Billie Potts":

> And the father waits for the son. . .
> To kneel
> With the little black mark under your heart,
> Which is your name,
> Which is shaped for luck,
>
> Which is your luck. (RPWR 349)

Billie the child is the tabula rasa, and the original sin of the fathers, the birthright name written on his heart to proclaim his destiny, is a mark of Cain, of "outrage" and shame.

The black marks on white paper record the stories of our lives. In *Brother to Dragons* Warren gives RPW and Jefferson this metaphor to recreate, rather than to define, human existence,

like Pound's ideograms of being; the image recurs in other dialectical contexts, to underscore the violent interrelationship not only of battling (enforced) silences and lies to find truth, but also of thesis/antithesis, oppositional pairings. The poem works in that tension between black slaves and white masters. We see the white catfish belly in black mud; the black slaves versus the white spoons; and in the climax of violence, "white bone through black flesh" (BD 61). These pictures do tell the story, not a story composed in fancy, or artifice; but as an attempt to make language tell the story of reality.

It is a story that must be told. RPW and Jefferson "invent our dog" together, trying to find the form to reconstruct truths that can scarcely be imagined. *Brother to Dragons* does employ definite classical dramatic conventions; and the overall effect of the poem distinctly invokes the effecting of a tragedy and a catharsis, by which characters and readers experience the tragic fall of great men, reach a crisis point of misery, find redemption in their suffering, and undergo a healed and healing denouement. However the poem's form is not the play, but the epic, with its roots in myth.

Warren's poetic form is the narrative long-poem, with his allusive use of historical antecedents. These antecedents reflect the oldest philosophic endeavors, wherein philosophy can be construed as the search for human truths in lived experience:

> If language is to express the indubitable facticity of reality it must take on the form of thought [as seen

> in] myths. . . A story is told, not with a pragmatic intention (i.e., of making events comprehensible). . . but as an indubitable event the telling of which makes reality alone palpable as a "thus it is" or "it happened thus,". . . Reality is simply received as incomprehensibly self-evident (Jaspers PE 82-32)

Over Warren's prolific career, he used the long-poem to examine the true lived experience that became our legends, America's myths of itself. *Brother to Dragons* is based on what was for Warren an unshakably compelling true story, one important to the reassessment of the truths of our myths.

The story is part of America's epic journey West, and Warren frames the poem as epic, employing both the conventions of the Homeric and the Anglo-Saxon heroic epic, homage to the continuity of Dasein in time. Like Melville, Warren's personal tradition stretches far back into the earliest oral epics, with their heroic sense of the tragic and their (existentialist) fatalism. *Brother to Dragons* exhibits a peculiar strategy in Warren's admixture of the traditions of ancient Greek and old Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. He uses the Greek heroic, including formulaic seafaring epithets as well as the cult of the minotaur, half-man and half-beast; but the poem also echoes the Seafarers as well as Beowulf who must fight not simply monsters, but human monsters who are "the sons of Cain." Examining the meter, rhythm and diction of Warren's poetry, Calvin Bedient talks about "the heroic tenor of his poetry. . . [that often] requires the prickle

and groan of short Anglo-Saxon words," and he discusses Warren's use of compound-words, kennings, and intricate alliteration, resembling Hopkin's borrowings of the Old and Middle English alliterative form (IHLK 45-47, 81). Yet the epic framing is deeply ironic, too, both seriously applied and instantly undercut, as the heroism of human experience persists in being base, savage, inane:

> But even so, the town looked still
> The sort of town that the vagrant liar from Ithaca
> Might have spoken of as his own rocky sea-mark:
> "Not much of a place-- but good for raising boys. . .
> (BD 15)

Smithland, Kentucky is a far cry from anyone's ideal of the heroic, most certainly "not much of a place." Warren's take on the Ulysses-epic hero, shows him to be only a "vagrant liar," and also very wrong and none too smart: Lilburne and Isham are apt proof that the "boys" raised here fare badly.

It doesn't seem to matter where we are. In Warren's appropriation of epic conventions, he demonstrates the ways that humankind will not rest. We surge, spill out, over the world; we voyage and cause trouble everywhere we go, caught in that constant dilemma between longing for home and longing for distance. And every place is just a place:

> Not rock or olive, no, nor dazzling depths
> Whence once Poseidon, rearing
> From crystal courts and tangled corridors

Of glaucous pearl and ink-slick basalt, stared

Beyond black sea-wrack on the emerald

Of water, white-stung, surf-brilliant, to meet

The sun, and shake

His locks, foam-maned, against the dawn.

No, nothing like that in my own Todd Country even.

RPW realizes that the valiant gods don't preside here; the scruffy land, the brackish waters, shouldn't be the stuff of heroic poetry. Most of all, his own journey out and into truth, from his own Todd County, shouldn't rate heroic treatment. Yet it does, because every story of Dasein striving becomes part of the epic of all his striving:

. . . and even

The picturesque bum, sudden-awake

In the vomit-sodden dawn,

Cries out the classic anguish of our doom:

"Ain't nobody loves me, I never had no chance!" (15)

In Warren’s take on the Homeric epithet, Dawn is not rosy-fingered, the land and the waters are not the dreamscape of romanticized nature, the human conflict is about as un-heroic as it can get, and RPW heaps scorn on our "classic anguish" of self-justification and self-pity. But RPW must yet admit that any place, any circumstance will do. Any river, or millpond, or fox's den "will serve" as the background for man's agon, as he relates the story of Kent, his boyhood friend who showed him that Being-itself is "glory," in Kentucky or anywhere else.

RPW's penchant for Naturalism urges him to say that the human struggle of Dasein is too crass and banal to matter. He sees mankind's wretchedness, from the Greek Isles and Ithaca, to the Anglo-Saxon seafarers, to Todd County, to Smithland County Kentucky: human being huddles around our pathetic little campfires, strewing our garbage, our passage never even causing a stir on the waves of eternity:

> . . . the slapdash
> Confusions of life flung
> In a heap like the kitchen-midden
> Of a lost clan feasting while their single fire
> Flared red and green with sea-salt, and night fell
> Shellfish and artifact, blacked bone and shard
> Left on the sea-tongued shore
> And the sea was Time. (16, 17)

In his cynicism, he would like to see all our strivings as less than futile-- as "slapdash," haphazard and meaningless. He cannot do so. Against all good sense, he knows that the single fire against the black night, the feasting of fellowship, the tribes's presence and passage is a kind of heroism, the heartbreakingly human kind. Even the erasure of Time cannot nullify the glory of existence.

RPW, Jefferson and Meriwether write the epic journey of a people, of America, and sift whatever philosophic knowledge they may glean. En route, though, these witnesses must reckon with the costs of our passing, the ravages we inflict on one another along

the way. "Billie Potts" showed that the road to the Promised Land lay in Big Billie's deadly terrain. Now, we must stop and sojourn with Lilburne Lewis. With Lilburne Warren uses his most startling, intricate narrative and thematic metatextual technique. Warren has established Lilburne doubled as Jefferson's alter-ego; son; and brother; and he is twinned with the minotaur, that part of our humanity which we would (and do) hide in our labyrinthine circumlocutions. Now Lilburne, too, emerges as another philosopher-writer, like Jefferson and RPW; again as much parallel as bitterly parodic.

Like Jefferson, "Lilburne would defend civilization . . ./ bring light to the dark place." (95). In the last hours bfore his execution, "Lilburne kept writing" (101). Lilburne finds the light of civilization to be no match for the bottomless darkness of the human heart; he writes not the Jeffersonian dream of light but the dark nightmare, as Isham says, "Like he would name my dream" (103). "Read on," Lilburne tells him. Doubling the word "will," Warren shows Lilburne's 'will' as he lists his concrete realities of existence: horse, rifle, hound. Then, in the final act of love that is hatred, the final Cain slaying that is murder and deliverance of his brother, Lilburne wills his brother to kill him. He writes to consign Isham's bones to the ground, an act parallel to his burying the bones of John: Lilburne documents his desire that Isham will share his brother's coffin, as the "story" Lilburne writes names "the awful truth." Isham realizes that his brother has no intention of helping him, but instead,

like Cain, wills Isham’s death. "I read the words / . . .saw brother writ," Isham says, "And knew the word was me" (104). The author Thomas Jefferson wrote the human mission as the brotherhood of men. Now Lilburne, writing his own version of human will, defines man's brotherhood as shared guilt, and sharing the forever-darkness of the grave.

Warren's metatext establishes a further existentialist take on the Book of Nature, as his characters' writing and reading of the world conflate to make the story a concretely-realized part of experience. It becomes all the more crucial that the story tells the truth. RPW searches to know his father and the truth of his father's selfhood, but the story has been romanticized and no longer tells the true words: "And thus I saw his life a story told,/ Its glory and reproach domesticated" (21). Human life is text; our stories our book. When Lucy dies, and Lilburne's last hope dies with her, Isham sees "He dropped the eyelid like you close a book, / All reading done. . ."(56).

Myth has always been the concretizing of humankind’s inner and outer experience in Being, the result of an effort to find meaning. Robert Penn Warren's career can be seen as a lifetime vocation of working with the myths of America. From the earliest years with his investigation into the legend of John Brown and the role of slavery in American history, to his late-life long-poem about the mythic Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce and our genocide against Native Americans, Warren's questions and obsessions, the rage and the joy he discovers and expresses,

remain consistent. Warren's affinities with Modernism are perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in his adherence to Pound's (and Eliot's) belief in the poet's mission. As the voice for the tale of the tribe, shamanistic, respository of experience and its incantory telling, the poet seeks to offer humanity real-life insights into existential meaning; in stories, allegories, metaphors, parables, the poet-priest tries to shape truths, and myth comes to us via this particularized ontological "job." As Jaspers explains,

> Philosophy cannot produce myth. For where myth occurs reality is present in it. Philosophy can only play in myths and indirectly come to certainty. It cannot take the place of revelation (PE 82).

Robert Penn Warren was first and always a poet. Foremost, Warren's passion lies in the poetic aesthetic. Warren's tribe is America, in a lifelong association of outraged obligation and generous love. His aesthetic is firmly rooted in the myths of our heritage, where he seeks to find whatever revelation these myths may yield.

We have seen that, thanks in part to the influence of such religious writers as Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, the philosophy of Existentialism is framed in the language of Judaeo-Christian (especially Old Testament Biblical) terms and myths, and we have examined how Warren uses many of the same myths and archetypes in Brother to Dragons. His foundational reliance on these myths and archetypes all help to create the form and context for his poem

on man's tragic nature. This Old Testament mythic complex occurs frequently in Warren's work, his methods announced as Warren's particular poetic orientation in "Billie Potts." However, in *Brother* the stakes have been raised. The poem asserts its message is nothing less than the gaining of our souls: Lucy tells Jefferson that he must name truth "For the sake of your own soul and salvation" (43); and characters repeatedly cry out to God ("in God's name"; "God help me") as they lose their souls as a result of self-delusions and the existential failure of nerve.

