Conversion as "a human constant" in Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons*

KONOKI Takaomi

Introduction

Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices* (hereafter abbreviated to *BD*) is a full-length narrative poem in a synchronic conversation style. All the fictional characters converse with each other beyond the substantial difference in time, as the subtitle suggests. The narrative framework is that R.P.W., Thomas Jefferson, Lilburne, Meriwether and other characters related to Jefferson are all placed, regardless of social status, on equal terms as human beings. This metafictional method, juxtaposing a present character with others exhumed from the past, illuminates the theme of this innovative narrative poem: achieving spiritual maturity through incessant reconsideration of the past. The poem's introduction prefigures Warren's attempt to investigate the fundamental nature of American idealism irrespective of the course of time: "the issues that the characters here discuss are, in my view at least, a human constant" (*BD* xivi). *BD* is narrated within the narrative framework that R.P.W., an obvious persona of the author himself, re-experiences the agonies that Jefferson and other more peripheral characters experienced in the past. This imaginary fusion of the present and the past allows us to perceive the sense of continuity through which the present time is constructed against the background of its predecessors.

The story of the poem is based on the little known historical fact that Jefferson's nephew, Lilburne, killed one of his African-American slaves by chopping his head off with a hand ax on the night of December 15, 1811.[1] Jefferson himself did not leave any comment on this crime, a silence of which the author takes full advantage in depicting characters' sentiments and ideas from his own perspective. The process of narration also

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[1] Merrill explains the background of the murder case in detail in *Jefferson's Nephews*. This is a purely historical documentary work.

mirrors an inner transformation in R.P.W. through which he comes to abandon spiritual cynicism and espouse a much more lucid sense of reality. According to Lewis P. Simpson, Warren attempted to "incorporate the supreme fiction that was Jefferson's life into the supreme fiction that was his own life—to fuse the Jefferson of historical fact and a fiction of *his* redemption with the fact of the historical R.P.W. (or the poet himself) and a fiction of *his* redemption" (Simpson 147). In constructing this parallelism, Warren proceeds to demolish the ideal public image of Thomas Jefferson as one of the Founding Fathers while at the same time confessing certain sides of his own personal life experiences and beliefs, as he later admitted (Hendricks, *Letters* vol. 4 186). Though Warren himself had once supported the preservation of Jeffersonian Agrarianism in "The Briar Patch," his contribution to the Southern Agrarian essay collection *I'll Take My Stand*, his view of Jefferson subsequently went through repeated transitions over his long literary career. In this narrative poem Jefferson's sense of values undergoes a significant change during the course of the dialogue, as does that of R.P.W. described in the final chapter. One step to the attainment of spiritual maturity lies in the endeavor to recognize the presence of the deceased in the present and to accept the guilt inherent in being human.

Criticism on *BD*, on the whole, has emphasized Thomas Jefferson's conversion to a recognition of human imperfection through his acceptance of the guilt symbolized in Lilburne's murder of the slave John, and has tried to analyze the dialectical structure of the dialogue between Jefferson and R.P.W. Previous studies of *BD*, however, have not fully discussed the roles and significance of peripheral characters in making possible the inner transfigurations of Jefferson and R.P.W. Also relatively little attention has been paid to the significance of *BD* in Warren's overall literary career. Through the persona of R.P.W., Warren audaciously incorporates his personal perspective into this work, which thus reflects the trajectory of his struggle to abandon Jeffersonian Agrarianism. That is to say, this poem offers an epitome of Warren's inner process of re-establishing himself as a writer. Warren had not published any poetical works since *Selected Poems* in 1943, and he needed almost ten years, until 1953, to compose *BD*. After that, in 1957, he went on to publish *Promises*, his Pulitzer Prize winning poetical work with strong references to his personal situation but free of the Eliot-like elements of his previous verses. The importance of *BD* in Warren's career can also be seen in the fact that there are two editions: 1953 and 1979. In a later

interview and letters he made it clear that the 1979 version was the definitive one.[2] The text followed here will be this 1979 one, which avowedly reflects Warren's imagination and intention.