Thematically, the soul's crisis of salvation or damnation pushes Warren into even more allusive mythic associations. Specifically he employs heavy use of the Crucifixion, as its redemptive function applies to the individual soul, and Revelation, extending the drama of lost (and found) souls to the universalized realm. Warren's allusions do not separate the two realms (the individual and the personal; the dying God and the End of the World). His mixing of imagery and figurative language pairs the crisis of the individual soul with that of the collective soul of humanity. In the cataclysmic landscape of the night in the meat-house, the convulsive earth-shaking of Golgotha twins with the signs and portents of Judgement Day: "Strong men die willingly /. . . Dog-days, and stars fall, and prayers have ceased" (65). Nature and Being-itself manifest Dasein's guilt, culpability so profound that God turns His face from the world; meanwhile, human beings behave with the same stupidity, and mendacity, as ever:

Hits the Lawd's last chance. Last night

I heared the Lawd. The yearth shook, I heared him say:

One shall be saved. (37)

It is typical of Warren's irony (and of Warren's "jokester God") that as God turns from humanity, leaving us to our own despicable devices, the "one" whom Cat believes is worth saving in the Last Days is Letitia, the "angel" with her head in the clouds and her feet in the pigsty, perhaps the least worthy (the in-valid) character in the story.

The Existentialist belief that myth contains the facticity of the real is intriguingly supported by the historical truth that in 1811, the year of the butchery of a slave by Thomas Jefferson’s nephew, the world of America did in fact go through an apocalyptic annus mirablis. Warren names some of his historical sources in his Notes, and they include the texts of letters from Jefferson, as well as the written record of the arrest and trial of Lilburne Lewis. He also includes a letter for *The Rambler in North America* (1935) which gives an account of the incredible natural phenomena that occurred in 1811. His historical sources describe the great floodwaters and widespread pestilence, mass-suicides of maddened stampedes of animals, continual earthquakes, all accompanied by the visitation of the comet. *Brother to Dragons* describes the natural, and Naturalistic world mirroring the spiritual warfare of 1811 in Kentucky:

The sad God rises

In season past the pathos

. . . Signs will be seen.
The gates of the earth shall shake, the locked gate
Of the heart will be struck in might by the spear-butt
. . . The darkling utterance
Shall wither the bride's love, and her passion become
But itch like a disease: scab of desire (64)

The earth splits and the waters flood the land, "the beast's belly." In Revelation's myth the Bridegroom Christ, figure of forgiveness and redemptive love, comes; but his bride, humankind's faithfulness, has already been diseased in dark words and lies, her faith corrupted. The Tribulation has come.

In *Brother*'s iconography of the slaying of God and the tribulations of Judgement, Lilburne's original sin "blooms," to infect the world:

And the Terrible Year bloomed its malignancy
The comet has come. . .
Let now the night descend
With all its graduated terrors. . . (76).

Lilburne the Beast will bring down the night of terror, as he unleashes his own shadow in malevolence. Warren shows the desolation of human souls screaming in supplication for deliverance. Criticism tends to treat the character of Letitia as minor to *Brother to Dragons*, but Warren uses Letitia in significant ways as an *in malo* figure demonstrating what Warren sees as the worst traits and failings of human nature. It is as if Letitia is so competely oblivious that she will voice the

self-incriminating truths that others don't. Letitia says "Again the world shook, and folks named the End of Time / They prayed. But I just prayed for the End" (43). Totally passive, wholly selfish, she wants God either to fix things or put an end to the entire world, so she will be "saved" from the fear and unhappiness she will not attempt to solve. But here will be no rescue. God will not save us when he has already given us the abilities to save ourselves. Giving up on existential responsibility, “just [praying] for the End” of our tribulations, brings no answer. So that the only tiny hope in the hopelesness of our damnation must lie in our own existential individual will as we choose virtue in the act, for which we alone are responsible, which we alone “will” and choose.

In her refusal to be responsible for her own soul, Letitia blames God: "I wasn't afraid of what the Lord would do./ I was afraid of what He might not do." (44). What He will not do is relieve us of what the Existentialists call the condemnation of free will. He will not absolve us of having to take responsibility for ourselves. Having retreated into being a helpless "innocent" victim, Letitia accuses God of depriving her of knowledge, and says "You haven't got / The right to make me not know anything," even as she herself willfully demands to remain ignorant. She resents God for abandoning her to nothingness, although she has taken to her bed and refused to live. Warren, using Kierkegaard's (and the Scriptural) solution for lost selfhood, that we must work out our own salvation with

fear and trembling, shows how frightening, confusing, wrenching that task is for us. But it is necessary, and we cannot "know anything" unless we address it. Letitia wants God to take over and do what she must but will not do for herself. RPW replies that "You don't ask much. Just everything,/ Or maybe the one thing God can't give" (46).

RPW voices the message of Existentialism: knowledge of essence and meaning, commitment to good faith, true selfhood versus nothingness, are the tasks of the heroic individual will. Moreover, these do not come to us unless we first honor existence. As Warren says, we will not be gifted with a whole, coherent selfhood and its attendant values as if it were a pretty Easter-egg prepared for our personal, childish treasure-hunt. Instead, Easter is the triumph of the valiant Gethsemane-will, and its heroic act. Each soul must find meaning for itself. Not only do we not have a fondly indulgent guide to make sure we succeed, but we most often have no directions at all, nor even many clues. As William James says, all of our heroism comes down to a leap in the dark. This exercise of will is "the one thing God can't give." Even Lilburne, the Beast, is not the Devil's son. The Devil did not make Lilburne depraved; Lilburne chose to be so. Moreover, God will not "save" Lilburne, when it is man's existential duty to first choose to act and then to save himself. Lilburne has damned himself because he turns his back on truth, and falls in love with despair.

CHAPTER 7

DAMNATION AND SALVATION: THE ANGUISH OF VIRTUE

As Warren has shown with his apocalyptic allusions, one soul's damnation exists in relationship to all the souls around him. At no point in the poem does Warren show anyone in Lilburne's life--not his family, and certainly not the slaves--ever confronting Lilburne or trying to speak any message of truth to him. Aunt Cat, Letitia, Isham tell Lilburn they love him; they do not tell him what everyone else knows, that he is losing his soul and that only he can keep it from being lost. They all choose to spurn knowledge, denying the dual self and choosing ignorant idealism. Letitia insists she and her husband love each other, and demands her bloodless, adolescent romantic dream; Lilburne, daily drunk and whoring, has no use for her other than the pleasure he feels in terrorizing her with sexual sadism, and making her admit she enjoys it. (When she finally abandons him and runs away, he names her in his will "beloved but cruel," in his gallows humor.) Isham can be a simpleton, but one who can be basically trusting and affectionate. Lilburne badly mistreats him constantly, yet Isham chooses to idolize (and idealize) his brother. He describes Lilburne's sensitive soul, which can feel compassion for a lovely moth and see it as a gift of grace. But if it will break Isham's heart if Lilburne destroys a moth, it will thrill him when he

destroys a man: "I just can't say: / Look, John, don't take it!--You see, I want him to" (BD 79). Isham knows Lilburne will kill John if the slave takes their mother's pitcher and breaks it. Isham isn't very smart, but he's fully aware of what should be his own reasonable and moral response to Lilburne's reprobate thrill. Yet Isham never says a word to deter his brother and serves as his dazzled accomplice in slowly dismembering another living man; and even in death, Isham insists on his brother's "love."

Idealism's protective fictions of man's salvific reason and innate goodness, and their corollary of willed ignorance and cowardice, prove too powerfully seductive for all of these characters. Just as we so often do today, as people have done for millenia, they will maintain Idealism's fictions no matter how overwhelming the evidence to the contrary. Lilburne's problem is not that he rejects Jefferson's idealized message of human nature; it is that he believes it, that this is how human beings should be, and has--reasonably--convinced himself that since humanity does not conform to Jefferson's 'Enlightened' vision, then we are irredeemable, and nothing matters, in nothingness. Splitting selfhood, he sees no third way; like Meriwether, when Lilburne figures out that we are all capable of unreasonable evil, he gives up on humanity, and ceases to see our possibility for the good. Lilburne's winter of discontent shows his struggle to understand his confusion and pain: part of him does not want to abuse the hound, but the other part enjoys it; part of him

loves his brother, the other part wants to abuse him. Under the lash of his own self-loathing, Lilburne resorts to that magical thinking we choose when reality cannot be borne:

> But what accounts for the chain of choices that eventuate in. . . malevolent acts? [Magical thinking] provides quasi-legitimate, seemingly rational reasons to justify [such] behavior. (Goldberg SWD 152)

Before Lucy dies, Lilburne is already beginning to exercise his joy in cruelty, and "protecting her" by savagely beating the slave who breaks her dishes or steals her spoons gives him a good excuse. Lilburne has idealized his mother and sees Lucy as the one and only valuable person in his world. When she dies, he believes his father, his brother, the slaves and nature itself are injuring her, and Lilburne holds dear a sacred trust to care for her, to somehow keep her alive. RPW tries to analyze Lilburne's "deepest character": "No, Lil had no truck with the Evil One, / But knew that all he did was done / For his mother and the sweetness of the heart--"(90).

Magical thinking leads to the worst kind of meanness, as we also objectify others. Lilburne objectifies his mother, stripping her of her real humanity so that he can believe she is wholly "good." More often, objectification of others swings the other way, giving us reasons to hurt them, when we see in "them" the flaws of personality, character and behavior we either will not admit to, or despise in ourselves. Lilburne projects his sorrow, rage, guilt, and self-loathing on to John the slave, the dark

Other. John comes to personify everything Lilburne would hold in antithesis: "I don't know why/ I just can't stand that stinking nigger bastard./ Looks like he just does something to me,/ Something I just can't stand" (72).