This paper attempts to scrutinize the spiritual trajectories of both Jefferson and R.P.W. in *BD*, while also laying emphasis on the roles of secondary characters. It then traces the way Robert Penn Warren abandons his belief in Jeffersonian optimism and begins to seek meaning in his own personal past and in the shared past of American society. It will be argued that the lesson of this narrative poem still retains its validity in the sense that its theme and its technique of exhuming past characters and events both contribute to a recognition that present values need to be continuously reconsidered on the basis of what we can know of the past.

1. Characteristics of *BD*

The narrative technique of *BD* is based on the assumption of "PLACE: *No Place* TIME: *Any Time*" as the author postulates at the beginning (*BD* 3). All eleven characters engage in conversation, sometimes aggressively, but mainly with reference to the aftermath of Lilburne's murder, more than to the event itself. This technique of indirect allusion emphasizes the considerable influence the murder had on the people concerned. In constructing this unrealistic manner of conversation, Warren was applying to his narrative technique the Native American custom of the Ghost Dance as established by the Paiute prophet Wovoka at the end of the 1880s. While this real Ghost Dance ended in the catastrophe of the Wounded Knee Massacre, the Ghost Dance in *BD* has a more positive function as a transaction between the living and the dead, and as a vehicle for a merger of races. As all the characters in the work are thus put into symmetry, the whole structure of the poem functions, in a word, as an invocation within the basic framework of the Ghost Dance.

The "Ghost Dance method" makes it possible to articulate a reversion of the previous WASP-centered way of thinking: the peripheral characters make Jefferson change his mental formula. This method may have seemed idiosyncratic in the conservative early 1950s. But when Warren rewrote this work in the 1970s, at a time

[2] In an interview published in 1980, Warren replied, in answer to the question that many people say the 1953 version is superior to the 1979 one, "they are dead wrong" (Watkins 339). In a letter to T. G. Rosenthal, Warren jokingly writes, "I mention it [rewriting *BD*] only because it means something in me, twenty years of rewriting and revision and, I think, some 500% improvement" (Hendricks, *Letters* vol. 5 452). For a more detailed explanation of the differences between 1953 and 1979 versions, see Victor Strandberg, "*Brother to Dragons* and the Craft of Revision" (Grimshaw 200–10) and Richard N. Chrisman's "*Brother to Dragons* or *Brother to Dragons, A New Version*?" (Grimshaw 211–225).

when the United States was holding its bicentennial celebrations, the question of power was being seriously reconsidered, mainly as a reaction to the failure of the Vietnam War. Though the actual scenes of *BD* are set in no specified place or time, Jefferson is clearly introduced by the author as the third President, representing an American sense of values.

The Jefferson in this work, however, is far from the public image of a Founding Father and statesman. Rather, he is characterized as a man in serious agony over the meaning of the murder committed by his nephew. This contradictory characterization reflects Warren's own skepticism towards the Jeffersonian way of thinking, while the ultimate narrator synthesizing the points of view of the characters is none other than R.P.W., the author's persona. This is the author's strategy to cast as "a human constant" the theme of this narrative poem concerned with contemporary America.

2. The Shift of Jefferson's Thought

The most conspicuous element in the opening scene of *BD* is the mental anguish of Thomas Jefferson as an ordinary person obsessed with a terrible incident in the past. Though he is described in the introduction section in a way that stresses his esteemed social status as the third President of the U.S.A., one of the framers of the Declaration of Independence and the founder of the University of Virginia, his actual portrayal in the poem emphasizes his vacillating incapacity to accept the murder committed by his nephew, which is such marked contrast to his belief in human goodness ("Yes, being old, I am the record of my failure. / But whatever you make of my face, and failure, / I reject, repudiate, / And squeeze from my blood the blood of Lilburne and —" (*BD* 43)). This irresoluteness stands at odds with the public image of one of the Founding Fathers. According to John Burt, in this poem "Jefferson is the classic American fanatic, driven mad first by an ideal too large for the human (an ideal Jefferson himself refers to as a 'monster') and then driven mad again by too close a view of human depravity and evil" (Burt 202). In other words, the uniqueness of the ideal public character Jefferson in this poem is far removed from the reality of the man.