Lilburne doesn't know why he hates John. The core of Lilburne's deepest character is the not knowing (versus Warren's saving grace of "knowledge"), and it ruins him. In his struggle he cannot abide the unacceptable postulates of Lucy's temporal horizon of possibility (her death), or his own possibility for darkness. At first he tries to construct a rational explanation for his irrational compulsions, and why he feels so detached from everyone in his life. At the same time he tries to drown his misery in drunkenness, while he widens the gulf between himself and other people. As Goldberg writes in *Speaking With the Devil*, his study of human evil,

> [Such a man] is unable to recognize his symptoms because he is afraid of introspection. He paranoically views all his painful experiences as caused by [an Other]. A person with deeply harbored hate for his own behavior cannot free himself from fear --the preoccupation that other people are aware of his vulnerabilities, along with his wrongful deeds, and are relentlessly seeking to destroy him. (80)

The key concept Warren gives us with which to understand Lilburne is his fear. It is not the healthy fear of consequences for

wrong-doing, but the fear of having to face humankind's possibility, foremost in his own selfhood. His paranoia becomes more and more controlling as he sees everyone and everything alligned against him. And the fear of who he really is, and might be, feeds his need to objectify others, to demonize everyone else because he so wars with the demonic in himself.

Lilburne does depise himself. He cannot create a workable selfhood because he has believed the lie that his heart "should" be of one nature, the kind of man his mother would approve of--reasonable, decent, ethical, exemplary--and thus cannot make peace with the fact that his heart can be different from that ideal. Unless he sees himself in the light of truth ("the knowledge of good and evil"), he cannot hope to be able to choose virtue, or to find it in others. The existential primacy of the wholeness of the individual self is a prerequisite for any, and all, human ability to cope with otherness. Martin Buber describes how "real life is meeting. . . in two modes. . . subject-to-object (I-It) and subject-to-subject (I-Thou)" (WMB 6). Without the self-knowledge and acceptance of a subject(ive) -self, an I-Thou relationship is impossible. All that remains is the I-It, by which whatever is not the delusional, self-imprisoned self becomes object. Such objectification of others fosters no end of transgressions and travesties. The first casualty of the I-It self is its own selfhood, a horror by which even parts of our own selfhood become object; as C.S. Lewis says, hell is the self feeding on itself for eternity. Thereafter come all the

casualties of the other selves objectification affects. As Martin Buber explains,

> [Our] paradox is that the I/self is never fully realized until it can apprehend the Thou . . . without "It" man cannot live; but he who lives with "It" alone is not a man (WMB 55)

Kierkegaard simply reaffirms the New Testament commandment: to "love thy neighbor as thyself," which presupposes two sacred, individual selves needing our reverential regard. Lilburne's humanity gradually disintegrates, as everything in his world becomes object: "He had a way to look at a man sort of/ Like you weren't there. . ."(BD 45).

Paralleling Jefferson and partaking of Jefferson's lie, Lilburne does not understand and cannot accept the existential conditions of Dasein. Existentialism recognizes that the status of Dasein is aloneness, and often isolation; it is the necessary (versus contingent) condition to know alienation, and to endure anguish. Kierkegaard talks about these painful states, intrinsic to individuality, as the "anxiety preceding freedom" (Jaspers TGP 246). Anxiety, fear and trembling, anguish, aloneness are existential givens, as much a part of human being as breathing. Sartre's project of the good faith individual life, enduring the necessary heroically, is the hardest thing we can do. In his blindness and denial Lilburne does not know that his experiences of these conditions are a normal part of his basic humanity; or, indeed, that if we go through them courageously, they will lead

to virtue, wisdom, usefulness, joy. Instead these feelings cripple him with fear, as well as feed his own belief that he is unsalvagable, and is being perpetually punished. Lilburne says his brother Isham is "His last betrayer," just another who will "leave him . . ./ Alone, Alone, in that sweet alienation, yes, sucking / that sweet injustice" (108). Lilburne foresees himself exiled to the "ice-locked anguish of isolation" (71-72).

What Lilburne does not know is that the very aloneness, alienation and anguish he views as evidence of his own worthlessness are in fact confirmation of his value and relational belonging, leading to his wholeness. Existentialism explains that although the lonely, alone individual is the quintessence of realized life, true personal being is ultimately fulfilled not in withdrawal from community but in participation in community. We can see Robert Penn Warren's real-life examples of these truths in his own person: his poetry voices extreme aloneness and subjectivity; but experientially, the selves he explores in his poetry (frequently, his own) must always function in relation to other selves. Contrary to the avant-garde's (mistaken) romanticizing of Dostoevsky’s alienated Underground Man, this is why the character in the *Underground Man* is so "ice-locked,” of so little use to himself or anybody else, and what Dostoevsky is trying to show us through him. The Underground Man has stopped at his anxiety, become frozen in the existential state that is a precursor, not an end. The gains of our struggles

for selfhood predicate the extrapolation of this knowledge in our dealings with other selves.

Lilburne cannot know this, though. Isolated in his shame and self-abjection, his refusal to deal with the realities of his own personhood ensure that he is cut off from human sympathies:

> Deprived of other humans [in his total aloneness] the madman is compelled to create his own world and animate it with beings that reflect what he believes to be his own flawed moral character. (Golden SWD 89)

The other people in Lilburne's life have no authentic selfhood for him, because he has no authentic selfhood, himself.

Perhaps the most apropos element in *Brother to Dragons*, the element that lends the most tragically-apt thematic power to Warren's existential drama, is the historic fact of the poem's immersion in the social context of slavery. The Jeffersonian national body-politic that justified slavery is the perfect symbolic setting for Warren's themes. As he said many times, most especially in *Democracy and Poetry*, Waren hated what he saw as the destruction of personality by the "machine" of socio-political and socio-cultural hegemonies. In DP Warren uses Kierkegaard and Buber to help explain his own Existentialist philosophy, and Existentialism that, as Herbert describes,

> insists on the mutual relation of man to man, not the machine of external institutions which distort personality; Existentialism is thoroughly radical in its uncompromising criticism of the

> depersonalization and dehumanization resulting from . . . mass society. (FET 4)

Brother's world of institutionalized slavery provides Warren with his most powerful commentary on human being objectified.

It bears on this discussion to note that commonplace misconceptions about Existentialism confuse its commitment to Kierkegaard's Single Individual as being opposed to socially responsive, and responsible, aims. Existentialism is often perceived as advocating a self-centered way of life. This is a complete untruth, as we can see (and as mistaken as seeing the philosophy as nihilistic, for that matter). In a discussion of the institution of slavery seen in Existentialist terms, many people would look to Nietzsche, because of his notorious use of the master-slave metaphor in his treatment of the *Ubermensch*. For the most part his paradigm is misinterpreted. Moreover, it is a mistake to see Nietzsche's famous pronouncements as emblemmatic of the philosophy as a whole. Without belaboring an apologia for his difficult complexities, suffice it to say that Nietzsche saw the slave-mentality as deadly to existentially-sound principles for the "greatness" of the heroic self (his *amor fati*, engagement in and love of Dasein's "fate," passion in possibility and acceptance of its horizon) (EH 12). And Nietzsche was an anomaly, and his increasingly wild metaphoric outpourings reflected his own unique cosmology. His ideas can be quite surreally if wonderfully expressed, and widely misunderstood. Claiming that everything Nietzsche wrote speaks for Existentialist philosophy

is like claiming that Blake speaks for Romantic Idealism--or worse, for Christianity.

It is much more instructive to go to Nicholai Berdyayev, the Eastern Orthodox philosopher who sought social reform, specifically in denouncing the mistreatment of the poor and disenfranchised, and whose philosophy more closely coincides with Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Sartre. Berdyayev's remarks (celebrating Nietzsche) sum up Warren's portrayal of the dehumanization of slavery:

> The world of slavery is the world of spirit which is alienated from itself. . . consciousness which exteriorizes and alienates [and objectifies] is always slavish consciousness. . . the alleged master is simply a tyrant who, in his worst, tyrannizes himself by every sort of fear possible. . . by *ressentiment.* (in Herbert FET 130-31)

With an uncanny poignancy, Warren's story of Lilburne's slavish consciousness, shattered selfhood, and objectifying crimes against others extends outward, reverberating in the close currents of community, and farther outward still, to include the story of our country, in the evil days of our national, collective shame.

Slaves are objects by definition. Their humanity has already been stripped from them, in American history, a result of the codified, enforced evil tolerated in our magically-thinking Jeffersonian system of law and government. As with every other

reality that challenged his "rational" dream, Jefferson must adhere to the irrational denial of the truth that slaves are also the "people" of our guaranteed golden liberties. Not only are slaves deprived of human selfhood; they are objects that Lilburne, Jefferson, Lucy and the white community own. First these sacred selves are denied Being, and Dasein (individual worth as "I"-selves). Thereafter, in the logic of oppression, they are denied free will and freedom. America contrived the perfect circumstance to fit the Existentialist formula for the greatest dishonoring and then annihilation of human life: an entire class of humanity with no subjective self, and no free will. And Jefferson was the author, and beneficiary, of the codes to accommodate this systematic dismemberment of human being.

Jefferson's rigid armor of denial and superiority could not grant existential worth to slaves. Although history strongly suggests, as Warren undoubtedly knew, that Jefferson sired children with (at least one of) his slave women, Jefferson insists throughout *Brother to Dragons* that he is "childless." Because they do not seem to resemble the Apollonian, noble and god-like (adopted son) Meriwether, he whom Jefferson could see as a symbol of future glory, Jefferson declares that these dark children, results of his own disavowed Dionysian urges (and his true "sons") do not exist. These little human beings do not have Being for him at all.

Similar to the methods he used to show murderous objectification of others in "Billie Potts," Warren uses

synechdoche and metonymy to characterize the way his characters perceive the slaves. The slaves do not appear intact as people, but fragmented, just parts of things unconnected to hearts, minds, souls: they are "eye-whites [that] roll and gleam," "the secret hand," "the eyes that spy," "blue-gums" (BD 69,70,98). Jefferson and RPW, assessing "the race question," reveal the depths of their mutual distrust and fear of "the intolerable eye of the sly one"(70). As Berdyayev says, the tyrant tryrannizes himself by every sort of fear, and it is not only Lilburne the Beast who axes the slave into pieces.

Lilburne carries his fear and the tyrannizing of selfhood deeper and deeper into his heart of darkness. In his descent Lilburne attempts every self-protective strategy of the beleaguered soul afraid of itself: rationalization, objectification, abjection of all that so appalls him. But Lilburne continues to sink and disappear. He cannot find the reality of his own existence, and becomes so disconnected from human life, himself so dismembered, that he cannot know or cope with human relatedness in any normative way. Love itself, that which he believes is the raison d'etre for his malignity, has proven much too painful to face in its wholeness, since its wholeness includes suffering and loss, and depends on a person capable of love, which he does not recognize in himself. The very mother-love he clings to dissolves into his ubiquity of objectifying humanity. He cannot hold onto what his mother Lucy meant to him or the principles she lived by, her genuine selfhood

that was giving, merciful, kind. All he can hold to are the leftover pieces of her, things not even human at all--spoons, the pitcher, grass on her grave—as reality dissolves.