Jefferson's inner disparity is reflected in the opening scene of his monologue. He cannot drink the water of "the dark stream," clearly associated with the river of Lethe, even when tormented by the sort of terrible thirst one may feel at the moment of death. The sight of his own face mirrored on the surface forces him to face up to the true meaning of his past life. The comparison of the river to a mirror already announces the assumption that this poem will be dealing meditatively with a theme

surpassing the logic of daily life. The figure of this reflected face on the water surface suggests that what will follow is to be a "reflection" through the medium of dialogue of what the characters have most deeply in mind. The traditional symbolism of a mirror as a path to another world may also add a further sense to this basic setting.

> My name is Jefferson. Thomas. I
> Lived. Died. But
> Dead, cannot lie down in the
> Dark. Cannot, though dead, set
> My mouth to the dark stream that I may unknow
> All my knowing. Cannot, for, if
> Kneeling in that final thirst, I thrust
> Down my face, see come glimmering upward,
> White, white out of the absolute dark of depth,
> My face. And it is only human. (*BD* 5)

It should be noted that in this first scene Jefferson clearly places himself among the dead, and acknowledges the reason for his return into present time. As the narrative unfolds, Jefferson's intention to attribute some meaning to his nephew's act of murder, which he could never accept during his lifetime, comes to occupy a significant place in it. The reason he cannot drink the water of Lethe even when thirsting for death is that he cannot accept the "white" face reflected on the surface. Struck by "white" as his own racial identity, Jefferson is clearly confronted with the point that he should never have permitted himself to ignore his nephew's murder of the black slave. In short, the passage emphasizes Jefferson's public innocence, which ironically makes it impossible for him to find any significance in the obscurely hidden incident. Jefferson alludes to Lilburne's ferocious killing of his slave, John, in confessing that "I've long since come to the conclusion / That love, all kinds, is but a mask / To hide the brute face of fact, / And that fact is the un-uprootable ferocity of self" (*BD* 33). This cynical resignation expressed just at the beginning testifies how profoundly Jefferson has come to doubt the concept of reason which he once so cherished.

Near the end of the poem Jefferson finally accepts the limitations of his rationalism after going through the circumstances in which John, the slave, was killed by Lilburne. His conversion is the result of his acknowledgement of human evil once he has come to realize the various meanings in the murder through his dialogues with the other deceased relatives. Warren believes that a true understanding of rationalism

is only possible on the basis of a desperate experience. This is a practical application of Warren's resolution in his essay "Pure and Impure Poetry" to defend the positive power of impure elements in poetry (*Essays* 25).

> LUCY: No, Brother, touch him. Touch Lilburne.
>
> JOHN: Yes—now is the time!—That's all I,
> In my ignorance, know.
>
> LUCY: He should know most.
>
> JOHN: Oh, please!
>
> JEFFERSON: Touch him—touch him—yes?
>
> Yes, look! I've touched. Oh, may we hope to find—
> No, thus create—
>
> LUCY: —the possibility of reason. Yes,
> And create it only from
> Our most evil despair? (*BD* 119)

This symbolic scene of reconciliation reverses the dominant sense of values in that the black slave alters the self-image of his white master, Thomas Jefferson. Although the shift of his sense of values is the focal point of this poem, R.P.W. will not completely accept Jefferson's epiphany-like conversion in this phase. Previous studies of this problem have tended only to concentrate on the personal change in Jefferson; a full discussion of the characters surrounding him has not yet been attempted.