The icy winter moves toward the fires of the meathouse, as Lilburn's fear steadily overcomes him; and what he fears most is himself. He projects this fear to "his enemy, who resembles the protagonist . . . as if he stole his appearance from a mirror" (Golden SWD 80). Everyone around him, the actual reality of their selfhoods already unreal to him, has now become self-reflective narcissistic embodiment for him, merely the psychomachia of his own feelings. At this point brother Isham becomes "only a mirror for Lil's loneliness.” Lilburne comes to the fullness of the hell of self feeding on itself, and nothing else but his obsessional self-torment has any reality for him. John has become the embodiment of Lilburne's worst self-abjection, though, a constant blade goading him. Therefore John, Lilburne's dark self, must die:

> What he would have defended
> Was but himself against the darkness that was his
> . . . He felt the dark fear hiding in his heart.
> . . . He saw poor John as but his darkest self
> And all the possibility of dark he feared (116)

Warren carefully controls his mirror-doubling, as Jefferson and Lilburne are also what James Justus calls "Jungian-like shadow selves" for one another. Jefferson, too, has constructed a world of self-referential narcissistic objectifying; he, too, has

protected himself with an extravagant refutation of the duality of the self. Self-righteous, Jefferson damns Lilburne's taste for blood, but Meriwether, vengefully aware that Jefferson has used him--worse, that he never even knew him, or wanted to--accosts Jefferson, accusing him of his own "murderous lie," and Lucy agrees:

> But you did compound it! By refusal.
> For what poor Lilburne did in madness and exaltation
> You do in vanity
> . . . in fear. (117).

Jefferson rails, "Fear who?". And Lucy says "His name is Jefferson/ . . . your deepest fear/ [of] what was possible even in the familial blood." Meriwether is more direct: you fear "that you were human.”

In the end, both Meriwether and Lilburne suffer from the crisis of hopelessness that destroys them. Warren's narrative builds toward this crisis, and he details the ways, and the reasons, such hopelessness can consume us. Martin Buber talks about "the existential lie against Being," when man denies his dual possibility (for good, but also for its antithesis) and declares himself perfectible, a work-in-progress of incipient divinity (32). Jefferson's two doubled sons Lilburne and Meriwether, the rightful inheritors of the Adamic birthright of truth (e.g., of calling things by their right names) as well as inheritors of original sin, are both betrayed by the father. Jefferson has cheated them with his denials. He robs them of

their humanness after he denies his own; hence they cannot find faith in redemption. Ruined Meriwether haunts Jefferson:

> Had I not loved, and lived, your lie, then I
> Had not been sent unbuckled and unbraced--
> Oh! the wilderness was easy!--
> But to find, in the end, the tracklessness
> Of the human heart (BD 114)

Jefferson knew, but would not tell him, the truth of Dasein.

In the same way, the poem suggests, Lilburne has spent his earlier life living a golden dream. Young Lilburne's fiction parallels the fiction Jefferson has invented for Meriwether, of the noble youth civilizing the dark wilderness. Letitia describes first seeing Lilburne in town, sitting on his fine horse like a beautiful young lord. Privileged, handsome, rich, full of vigor and pride—Lilburne was everyone's ideal. Thus, we can infer that no one, thinking him the most fortunate of men, would have guessed at his inner pain, or satisfied his need and longing for someone to tell him that he was probably not (at first) a monster, but only a flawed man, with his own inner dark wilderness inside himself, a man as every other man; and that the possibility inherent in his inner darkness did not preclude or negate, but could actually strengthen, his possibility of inner light. Most critically, he did not know that he could choose. Throughout the poem Lilburne's crime takes on the inevitability of fate. Lilburne feels damnation is his destiny.

Psychologists know that, as with Lilburne, capitulation to shame overcomes many people. Such shame always injures selfhood. When no one tells a young teenager his unnerving sexual urges are normal, urges everyone has, he believes he is deviant, unnatural. When no one assures a new mother that her occasional bursts of anger and resentment at feeling hostage to her newborn are normal reactions, such as anyone would feel, she begins to fear and despise herself. This shame brings fear of being, but first of the being of the self. The existential word, the word of reality and truth, is our avenue to the knowledge we need. The word is the affirmation and acceptance of existential being, self declaring and naming self, and the Adamic discerning and naming of reality we are called upon to do daily, every day of our lives, without which no knowledge is possible. Thus the word is "the way, the truth, the life," of our possibility of what Warren calls redeeming the world, and most of all ourselves. (John 14:6)

Warren's depiction of the scene between Lilburne and Letitia, when Lilburne forces his wife to speak the words of their disturbing sexual encounter, directly depicts the way his shame causes his vengeful drive to destroy others. Letitia cringes in cowardice when Lilburne demands "Letitia--now tell me exactly what happened" (BD 50). She dithers, recoils: "But my words wouldn't come . . ./ and I cried:/ "I can't, I just can't!" He forces her to speak the truth, "words I never named before,/ they were so awful"; but even this cannot satisfy him. He needs for her to admit that, however debauched their episode, she liked

it-- because he did. Certainly Lilburne is trying to hurt his “angel” of a wife. But he also needs to hear someone, anyone, admit what he already knows, that "when angels / Come down to earth, they step in dung, like us./ And like it." (52). Warren reminds us that all his life Lilburne has needed a definition of what Dasein is; each of us needs definition, as each individual pursues his own ontological seeking, and this pursuit is "the way" to meaning. The Jeffersonian "angelic . . . abstract definition" did not and could not salve Lilburne's increasingly marginalized selfhood; but Lilburne has nothing to put in place of the ideal, so becomes locked in the shame of his deviance. Herein lies Warren's great pathos and tragedy of Lilburn.

Warren's salvific antidote to Lilburne's deadly shame can be found in the Logosophia. Not surprisingly, given the philosophy's commitment to the exercise of and revelation through both history and language, Existentialism draws its principles from religions of the book, and looks to history's religious parables of man seeking and finding the truth of Being, truth which must be spoken as existential act. Buber saw the Old Testament as a dialogue between the I of the Speaking God and the Thou of his hearing people: this dialogic encounter is the holy dialectic, and its New Testament version declares that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Buber carefully distinguishes between this encounter and some sort of Platonic-transcendent inspiration, vision, or dream: it occurs only "in the full existential context

of life" (WMB 25). Kierkegaard parses the New Testament Christ's simple declaration: the Logosophia speaks with "the Truth," and its speaking is "the Way" we access and engage with reality and Being-itself, "the Life." Without the existential word of truth we cannot truly live; Lilburne says "I want to hear" the voice of his mother, the only person Lilburne believes in, speaking truth, reconciling him, healing him. "But, Oh--No sound, not even a word. . ." (77).

Lilburne and Meriwether need the truth; they need knowledge. They battle the "complicity" of the duplicity which is their undoing, which will ultimately push them into acedia, and murderous despair. Warren's unfolding of their stories and their ends continues to reiterate and reveal the Existentialist interpretation(s) of their destruction. The philosophy of their Enlightenment-era Idealism indoctrinates them in the most profound disillusionment. Such societal conspiracy cuts them adrift, leaving them with no anchoring solaces or explanations for their lostness, and gives them no guidance as to how Dasein must face and live with reality. We see the princely dictates of the conspiracy of untruth, Existentialism's version of the rulership of the Father of Lies. Buber explains the inestimable need to renounce lies and speak truth:

> The man who leaves the primary word unspoken is to be pitied; but the man who addresses instead these ideas with an abstraction or a password, as if it were their name, is contemptible. . . the existence of the I and

> the speaking I are one and the same thing. When a primary word is spoken. . . the speaker enters the word and takes his stand on it. (WMB 44-47)

Lilburne's world is infected with untruth. He cannot achieve engagement with the "primary [true] word" because he doesn't know what it is.

Warren's characters in *Brother to Dragons* operate in a haze of existential bewilderment, and cannot get past untruth to find knowledge. Lilburne does not possess the knowledge of the self to understand others' motives: he "just doesn't know the rules of such a game" (69). When Lil would define his own motives and actions, RPW says "Does Lil know all this?/ He does not know" (95). Not only Lilburne, but the entire dramatis personae of *Brother* keep repeating the refrain that they do not know anything, have no inkling of the truths of their own, or any other lives. As Isham says, "I dont'--know--nothing" (108). John the slave "was lost in my anguish and did not know the reason" (118). Lies against the truth of Being leave them stranded in lethal ignorance. Even Lucy, long before she dies, cannot or will not know what her son desperately needs her to acknowledge. Until Warren's denouement, they do not want to know what human being truly is, nor what being human can cost; if they had, says Meriwether, "knowledge of that cost is/ In itself, a kind of redemption" (118).

Brother's critical observer and Warren's alter-ego, RPW explains why knowledge can redeem. He criticizes but also

honestly analyzes "the desperate circle:/ If I'd known," and says, not without scorn, that "the irreversible/ Dialectic will proceed," anyway, only a little more smoothly because of "human regret" (80). Then, though, RPW echoes Buber's idea that in knowing and speaking the true word, one enters it, as being: our interminable "if I'd known" might be valid if we strive to better comprehend how knowledge upholds Dasein:

> . . . knowing can be,
> Maybe, a kind of being, and if you know,
> Can really know, a thing in all its fullness,
> Then you are different, and maybe everything
> Is different, somehow, too.

Of Lilburne RPW says "He, like you, might have been only trying / To know what the good thing was, and when / He couldn't know that, then did the worst. . ." (46).

Warren's explanation, and Lilburne's debasement describes the pathology of the criminal's slide into malevolence. Lilburne cannot know himself as valuable and can feel only shame, not "the good thing," since he believes anything within him that is not good unalterably marks him as Cain, like Billie Potts's "mark that is your name." The self that cannot know its own value can, and likely will devalue others. In the final stage of Lilburne's fall, he does the only thing that can make sense to him: he dismisses the possibility of good in himself and claims all that is dark. Jefferson abjects half of himself and becomes an icon of goodness; Lilburne abjects half of himself and becomes an icon of

evil. Tyrannized by the fear of who he is, longing for the definition of his being, he finds it. Lilburne becomes anathema.