3. The Power of Peripheral Characters

Immediately after the scene of reconciliation, R.P.W. enumerates the names of a group of minor peripheral characters whose existence Jefferson has persistently been trying to ignore. By listing them in this way, R.P.W. emphasizes the significance of their roles in the act of conversion.

> R.P.W.: Consider those who could not end in joy.

Take John all huddled for the senseless axe,
Or old Aunt Cat, who lived too long. Or Letitia,
Who could never know what her own story meant.
Take Lilburne counting slow.
Take Isham—accessory they named, and the jury
Called for rope. (*BD* 121)

The description of the most significant of these figures, Lilburne, focuses in particular on his personal past up to his murder of John. The fact that Lilburne rarely appears or speaks directly encourages the reader to speculate over the role he plays in bringing about the change in Jefferson's sense of values. Another way of saying this is that Lilburne is portrayed mainly in the dialogic exchanges of other characters.

Jefferson acknowledges the existence of evil in humanity by touching Lilburne's hand, and then advances to the point where he can regard knowledge and rationality, in R.P.W.'s words, as "the bitter bread." The murder, therefore, is accepted by R.P.W. as an inevitable fact once he has traced the personal past of Lilburne. Though the whole life of Lilburne is "a cruel process of disillusionment, and isolation" (Ruppersburg 55), the narrator also insists that his turbulent life full of violence represents one brutal aspect of humanity unconsciously shared by everyone ("We feel that the force now driving Lilburne on / Is but part of the unhouseled force of Nature, / Mindless, irreconcilable, absolute" (*BD* 62)). The capitalization of "Nature" implies that Lilburne's violence is something beyond his own control. The direct motive for the murder is John's accidental breaking of the vase which Lilburne was once given by his mother. Of great significance is the description in which Lucy identifies Lilburne with John ("He [Lilburne] felt the dark fear hiding in his heart. / He saw the dark hand set the white dish down. / He saw poor John as but his darkest self / And all the possibility of dark he feared" (*BD* 116)). This appears to mean that Lilburne identified himself with John, and understood the murder as a kind of self-punishment for his own precarious life.

Lilburne's unsettled mentality is further described in several other scenes of this poem. One typical case is his physical and mental abuse of his wife, Letitia. In a scene in which they walk into the woods, he makes a wreath with leaves, puts it on her head, and speaks a few affectionate words to her. But immediately afterward, his attitude suddenly changes and he bluntly says, "If you're an angel, / Then I simply give you one piece of advice: / Go!"(*BD* 47). From that point on, he refuses to talk to her at all. Furthermore, he sexually abuses Letitia and then makes her recount exactly what abuses he has subjected her to (" 'Letitia—now tell me exactly what happened.' /

And [Lilburne] crouched at my [Letitia's] side. / But my words wouldn't come and my poor chest was a bigness / That hurt like something swelled there, and I cried: / 'I can't, I just can't!' ") (*BD* 50). This is an additional verbal assault on her from Lilburne whose destructive impulse to seek affection reflects the lack of love he receives from those around him. The disintegration of Lilburne's life comes about from his excessive adherence to pure idealism. Ruppersburg points out: "His decline is a cruel process of disillusionment, abandonment, and isolation. He begins as an idealist naively expecting the best from life, and he is disappointed at every turn, by every person and event" (Ruppersburg 55–56). This remark also applies to Jefferson and R.P.W., who share this psychological inclination with Lilburne to some extent.

After his murder of John, Lilburne pretends to have a duel with his brother Isham so that the bullet Isham shoots will hit Lilburne himself, meaning in effect that he will have committed suicide. His tragic end signifies a self-punishment not only for the murder but for his whole past life. The exploration of Lilburne's past, although only hazily suggested in the poem, thus supplies another focus of interpretation for *BD* from which it may be possible to grasp some essential key element accounting for Jefferson's conversion to the evilness of the world.