In some of *Brother to Dragons*' most affecting passages, Warren evokes Lilburne's existential hell of the self-devouring self. What Lilburne has sought is some way to be reconciled to himself: "He would like to feel / The ineffable joy of the soul's restoration" (67). He cannot find it, or feel it or believe in its possibility. All he can feel is brute pleasure in savagery, in hurting others as he has been hurt. And "Always somebody gets hurt /. . . But Lilburne most"(69). Lilburne will execute the fratricide(s), kill off his brothers, because he alone, his offering, can never be acceptable. As Cain, participation in human being is closed to Lilburne. The Great White Father Jefferson tries (and fails) to set himself apart from shared humanness: "I reject, repudiate/ And squeeze from my blood the blood of Lilburne" (43), trying to disown the dark son and escape the inescapable familial relation; and "Lilburne knows that he's repudiated" (63). Lilburne's beloved mother sings to brother Isham in dreams, but she does not sing to Lilburne. He believes she, too, repudiates him, the penultimate rejection:

> . . . Lilburne's wild wail
> Of loneliness. . .
> And his complaint of desertion in the dark.
> But we may say, with logic, it was he
> Who did the repudiating, who cast forth
> The all. That's true. But even so,

> We must remember that always the destroyer
> It is who has the most need of love: therefore
> Destroys (64).

Even after he commits his vile acts of mutilation and slaughter, having completely surrendered to pure evil, Lilburne can, for a moment, intuit that there must be an other-half of his repudiated self:

> And think: "But it's not me--oh no, not me!"
> Then know. But before the glacial acceptance, cry,
> Just once, to the empty room: "God!" But then know,
> and be, himself. (100).

The family of man, the sense of belonging and relation that to Lilburne is open to everyone but him, only further confirms his complete estrangement, and his desperate sorrow.

As with Dostoevsky's *The Double* as well as many other Romantic versions of the split-self, the pathology and existential transgression of trying to disown the unity of human nature results in part of self devouring its abjected counterpart, destroying Dasein's personhood. Dostoevsky does not invoke the metaphor of the beast-self overcoming the saintly self. Dostoevsky's alienated protagonist is his Jefferson, not his Lilburne; *The Double*'s consuming, triumphing shadow-self is the superior, enlightened, perfected part of its inferior, flawed and agonized other self, and the resultant damage to selfhood is just as catastrophic. Warren's Jefferson may seem to be an example of the rare triumph of the good self who exiles the

shadow, but denial is not self-mastery. Warren makes it very clear that Jefferson is Lilburne's counterpart--his double--in error, even in their shared murderousness. Jefferson's despair is juxtaposed with Lilburne's, as despair is their existential sin. Kierkegaard calls it the Sickness Unto Death: what St. Augustine identified as the deadly sin of acedia. Acedia is

> the violation of one's own human possibility for developing the positive, compassionate, productive attributes of selfhood. . . when our potential for creativity and compassion is denied, such other human maladies as mistrust, anger, and [finally] despair soon follow. . . [Acedia is] the most tragic of sins (Golden SWD 95, 96).

Further, Dostoevsky, and Jefferson demonstrate that acedia will accompany any and all abjection of self. Jefferson's life seems a victory of compassion, productivity; but he has violated his possibility by obdurantly splitting it, burying anything in human nature that he cannot bear to admit, and constructing his "fiction" of human possibility, based on his own repudiations. *Brother to Dragons* shows a Jefferson who is so haunted and beset by his denial of truth that he, too, can find no solace or "soul's restoration," until Lucy confronts him, and demands his reconciliation with the other-half of human truth.

James Justice best explains Warren's complex uses of acedia, linking it to his philosophic and artistic fidelity to the primacy of the self. Acedia is despair brought on by the

self's "debilitating sense of incompleteness and fragmentation" (ARPW 3) Warren's ideas follow Kierkegaard's with the importance placed on the philosophical and psychological mechanism and ramifications of the sickness unto death, how it begins and ends with the individual. Kierkegaard saw acedia as a four-fold disease of selfhood: unconsciousness of the I as a self; unwillingness to be oneself; a self at once defiant and dependent, which cannot achieve "balance or rest" on its own; and detachment of the self from the (*a priori*) power that posited the self (e.g., Heidegger's Being-Itself, Kierkegaard's God) (Jaspers TGP 245). Justus points to Warren's "speakers" in his fiction and poetry who are "constantly in danger of succumbing to acedia . . . deepest despair" (ARPW 5-6). A lifelong reader of St. Augustine, as well as such other “yearners” as Coleridge and Melville, Warren never makes the Romantic mistake of confusing acedia with melancholy, or ennui. Acedia is definitively a Judaeo-Christian term, and Warren conforms to the intricate and historical particulars of this existential condition.

The concept of acedia plays a crucial role in understanding Robert Penn Warren, especially in how acedia functions in *Brother to Dragons*. Throughout his oeuvre, Warren seeks to find a way to bridge, or leap, the chasm between man's despair and man's hope. Warren brings his deep scholarly background to bear in his efforts, choosing to appropriate the definitive, early-Church interpretations. Acedia is Coleridge's

"death-in-life," worse and more painful because we cannot die to escape it but must live with it. As Lilburne describes it,

> "What's to be dead!" he said.
> "You can be dead,
> And breathe and eat and sleep
> And purge your gut and walk inside your clothes."
> Then pointed: "Oh, see the folks all walking in
> their clothes!"
> . . . "Don't know they're dead and stinking in their clothes!" (BD 104)

Philosophically Warren returns again and again to the unyielding existential fact that we have more than enough reason to despair. We are tragic and absurd; we do stand at the abyss and face nothingness, when we're not mucking around in the "filth we strew" (130). But in relentless paradox, we must yet stand firm against despair and must instead find some empowering way to act heroically, to hope, to believe in virtue. In a quite real sense, acedia informs Warren's most central ontological concerns in his work.

In Warren's work acedia appears in both Existentialist and Medieval traditional portrayals of the Sickness Unto Death. The soul suffers from solipsistic pride, and thus embraces ignorance, in its diseased will incapable of wisdom, reasonable perspective, and sound judgement. Unable to find the hope and happiness the soul sees in others, it becomes resentful, Existentialism’s *ressentiment*, and embittered, with festering envy (what Blake

calls "jealousy"). This solipsistic pride results in the eternally-reenacted Fall from relationship with whatever God may be; thereby the soul is alienated from self-knowledge, hope and faith, felicity, community. Because acedia originates in pride, Justus correctly ties acedia to original sin as coexistent maladies: "Original sin and depravity's special sin is acedia."

Warren's treatment draws from exigetical tropes and images with a long history. Acedia means giving up on oneself, on Being and the world, and on God. As Warren casts Lilburne trapped in his own acedia, Lilburne resembles all other such historic "sinners." Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy* shows a protagonist imprisoned literally and also figuratively in the lethargy of a deceived mind, the pain of the shattering of self, and the enslavement to world-deranged desire and will. The prisoner is literally in exile (figuratively, self-imposed). He has forgotten who he is; as Lady Philosophy, *The Consolation*'s oracular heroine symbolizing authentic wisdom, says, he's forgotten his own "country" of his identity. He must reclaim his selfhood to free himself, as the truth does set him free. St. Evagrius, one of the most ancient sources of acedia-lore, named acedia

> wanhope . . . sorrow or weariness or overwhelming bitterness of the spirit, born of a very great distress of the soul. By it, spiritual joy is quenched, and the mind is . . . overthrown in itself. (in Wenzel SOS 13)

Macrobius writes about the soul's champion against acedia, in the liberating acceptance of "the alone to the Alone" (Lewis DI 65, 68), conflating reverence for the self with the existential condition of the single individual, as well as with the acceptance of our existential singleness. Chaucer's Parson in *The Canterbury Tales* speaks eloquently on acedia, his description perfectly fitting the character of Lilburne:

> Envy and ire make bitternesse in heart, which is the mother of Acedia . . . wanhope, that is despair of the mercy of God (TRC 311).

Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, in Book I of the Despair Canto, portrays the Red Cross Knight's encounter with Despair, who persuades him that life is all woe, and that it is useless to seek Una/Truth (knowledge, and oneness); only Truth's intervention saves the Knight from suicide.

Robert Burton's remarkable *Anatomy of Melancholy* devotes a special section to acedia, and his treatment helps show why Existentialism sees acedia as the worst sin against the selfhood. Burton's handles melancholy as as a kind of imaginative folly, a mixing of the truths of Absurdism as well as Naturalism. Burton insists that "it's all one," that is, we're all a bit mad, the world is crazier than anyone guesses, so we might as well accept our melancholy and enjoy whatever it offers us. Burton also suggests we're all slaves to something, and religions are mostly perverted and not much help, either. But when Burton discusses acedia, his 900-plus pages of urbane, often tongue-in-cheek

explications change altogether. Burton sets Christian acedia apart from the melancholic depression he has been having fun with; he defines it as

> the opposite to hope, a most pernicious sin, wherewith the Devil seeks to entrap men. [This despair] a sin most violent, tragical and grievous, far beyond the rest as privation of all happiness. . . a burning fever of the soul [As St. Augustine terms it], murderer of the soul. (AM 937)

Murder, the violent crime of death aginst a sacred self, is one of Robert Penn Warren's most startling recurring themes. In the characters and the story of Lilburne Lewis's crimes Warren gives his most focused portrayal of acedia: Lilburne, murderer, murdered, living the drama of original sin's special sin, abandoned to the absence of truth, fatally infected with what Existentialists believe is the Sickness Unto Death.

Acedia iconography in Medieval literature is extremely complex and intertextual; but Warren uses many of its images and leitmotifs. Interwoven into *Brother to Dragons* is much of acedia's unique lore. Acedia's beset self weeps, laments, and Lilburne's “melancholy” amounts to much more--to unremitting and bottomless sorrow. As with the early Egyptian desert monks who first described acedia, Lilburne is oppressed each day by the most aggressive demon, who

> sends hatred against the place, against life itself, against the work of his hands, and makes him think he

> has lost the love among his brethren and there is none to comfort him (Evagrius “Wisdom of the Desert” in Wenzel SOS 5)

Such a one lames himself as he stumbles a rocky landscape: stumbling from the house on Rocky Hill, Lilburne feels the pain in his groin, from some injury of lust or unconsciousness as he tries to drink himself to death, night and ("just") "day-drunk." Acedia becomes sloth because the soul refuses existential engagement with the work of daily life:

> And life goes on at Rocky Hill. . .
> Enters a phase of stillness,
> And Lilburne's soul lolls in his breast, lapt
> In a dark, luxurious satiety. . .
> That indolence of dark (BD 94).

Lilburne becomes a dead man in his own clothes, nullified, a shade in his motionless shadowed world.