Before the suicidal duel, Lilburne sets free a big moth, probably a symbolic spiritual incarnation of John, which has flown into the house through an open window. This act takes Isham by surprise, for he anticipated that Lilburne would kill the moth, being so full, or so he believed, of violent impulses. The moth episode suggests that the act is a ritual of expiation for John, and it leads Lilburne into a new mental synthesis entailing the sacrifice of John. Lilburne's violent journey of self-inquiry reaches a final suicidal closure in the murder of John, and can be interpreted as his vain effort to seek affection from the people around him. This mental dissonance may be a result of the ambiguous position Lilburne found himself in as a small child raised between his mother and his nurse. R.P.W. interprets Lilburne's violence as resulting from a lack of love during his formative period ("We must remember that always the destroyer / It is who has most need of love: therefore destroys" (*BD* 64)). Lucy, Lilburne's mother, was unable to overcome the mental distance between her child and herself, and passed away still regretting that she could not perform the role of mother ("I saw his [Lilburne's] face, / But a wide world between, like a valley, / And his face gone small in distance, / And the rain fell steady between, / The distance but to the bed-foot but great as forever, / And the face yearned toward me across the valley, / And my heart made a cry: 'Oh, God!' " (*BD* 55)). Her offer of atonement as the mother of a killer culminates in another speech focusing on this psychological gap: "I must accept the responsibility of my love. /

Even though that love was infected by failure" (*BD* 116).

Aunt Cat, Lilburne's nurse, consoles him in his terrible sorrow after his mother's sudden death as if he were her own flesh and blood. The scene is described from Letitia's point of view.

> LETITIA: The tears ran down, then Cat, she took his [Lilburne's] hand.
> Said: "Lil, my Honey, come on, git to bed."
> Said: "Chile." Said: "Chile." And him so drooped and slow.
> Till nigh the door. Said: "Chile, your Mammy's dead.
> But I'm yore Mammy, too. I give you tiddy." (*BD* 58)

However, Aunt Cat's nursing, ironically enough, induces confusion in Lilburne as to the real nature of maternal love. The dilemma of being caught between "two mothers" has such a traumatic effect on him that he grows violent to the others surrounding him as an misguided mode of affection-seeking. This mentality, and the complex it leads to, come in for heavy criticism from R.P.W., who sees the root of the trouble in the antebellum Southern family system ("Yes, she [Cat] would struggle / For Lilburne's love, for possession of her [Lucy's] Chile. / But the enemy, the rival, Lucy Lewis." (*BD* 58)). R.P.W. attacks this dissociated manner of child-raising as one of the harmful offshoots of Southern ideology ("Now, anybody raised down home—down South— / Will know in his bones what the situation was." (*BD* 58)). True maternal affection lies in Aunt Cat, not in the mother. Aunt Cat cries after she receives the notice of Lilburne's suicidal death ("My Lil, he come inside my heart to stay / And hang his hat and take his ease, and all / My heart gits singing and the fire dance bright. / Sings 'Lil!' Sings 'Lil! my leetle Baby-Bear.' "(*BD* 124)).

In this way, Lilburne is not characterized as a mere ferocious criminal, but as a social victim of antebellum Southern customs. What relates Lilburne to Jefferson is the pitcher—a keepsake from his mother—that John has accidentally dropped and broken. That was in fact a gift from President Jefferson.

> ISHAM: Then points up to the shelf,
> And says: "You see that pitcher there—
> All gold and flowers, the one she [Lucy] loved so much
> That the President, her brother, gave her
> And she set up high to see." (*BD* 78)

Emphasized here is Jefferson's public role as the President of the U.S.A., not his

private existence as an individual. The close relationship between Jefferson and Lilburne is articulated in this explanation of the origin of the pitcher. This in turn reflects the author's strategy of exposing the destructive force inherent in Jeffersonian idealism. Concerning the composition of this poem, the author left a note: "Jefferson's 'Crime' / parallel to Lilburn[sic]'s crime" (*Discussion* 202). Over and above the physical touch between Jefferson and Lilburne just before the Ghost Dance scene, Warren's intention to criticize Jeffersonianism is apparent in the parallelism between Jefferson and Lilburne, both of whom are pure idealists.