Acedia infects Being, and the world becomes a nightmare landscape as nature succumbs to wretchedness, losing the beauty and animating potential of Being. Warren's depiction of Lilburne's landscape echoes these highly specific historical and literary characteristics of acedia. Polluted, sickened, the "woods are dark and the river stinks all summer,/ And the world's a sty" (57). Life is in ruins: "the huddled stones of ruin/ . . .To say the human hand, once here, had gone,/ And would never come back" (23). The self traditionally inhabits a world of ice or of desert, as "the world was ice, and Lilburne is exiled"

to be "alone and Ishmael where the desert howled" (57, 12). Desiderated, static, the land is pocked with dark stagnant pools, as "sullen, the waters withdraw," leaving mud-encrusted slime (65). Manifesting itself as the “murdered” Tree of Life, normally a symbol for the hope of continuance in Being, acedia's ancient tree with many branches is ice-locked or skeletal, with withered limbs:

> the oak
> Stands on a headland above an enormous curve of the river
> ` It has stood there 200 years. The trunk is iron
> The oak's comment is anguish, but
> All night, like Jacob, it wrestles the
> Pitiless angel of air. . . (61,62).

Warren completes the ruination of world: above the deadened Tree of Life the icy stars "gleam downward [in] disdain.”

It is also notable that acedia poisons the other characters, too. Similar images accompany Warren's description of the scene of Meriwether's suicide, and Jefferson "always/ carried the shadow of the forest" within him, and also comes to total despair and wanhope. Acedia's world is dead, itself the ruins of what world once was. Even when spring comes with its promise of Being, rebirth and regeneration are impossible.

Another of Warren's appropriations of acedia's precise topoi is the presence of the owl, which both silently watches and then heralds the afflicted's doom. In folklore and churchlore the

owl symbolizes acedia's haunting of the self. “The screech-owl laughed and told me I was dead," says Lucy (64). While some of acedia's motifs were given to Warren in the strangely-fitting historical details of *Brother to Dragons* (Rocky Hill, for example), Warren says he invented Cat, and her association with the owl "scritching" death as fate is Warren's careful design: “the call of the owl discovers a new register” (64). Lilburne asks Cat if she heard anything on the night of John's death, and she says "the owl . . ./ and then hit come!" Cat herself, like some old scritch-owl, confirms Lilburne's despair and condemns him to die.

But Lilburne is already dead, in Coleridge’s death-in-life. By the end of his story he has died of the Sickness Unto Death and is already interred, even as he walks around in his deadman's clothes. In a sad allusion to the story of Lazurus redeemed, reborn, acedia's "forms" have entombed Lilburne, and he cannot be resurrected:

> Lilburne walks not forth. . .
> His heart does not unlatch. . .
> For he now inhabits an inward landscape
> Of forms fixed and hieratic, like moon-blasted
> basalt.(96)

Ironically, Lilburne has craved the reality of existence. He has tried to find some proof he is still alive, that the experience of Being was real. Lilburne's twisted and dark need contrasts with other characters who seek to deny experience: if Letitia

doesn't name her feelings, she doesn't have them; if John closes his eyes and doesn't see the ax, it isn't there; if Isham doesn't hear the screams while he watches the dismemberment, it didn't happen.

Lilburne, though, has yearned for some confirmation that his existence, and anyone else's, was real. Warren calls this experience of Being "joy." In committing "the worst thing" imaginable, Lilburne confirms himself to himself. This confirmation brings him "vision":

> But before the glacial acceptance, cry,
> Just once, to the empty room, "God!"
>
> Then know, and be, himself.
>
> Joy flickers, shy, in the heart's
> Cold fatigue. But joy is energy.
> There is one germ for joy. Its name is vision.
> The scales are loosed from his eyes. (100)

Obviously Warren does not suggest any sympathy for murder. But we're left with such a disturbing confusion: why does Warren attribute to his murderers' hearts the satisfactions of joy, as if anything about such hearts were appropriate to joy? Leo Hamalian, commenting on Robert Musil's Existentialist novel *The Man Without Qualities*, says of the murderous protagonist that

> Like Camus' Stranger, who has committed an
> inexplicable murder, Moosbrugger must come to terms

> with several aspects of himself; there is a confrontation, a moment of truth. . . and in this area of self- awareness he gains a kind of freedom. . . (EI 21).

This is the self-awareness Lilburne calls "his perfect certainty of self.”

For Lilburne, the degeneration into extreme criminal pathology has offered something, to stave off the nothing. Psychologists today know that for many lost, shattered, shame-crippled souls, the violent act is their only way of feeling that they exist. In human society, qualities like behaving with integrity, compassion and mercy usually “feel” intangible: their results for us are internal, their consequences usually not measurable and/or delayed, usually for years, if we get any overt response at all. In fact accepting such delayed gratification and being satisfied by internal spiritual rewards are marks of our psychological health and maturity. The aggressive/violent act, though, causes immediate and radical results. Hereby the self committing such acts has clearly served as direct agent, making things happen. For one who needs confirmation that he exists, the violent act can affirm his, or any, reality. To much lesser negative degree, we know many people—and may even be such a person—who will “stir things up” just to “cause trouble,” get a reaction; and the reasons are much the same: they feel more alive with conflict. We admit this even as we also know that, like Lilburne, sometimes people of severe inner emptiness or pain have

also chosen to be anathema, demonic and dangerous, guilty of the most loathsome existential act of injuring other selves; themselves--in turn--noxious to the community of Dasein. Warren courageously attempts to show Lilburne's motivations and state of mind, as upsetting as we find it.

Lilburne does not want the new grass to heal nature's wounded scar of Lucy's grave; he does not want the vernal healing, its loveliness, but wants the “scar” of her new grave. This scar is his only confirmation of her existence, or of his own:

> . . . He knows that when that vernal
> Mitigation comes back, he
> Will be deprived of something,
> Of some essential reality. The sight
> Of the wounded earth--he craves it, craves
> Pain, sorrow, the oppression of breath.
> Ah, that's reality! (66).

But the malicious crimes against the sacredness of other selves can never be a solution, only a further slide into nothingness. Lilburne's *in extremis* retributive violence does not help, only serving his acedia-dissipation of his disappearing self. So that "unreality grew round him like a fog” (71). Heidegger says that acedia manifests itself as

> drifting here and there in the abyss of our
> existence like a muffling fog, removing all things
> and men and oneself along with it into a [profound]

indifference (BT 101).

Or, as Nietzsche exhorts, trying to move us to existential reclamation, "Why is there so much negation and abnegation in your hearts?" (TSZ 214). But Lilburne's "heart/ Floods dear with desolation./ Why does he suffer, and understand nothing?" (66).

Perhaps one of the reasons why Warren's acedia-sick characters so often do not heal from hearts full of abnegation, and find so little solace, is that as someone who can be neither infidel nor believer, Warren follows Existentialism's contextualized religious, or godly (here, Christian, mostly through Kierkegaard's) doctrine but cannot apply a consonant solution (or, more precisely, a believed truth) of faith. In this he shares with many of the Existentialist philosophers who adhere to what they regard as philosophical truths, while lifting these truths out of particularized religious or faith-based application. It is a difficult maneuver, and not always successful. Warren declared his agreement with Kierkegaard, Buber, Nieburh, and relied on his less obvious but distinct affinities with the beliefs of philosophers like Dostoevsky and Berdyayev; but he stops short of being able to accept their "answers" to our existential condition, answers specifically ending in a final-analysis imperative that we need God. Thus Warren does not show his characters coming to this resolution, this emergence from St. John's "dark night" of nothingness; even the redemptive Lucy does not offer this Godly solution.

Nietzsche, Sartre and others notwithstanding, even Ungodly Existentialist philosophy cannot distance itself from its religious inheritance, while it yet seeks to find Dasein's solutions within the concrete, temporal limits of human existence. (Nietzsche himself reads like a religious zealot, for that matter.) Just as Heidegger's and Jasper's Sein, or Being-Itself can sound like secret-code for the spirit of God, Warren's philosophical Existentialist solutions may be the closest he comes to an idea of spiritual faith. James Justice astutely describes how

> [Warren's acedia] consciously or otherwise, locates its source at the Cross itself, in the Son's typal cry that the Father has turned away His face. . .[causing the] Fall into spiritual lethargy, depression so profound that murder and suicide are the inevitable outs. . .(ARPW 5)

Justus's remarks speak to an on-going controversy in Existentialist philosophy, and in its drama in *Brother to Dragons*. If nothing is certain but Being and the self, and human being is tragic and absurd while the anxiety-ridden self fears and trembles--where is the good? Or, put in the religious framework Justus cites, what is left when God has withdrawn from us? This is Nietzsche's question as well: what will we do if, or when, God is dead? And we are left facing the great abyss of nothingness?

In *Brother to Dragons* Warren uses craven, abdicating Father Charles to voice our secret horror of the nothingness, as he speaks his shockingly soulless and nihilistic farewell to his dead wife, whom he was supposed to have loved:

> My Lucy, rot to nothingness, enter
> The depths of nothingness, not
> Into the postulated oblivion
> That in nothing we may at long last love
> In appropriate mutuality, nothing
> To nothing. (63)

Hatefully cold as this man is, he addresses our worst fears about Being and Dasein: that nothing really exists at all, least of all us; and if anything does exist, its existence is meaningless and void, and nothing matters. Warren puts *Brother to Dragons*' most explicit, pivotal paean to nothingness in the form of a funereal elegy, a kind of Luciferian prayer to a saint. He thus cojoins the nothing to our religious yearnings. We have been led to assume Charles loved Lucy as much as he could love anyone; for her alone, as long as she was alive, he at least kept living, or going through the motions of living. Still Lucy is not lovingly consigned to a loving God and heavenly grace, but to absolute void, not even released into peaceful oblivion but cast into emptiness, as the "appropriate" place for the nothing of human life and all its vain strivings, including love.

Like Hemingway's apostate Our Father ("our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name") in "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," Warren

shows Charles substituting the Existential nothing for belief in God; and the similarities between the works are instructive.

> Despite Hemingway's older waiter's perception of the chaos, of the impossibility of. . . a value system which made belief possible, he continues to betray a religious consciousness. . . though an inversion of religious values [it] is nevertheless a prayer, a spiritual act. . . A religious man who finds no system acceptable, he must bear at the same time his intense spiritual hunger and the realization of the impossibility of its fulfilment. . .the crack in the universe (Joseph F. Gabriel "The Logic of Confusion" *College English* 541)

There can be a kind of peace in embracing nothingness. It can feel like freedom. Yet despite what may be our strongest efforts against seeking religious answers to our “prayers,” most people feel they should believe in something; and once we have rid ourselves of religion and (to more or less degree) all it encompasses (holiness, pure justice and mercy, the hope of redemption, transcendent joy in a future in eternity, etc.) we may well feel that life is nothingness, life as only that idiotic tale, that sound and fury, “signifying nothing.” Warren shows the infantilized Letitia offering up another heretical prayer of her own, telling us that her nothingness is God's fault, even after she admits she desired to be nothing, to erase herself and stay erased, and force Lilburne to assume charge of her selfhood: "Oh,

I was nothing--/ Just nothing . . . and I wanted to be / Just nothing and him everything" (BD 45). Since Lilburne cannot give Letitia a self (as no one can do for another), she blames God: "If you're God, you haven't got / the right to make me . . ./ Be nothing, God"(46). She has whined that God will not give her self-knowledge, when Warren shows us she would not seek it, nor accept it.