Another character who importantly criticizes Jefferson's idealism is Meriwether Lewis. Meriwether is based on the leader of the historical Lewis and Clark Expedition across the Louisiana Territory, and this optimistic westward expansion of the United States was a result of the Louisiana Purchase endorsed by Jefferson. In addition to Lilburne's crime, then, the role of Meriwether is of particular significance in preparing the way for Jefferson's inner transfiguration.

In this poem, Meriwether is a surrogate son of Jefferson and then commits suicide by shooting himself after the expedition. Though it is not clear historically whether Meriwether's cause of death was an accident or suicide, Warren opts for the latter, thus illuminating the fatal defect in Jefferson's idealism. Meriwether's skepticism in the expedition ordered by Jefferson is shown in the following stanza:

> And we suffered the rigor of seasons,
> White dew and sun-heat, and the time
> When hibernants are withdrawn to the only comfort
> In the iron world. And snow on the far peak glared blue
> In excess of light, and no track of beast on the unruffled
> White of the high plain, no wing-flash in high air,
> And in that glittering silence of the continent
> I heard my heart beating distinctly, and I said,
> Is this delight? Is this the name of delight? (*BD* 111–12)

Meriwether recounts the journey into the wilderness here as total disillusionment. He represents the experience in terms such as "suffer" and "rigor" undergone by men in contrast to the ways of the animals of the wild that know how to hibernate in a world full of suffering. The "excess of light" may allude to the enlightenment thinking of Jefferson, and the "silence of the continent" relentlessly reveals the emptiness of thought to Meriwether. Therefore, although he is alive ("my heart beating distinctly"), he cannot find, as the two successive rhetorical questions suggest, any true meaning of

life in his pretentious mission. Meriwether then moves on to his reason for committing suicide.

> Had I not dreamed that Man at last is Man's friend
> And they will long travel together
> And rejoice in steadfastness.
> 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 human heart.
>
> So seized the weapon primed and charged, and broke
> In one blast the brain-pan, and flung the lie
> To wing away, and let me sleep. (*BD* 114)

Meriwether's accusation of Jefferson's "lie" illustrates how much he repents of his life choices in cherishing what Jefferson had promised. What he found finally was nothing but "the tracklessness / Of human heart," in stark contrast to Jeffersonian ideas of enlightenment. The way in which the author Warren is so easily able to present the cause of Meriwether's death as suicide comes effectively as a debunking criticism of Jeffersonian idealism, symbolized as the exploration of American wilderness. After he understands the meaning behind both Lilburne's crime and Meriwether's accusation, Jefferson acknowledges his fault:

> JEFFERSON: My son [Meriwether], be still a moment.
> If what you call my lie undid you,
> It has undone me too. For I, too,
> Was unprepared for the nature of the world,
> And I confess, for my own nature.
> And Truth, long since, began her hideous justice.
> But if there was vanity, if there— (*BD* 117)

We can see that Jefferson and Meriwether are psychologically bound together in this sense that Jefferson's command, or "lie," devastated both of their lives. The result is the present tumultuous scene of mental attack from Meriwether, Lilburne, and John.

The final recognition gained through the imaginary conversation is brought about

by all the characters conjuring the Ghost Dance. The invocation aspect of the Dance is aptly used as a tool to illustrate the imaginary and mystic elements in this poem. Its introduction into this climactic scene, even though no Native American characters appear in the work, contributes to a denial of the idea of white supremacy and in that sense the significance of the Ghost Dance in this scene lies not in the act itself but in the meditative aspect it invokes. That may be why the word "knowledge" is emphasized after the ceremonial incantation by all of the characters in the Dance.