Brother's characters, like Hemingway's waiter, continue to pray to a God, or to an idea of a God, even as they have no faith in His existence, and rather believe in nothingness. It is truly a dilemma, a crack in the universe, and we can speculate, given our knowledge of Warren's oeuvre, that Warren frets the dilemma as much as the people in his story do. How can nothingness be anything? Existentialists argue this question in various ways. The nothing translates best as a dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross; this is where most Existential philosophers locate the abyss. (Nietzsche talks about the "joy and terror of the noon-tide abyss," in his semi-hysterical version of how to overcome acedia's noon-day devils.) Kierkegaard set the terms for the famous encounter with the nothing as that moment of highest anxiety and "dizziness" when the soul looks into the abyss of emptiness. However, the abyss and its nothing is not--nothing, and to believe that the sum-total of existence is nothingness would also mean it is meaningless, a serious misreading of Existentialism, in which the meaning of existence is our treasure, and irrefutably real.

The encounter at the abyss is indeed terrible, but it is also liberating, if the self has the courage to face its insidious fear--that the self is nothing--and hold onto possibility. As Heidegger explains

> Thus the nothing comes to be a name for the source not only of all that is dark and riddlesome in existence-- which seems to rise from nowhere and return to it-- but also the openness of Being-as-such amid the brilliance surrounding whatever comes to light. (BW 90-92)

Heidegger's explanation recalls Warren/Mellville/Conrad and notions of the great “blankness,” and, for them, the blank page on which possibility occurs as writing our black marks: but more particularly his description evokes the Genesis Creation, as out of a world "without form, and void" a great act of will summoned the light. Berdyayev, a godly philosopher and as close as modern Existentialists come to a mystic, criticizes Sartre because he says "Sartre would think that behind the apparent there is nothing, there is no mystery" (in Herbert FET 142-144). But if Sartre didn't see the nothing as part of a greater mystery, he assuredly follows Heidegger in believing that our encounter with nothingness can be a way to find meaning; the encounter is the central element of Sartre's ontology. And Kierkegaard, who often referred to "the enormous nothing of ignorance" declares that "one who squarely faced Nothingness [may] see love of Being as the other possibility" (in Jaspers TGP 190-92). Clearly

Kierkegaard presupposes that dishonoring the reality of Being (believing it to be, itself, nothing and/or meaningless) is the most ignorant error, and that faith in reality and the reality of Being is redemptive.

Kierkegaard's position cautions that the encounter with the nothing must not be a self-devouring exercise in solipsism. It is useful to reiterate his distinction here:

> In place of bottomless, endless reflection which leads into nothingness stands immediacy, origin, actuality, authenticity, presentness. (280)

Jaspers says anxiety at the abyss "is the state of possibility preceding freedom" (246). Existential possibility is our way to survive and understand our encounters with nothingness. As Jaspers explains, realized human being is two-way: grab onto all the decision-making freedom of Dasein; be open to all possibility of Being, because beyond Being is nothingness. Nothingness is its own kind of possibility, though, and we can choose it, too, although once we do, of course, possibility ends. For Existentialists the encounter and what it reveals is the avenue to truth; nothingness is itself real, a fact we must face, an existential condition we must endure if we are to claim our freedom. This is why Existentialism sees Idealism as "anti-life," anti-possibility. Warren uses the word "nothing" repeatedly in *Brother to Dragons*, as a mantra for all the abdicating selves, what they choose and what they believe in, as they stand at the abyss but "reject [and]. . . repudiate" knowledge, freedom and

possibility. Letitia complains that "my living was just nothing / . . .me nothing in my hollowness," and she is correct (BD 52). Isham, in his lies and denials, insists that "I'm nothing, nothing ever happened," rather than admitting to the reality of what “happened” and taking responsibility for his part in the murder (122). When Lucy experiences her fatal failure "to execute the good thing," "there was nothing else in my mind left" (54).

Lucy's admission describes the condemnation to choose; having refused to do the good thing, she chooses nothingness. In any dialectical construct, nothing posits something. Kierkegaard's self can choose possibility in the encounter with nothingness; but as long as the self exists it cannot be free from the necessity of choosing. We may talk about people who will not take responsibility for their own lives, make a decision, make choices in autonomous fidelity to self; but in a true and fundamental way, refusing to choose, we choose, a by-default certainty. Humankind's machinations, continually trying to avoid choice, are simply not part of possibility.

Furthermore, although Ungodly Existentialism believes the self can be destroyed as its horizon of temporal existence is met, the godly Existentialists, and Kierkegaard most insistently, believe that the end of temporal existence does not preclude an eternal soul: "Man cannot destroy his self. He can only ruin it" (AKA 122). The devouring hell of self will stretch to infinity, endless and never accomplished, Camus's Sisyphus and his rock, Prometheus and his condemnation as the eternal carrion, in the

forever-assault of vultures eating away at him, "the impotent self raging to do what it cannot do, which is . . . consume itself" (in Jaspers TGP 246). Warren states this position when Isham runs away, changes his name, and tries to avoid the consequences of murdering John, working so hard to disappear and get rid of his selfhood, to obliterate it in nothingness; but "knew the one durn thing/ A man can't do is throw himself away" (BD 122). The godly Existentialist answer, though contingent on the self's reconciliation with God, does agree with the Ungodly Existentialist answer to the question of redeeming meaning, in the self's will to act heroically, with courage, as it cherishes Being. This is Existentialist ontology.

Anything less can only bring Lilburne's desolation, the enervating depair. James Justus discusses Warren's commitment to Being, and to human being, as Warren's Existentialist solution for acedia:

> . . . Warren's subtle point thus becomes. . . the necessity for respect of the only human, bereft of sureties based on religion, philosophy, or history. (74)

Justus describes the respect for the only-human as being distinct from philosophy, but it is exactly the de facto operating premise of Existentialism. Also, Warren's only-human includes a belief in some kind of redemption, salvation, as Justus has noted of Warren’s portrayals of the deadly sin of acedia and its context in the Cross of Calvary. For Warren the passionate covenant with

Being and its only-human being is our sovereign hope, and our free will, our salvation.

This hope, following the Judaeo-Christian poetic of the existentially-required engagement in the existent present, must be "Now," because "now is the moment of our salvation," no matter how terrifying or arduous that moment may be. Warren's narrative in *Brother to Dragons* builds to "now":

> Now is the hour of iron: accept the obligation
> And the sap of compassion withdraws uttermost inward
> To sleep in the secret chamber of Being (64).

Just as Justus has contextualized our temptation to slip into acedia, Warren's "now" is located at the iconographic hour of the Crucifixion, emblematic of the undeniable necessity to choose, now--that lightning moment of decision, between death and life, when the only-human stands at that abyss which is the crossroad between infamy and integrity, hatred and love, abnegation and affirmation. It is Letitia's "Now! Like the time had come / You were afraid for, but had to have . . ." (36). Now, in each exquisitely singular, individual and subjective moment of truth, the self chooses and creates its identity; what, existentially, it wills itself to truly be, by choosing what it truly will do. Kiekegaard says subjectivity is the truth. Not the happy fantasies of essence, but the costly experience of the individual, existing will. In *Brother to Dragons*, Warren has announced the real names for the choice, as he says, between

salvation and damnation. Every moment of now, the self chooses its fate.

We are still left with the question of what salvation really means to Warren. He persistently calls the higher good "virtue," but what can this entail, in the absence of Kantian *a priori* categories of the good, or of religious consolations? How do we come to virtue, and what is it?

Warren says that history is, and was, made primarily by "great men.” We can therefore look for answers by returning to Warren's paricipation in the historical traditions of the epic hero. Many critics have examined the significance of heroism as a theme in Warren's work. Warren's own remarks consistently reiterated concepts of heroism as salvific in human life. But what makes an ordinary man heroic?

With *Brother to Dragons* Warren established himself as the poet of the American heroic epic, a "job" he pursued over a lifetime, his stance either focussed in long elegaic narratives of our legendary heroes (*Audubon, A Vision*; *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*) or imbedded in his collections of shorter-form lyric poetry (such as *Or/Else*, *Promises*, *Rumor Verified*). Warren's definition of virtue cannot be seperated from his ideas of heroism, in which he agrees with the oldest existential paradigms, as his epic sensibility attests. In *The Consolation*, Boethius says that the virtues of *Fortitudo* alone can defeat acedia. As Lady Philosophy tells the prisoner, "virtue gets its name from the virile strength that is not overcome by adversity"

(99). Throughout Warren’s work he examines the heroic warrior code. Two main elements comprise the code. As Morris Green defines it in *The Old English Elegies*, the first is aloneness, "solitariness [and] the acutely painful fracture of the *comitatus*," casting the warrior into a questing search for selfhood's identity; and, as Ed Irving says in *A Reading of Beowulf*, "a series of radical choices [of] strength and courage and resolute self-respect [steeped in] irony" (OEE 12; ARB 62). Explaining "natural heroism" in Conrad, Warren quotes Conrad's use of the old Anglo-Saxon formula of "heart and hand": "for the great mass of mankind the only saving grace that is needed is steady fidelity to what is nearest to hand and heart" (SERPW “Mirage” 144). It is a figure Melville used, as well, to mean volition and action, passion and choice.

For Warren heroism hinges on the existential act, what he calls, in "Melville's Poems," "the necessity for action in the face of knowing the truth"(MP preface). Warren is always much more disposed to understanding a mistake or wrong act (even, unnervingly, a crime) than to tolerate the empty-souled cowardice of fleeing, especially in self-justifying equivocation and self-deceit. In *Brother*'s denouement, Meriwether tells Jefferson

> . . . yes, I'd honor more
> The axe in the midnight meat-house, as more honest
> at least
> Than your murderous lie to prove yourself
> Noble in man's nobleness (116).

Existential free will must choose, and it must act. Denial, refusal, abrogation or fleeing the truth damns the self.