> ALL (singing):
> Dance back the morning and the eagle's cry.
> Dance back the Shining Mountains, let them shine!
> Dance into morning and the lifted eye.
> Dance into morning past the morning star,
> And dance the heart by which we must live and die.
>
> JEFFERSON: My Louisiana, I would dance you, though afar!
>
> MERIWETHER: For nothing we had,
> Nothing we were,
> Is lost. All is redeemed,
> In knowledge.
>
> JEFFERSON: But knowledge is the most powerful cost.
> It is the bitter bread.
> I have eaten the bitter bread.
> In joy, would end. (*BD* 119–20)

These ending stanzas emphasize the power of meditation, or knowledge, in reconstructing the past in order to interpret the present. Jefferson in the opening scene was unable to leave this world because of the vexation due to his nephew's crime. However, through the imaginary conversation with Lilburne, Meriwether, and other relatives exhumed from death, Jefferson has been allowed to confront his past while still alive in the present. At this stage Jefferson is at last able to grasp the bitterness of his past and confess how destructive it was to ignore it. These inner dramas of conversion are given final meaning in R.P.W.'s transition from cynicism to an epiphany of "joy" in the present. This assumption that an understanding of reality can only be possible when one recognizes one's own guilt can also be traced through

Warren's other works, whether poetry, fiction, or essays. Although the particular background of this poem is Kentucky, its wider theme is the critique of the idea of American idealism rooted in Jeffersonianism, and that cannot be limited to any particular problems in the South.

4. The Shift in R.P.W.'s Thought

As well as performing his role of synthesizing all the other characters, R.P.W. also undergoes changes in his recognition of his own past and of reality in the course of the dialogues. He is in fact the ultimate protagonist for all the characters in this narrative poem. In this sense he is similar to the protagonist-narrator, Jack Burden, in *All the King's Men*. While Jack remains closely involved in the dramatic events of others in conflict surrounding him, through observation he also comes to understand the interrelatedness of the people concerned with him not only laterally but vertically. One characteristic point is that Jack Burden's recognition mainly derives from watching others' conflicts, not in actually doing things himself. The same method is adopted in *BD*, as R.P.W. is not actively concerned in the historical facts of Thomas Jefferson's and Lilburne's real life. This poem can be described as the inner drama of the mental education R.P.W. went through by conjuring up other characters' spirits based on American history. The narrative frame of this poem, in other words, contains elements of a *Bildungsroman*. R.P.W.'s emotional development is clearly the basis for the narrative structure of this work; the beginning and last scenes are situated in the same place: the ruins of the house of Charles Lewis, where Lilburne committed his murder. R.P.W.'s indifferent attitude when visiting there for the first time well illustrates his inner void.

> R.P.W.: Yes, I have seen it [the relics of the house]. Or saw,
> Rather, all that remained when time and fire
> Had long since done their kindness, and the crime
> Could nestle, smug and snug, in any
> Comfortable conscience, such as mine—or the next man's—
> And over the black stones the rain
> Has fallen, falls, with the benign indifferency
> Of historical imagination, while grass,
> In idiot innocence, has fingered all to peace. (*BD* 9)

Even looking on these desolate ruins from a fire many years past, R.P.W. is unable to

conjecture what the crime was about, but can only repeat light words with frivolous alliterations. This scene of weathered ruins at the beginning of the narrative tells us of the dissociation between R.P.W. and the actual world. The narrator seems to hope that the scene will dissolve into pieces through the working of time, and rapidly passes over more topical matters ("But touch the accelerator and quick you're gone / Beyond forgiveness, pity, hope, hate, love" (*BD* 12)). His indifference is further confirmed in expressions like "a journey is only a journey and only Time is long, / And a river is only water, Time only will always flow" (*BD* 13–14).

However, after experiencing the inner journey of the dialogue between Jefferson and the others, as summarized above, R.P.W. comes to be convinced that recognition of the interrelatedness of human beings is only possible if one admits the existence of the evil in one's mind. Half a year later, R.P.W. visits the same ruins again, this time accompanied by his father. This return symbolizes the meditative fusion of the past and the present in R.P.W.'s mind.