Surely the act itself cannot solely result in heroism. We recall that Warren insists that the "fidelity" to act must be ethically-based, as this partakes of the "moral discipline [to create] the human community," Warren's *comitatus* (SERPW “Mirage” 144) We have explored the ways in which concepts of virtue in *Brother to Dragons* directly conform to Existential philosophy. The individual must choose reverence for his own vital Being and not choose the nothingness of acedia. Faith in Being both comes from and engenders fidelity to truth, to knowledge, beginning with knowledge of the sacredness of the self and extending to community. When the individual chooses faith in this sanctity of Dasein in *comitatus*, choosing the good for and in his own selfhood and the selfhood of others, he learns love. And only hereby can he find the way into forgiveness, to forgive or to be forgiven. Existentially, this process yields Warren's secular but eminently sacral concept of salvation, as the individual has indeed worked out his own salvation, enduring, accepting and rising above fear and trembling.

Facing nothingness at the abyss, the hero musters the "courage" that "slays giddiness at the abyss," to make clear-sighted passionate choice. (Nietzche TSZ 165). We recall, too, that Warren's metaphor for his own passionate choice, to work hard to tell the truth in his art, is the "image of a dance on the high-wire over the abyss" ("KA” 246). We see the individual

(and the artist, for Warren) choosing either nothingness or possibility. The most frightening as well as absolute fact of the free-will choosing, facing the abyss, is that neither of the two alternatives (abdication, or action) gives us any firm surety of safety or rightness.

Human being can either nullify itself in cowardice and fear or take its chances--possibility is not promise, nor outcome. Existential anxiety bedevils us all our lives; we are continually called upon either to give up and hide or to make the Jamesian leap of faith and radically, heroically risk ourselves. To our life-long dismay and exhaustion, this confrontation never stops so long as we're alive, and what is worse, it never offers peace or complacency. The existential dialectic is insoluble, without a resting place in any Hegelian synthesis; and all we can cling to is the hope that faith makes possible. William James also talks about the will to believe, and hope is the courageous existential act of will in our lives. Today we say that there are no guarantees in life. Existentialist philosophy and belief has been saying the same thing for a long time. Like Warren, our lives consist of our walking the high wire over the abyss, and we either save ourselves or lose ourselves. (And tragically, like the great Greek and Shakespearean dramatic protagonists, sometimes our fall isn’t even a fault of will, but just *harmartia*--error; hence the tragedy.)

So far we have covered two elements of the three-part formula St. Paul says are the necessary way to achieve virtue:

faith, and hope. The last,"the greatest," is love; and it is also the most complicated and difficult. It too must begin at the confrontation at the abyss. Heidegger says

> Dasein finds itself face to face with the Nothing of the possible impossibilities of its own existence (BT 92).

Or, to our extreme unhappiness-- part of the possibility we must so heroically face, is the possibility of our own impossibility! Contemplating our own death, or nullity, or unreality: this does not seem to herald much good news. But Warren explains the redemptive promise in our position. In "Pure and Impure Poetry," he discusses Proust, Eliott, Dreiser and Faulkner as "writers of the death drive" who seek to find answers through recognition of the horizons of our temporality, that is, to find the key of life in the understanding the death of life. So that Sartre's *le neant* is also Jean Lahor's *la gloire du neant*, the recognition of possibility when the sacramental impulse meets nothingness. We return to Jaspers's description of Kierkegaard as one who squarely faced nothingness, and there saw love of Being as the final answer to our woes. And as long as Being exists, the possibility of love exists. Martin Buber instructs us in the nature of love:

> Good people and evil, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real to the eyes of him who stands in love. . . set free they step forth in

> their singleness, and confront him as a “Thou”
>
> (WMB 48)

Fiercely holding on to the conviction of the sacredness of others, refusing all objectification of others, willing ourselves to see beyond appearances (the superficial mirrors) and experience the reality of other sacred selves, we will be rewarded by knowledge. The will to believe meets the ineffable passionate love of Being: Lucy, *Brother*'s messenger of reconciliation and hope, says such love requires "a difference in the heart," and cries

> Oh, the terrible burden of love!
>
> . . .if you loved him once
>
> that love is valid yet and all you have
>
> to bring with you into the inhabited darkness (108).

Time is fluid, the past is alive in the present, and love, the most bitter and most sweet conundrum of all, is "all you have" against the nothingness.

Faith, hope, love. Existentialist love yields knowledge, truth, and redemption, as Warren shows the characters of *Brother to Dragons* finding truth when they will to act with love. To love Being never means an abstract or generalized sentiment, or feeling. Buber says "Believe in the magic of life"; Sein revealed to Dasein. Nietzsche says "Look! Round you beings love their life, and to whatever point you turn you come into Being" (GM 48). Christian scripture declares that "God is love"; Warren will say that human being’s answer is to "love the world" and that

loving the world "may be a way to love God," and to hope that God loves us. Such love must start with the individual selfhood of our single existence, resolving our alienation, that which Eliot, in his “Four Quartets,” calls "the fever chart" of our pain, with the concomitant choices of faith, and hope.

Dasein must love its selfhood in all its conflicted, chaotic, ugly and maddeningly problematic dualism, including the other-half of its life, e.g. its death. In Warren's art, the call to love is never a Romance, but hard and costly. Somehow, though, the love is always our answer, even if we fail. Warren keeps reminding us that our own existence ("we are only ourselves") is all we have to go by. Once we have faced nothing and chosen to love, we set ourselves on the path to truth. It is a rocky journey, and the gate is narrow. Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor accuses God of the dirtiest trick:

> Thou didst choose [to give men] all that is exceptional, vague and enigmatic . . . instead of a firm foundation to set the conscience of man at rest (BK 66).

Indubitably, there is nothing restful about choosing to love Being and truth. Dread, anxiety, anguish, Warren's fidelity to the (immense) job; every step of the way is work, and hard going. Every individual knows the pain of reality; in Nietzsche's inspiration, Buddhism, original sin translates into the tenet that life is suffering, and tragic. And love does hurt; but as

Lucy demonstrates when she fails to show love to John the slave—the lack of love hurts more.

Only by choosing courage, love, truth, can we hope to find virtue for ourselves, or to behave with virtue towards the other selves we must cope with throughout our lives:

> Oh, that you would renounce all half-willing. . .
> do ever what ye will, but first be such as can will.
> Love ever your neighbor as yourselves, but first
> be such as love themselves (Nietzsche TSZ 180).

Invoking Christian dogma, Nietzsche adds the will to love, to the virtues of willing faith and willing hope, and links it not only to the self, but to all other selves. Here is the overwhelming Existential truth, the "terrible" knowledge we must face: we have a choice, and we are responsible for it. In *Brother to Dragons* Lucy's one failure to love sets off the cataclysmic hatreds, retributions, crimes, and damnation of her entire world:

> To touch it, and the terribleness
> Of knowledge. My mind
> Was saying the pure and simple thing
> The sort of thing to live by and make the day good
> Saying: This boy is hurt,
> Get water, bathe his blood, bind up the wound (BD 54)

The wounded slave is just "one more nigger more or less," but he is "all.” Heart and hand, we must roll up our sleeves and get to the tasks of love. As Lucy learns, love fulfills "the small obligation that sways the weight of the world.”

Love is the ultimate Existentialist theme of *Brother to Dragons*. Warren's other thematic issues, such as conscious and responsible selfhood, seeking and facing the truth, the heroic struggle of the individual in the epic of America, can all be seen to conspire in conveying the one great theme of love. Love of the world, love of the self, love of others. Like Lucy, Kierkegaard prayed for "a truth to live and die for," the kind of reason to live that Warren's grandfather told him so long ago, that a man needed. The passionate commitment of the heart makes a man willing to devote himself to it, or sacrifice his life for it. Sartre's engagement translates to Warren's yearning after virtue, but its existential act is love. RPW asks "what is knowledge/ Without the intrinsic mediation of the heart?" (130). Love is Warren's mediating third way, "the narrow ridge of responsibility between Idealism and Realism" (WMB 20). Once we accept our responsibility to love, we can forgive ourselves and others, and as Jefferson finds, "all is redeemed in [this] knowledge," the "bitter bread" that makes up our possibility for joy.

Somehow the love is always worth the doing, because every single human existence matters. Lucy tells us

> I must accept the responsibility of my love
> Even though that love was infected by failure
> Even if I tried to flee responsibility, and
> Died. Oh, don't repeat my crime (116).

Thus love will harry us, always, as new and newly-agonized--heroic--choices must be made. Each act of love carries within it the weight of the world, and we must stand. This steadfastness is our virtue and our heroism. As Sartre says, "what produces cowardice is . . . giving up or giving way" (EFDS 360). Fierce, unflinching, virtue means never giving up our responsibility to love.

RPW brings the story of *Brother to Dragons* to an end. The poet, persona and person, has given voice to (spoken the "primary word" of) vision. He has faced Dasein's deepest darkness, looked into the face of human evil and the self's anathema damnation. He has shown us the "evidence of things unseen"; risked the old epic existential journeying into our dead past to bring back living, saving truth, to offer us knowledge of the possibility of virtue:

> We have yearned in the heart for some identification
> With the glory of the human effort. We have devised
> Evil in the heart, and pondered the nature of virtue.
> We have stumbled into the act of justice, and caught,
> Only from the tail of the eye, the flicker
> Of joy, like a wing-flash in thicket (131).

Warren describes our pathos: Being and its transcendence are immanent in our lives; the reality, its image, registers in our consciousness, as we see it, feel it, recognize it, respond to it. The ontological journey takes us to this answer: herein is life’s meaning. En route, RPW/Warren learns that his own selfhood needs the fulfilment of his mission fully as much as the poet

feels his duty to bring it to others. The poet's great commission is, has always been, to find the sacred truth of Being with its gift of knowledge, and courage. Returning, the poet feels Being’s transcendence as he walks through the gate of the past, into the presentness and presence of world, into the salvific “now”:

> And so I stood on the headland and stared at the river
> In the last light of December's, and the day's,
> declension . . .
> The winter makes things small. All things draw
> in . . .
> It is strange how that shift of scale may excite
> the heart (BD 131)

Late light confirms existence, reality, but it also illuminates the poet's heart. His epic scale has shifted to the most intimate, the singular individual relationship with Being-itself, from which he must draw the strength, heroism and virtue he needs:

> I crossed the evening barnlot, opened
> The sagging gate, and was prepared
> To go into the world of action and liability.
> I had long lived in the world of action and liability.
> But now I passed into a world
>
> Sweeter than hope in that confirmation of late light.

Choosing responsibility, seeking truth, the poet has learned faith, and learned hope. But now he has come to know the one

thing sweeter than hope: the passionate love of Being, concrete, alive and real, redemptive. It is the thing worth living and dying for-- costly, but infinitely, timelessly dear.

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