> And I think of another bluff and another river.
> I think of snow on brown leaves, and below
> How cold and far was light on a northern river,
> And think how her mouth and mine together
> Were cold on the first kiss. We kissed in the cold
> Logic of hope and need. (*BD* 129)

The "bluff" and the "river" mentioned in this stanza refer to no particular geographic places, implying that the scene is an imaginary one in R.P.W.'s mind. The bluff may signify the bleak mental condition of R.P.W., and the river may refer back abstractly to the river where Jefferson first declared himself unable to kiss his own face reflected on the surface. R.P.W. can now look back on all of the dialogues more objectively from a higher standpoint, the "bluff." The symbolism of snow here also corresponds well to Meriwether's desperate death after realizing that he has been "deceived" by Jefferson's idealism ("And snow on the far peak glared blue / In excess of light, and no track of beast on the unruffled / White of the high plain, no wing-flash in high air, / And in that glittering silence of the continent / I heard my heart beating distinctly..." (*BD* 111)). R.P.W. has accepted for himself the same bitter but rewarding moral experience that Jefferson has undergone in the encounters of the poem, for R.P.W. is also finally able to attain to the underlying principle of human interrelatedness as he kisses the river and comes to understand its logic. This state of raised awareness is described as follows:

So in this other year by another river,
Far in Kentucky there, I raised my eyes
And thought of the track a man may make through Time,
And how the hither-coming never knows the hence-going.
Since then I have made new acquaintance
With snow on brown leaves.
Since then I have made new acquaintance
With the nature of joy. (*BD* 129)

As compared to the opening scene of the River of Lethe, R.P.W. here contemplates more positively the destiny of human beings involved in historical change. "Time" here will signify his recognition that for historical continuity the present must always be sustained by the deceased, as in the case of Jefferson and his fellows. The phrase "how the hither-coming never knows the hence-going" suggests a historical awareness in which the meaning of one's life can be determined only through a new interpretation from the viewpoint of the next generation. The narrator now weaves to and fro between images of death as in "snow on the leaves," and positive expressions of life as in "I have made new acquaintance / With the nature of joy." Thus this whole process of learning to recognize the meaning of the past also depends on a deliberate association of death with "joy" through the medium of the poem's continuous communion with the deceased. The word "joy" deserves attention, as Lesa Carnes Corrigan points out: "'Joy' is a central and recurrent term in the Romantic vocabulary, and like the Romantics, Warren invests the term with specialized meaning" (Corrigan 81). As can be followed in the trajectory of Jefferson ("In joy, would end" (*BD* 120)), joy may only become possible after the sufferings of a bitter mental journey; and similarly for R.P.W., it is only after accepting the existence of evil as exemplified in the actions of Lilburne that one learns to appreciate Jefferson's gradual growth into a mentally mature person, as compared with his arrested state of development at the start. The river seen by the narrator at the end of the work is now transformed for him into a symbol of regeneration and mental growth. With this vision before him, R.P.W. sums up the whole process of the inner drama which is also the theme of this narrative poem.

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.

And so I stood on the headland and stared at the river
In the last light of December's, and the day's, declension.
I thought of the many dead and the places where they lay.
I looked at the shrunken ruin, and the trees leafless.
The winter makes things small. All things draw in.

It is strange how that shift of scale may excite the heart. (*BD* 131)

The blurred light of winter dusk, this doubtful dividing line between days and years, makes realities ambiguous but supplies a pause for meditation on what has been performed in the poem. R.P.W. recalls the various dialogues with ghostly beings and reflects upon what they mean to him. More particularly, he contemplates how the murder committed by Jefferson's nephew leaves its added stamp of complexity on the guiding light of reason embraced by Jefferson, which in turn requires a reconsideration of the nature of virtue. The outcome is a mental synthesis capable of containing all of the impure elements of the real world. The line "The winter makes things small" suggests this new mental capacity to absorb and contain surroundings. The reason behind the strangeness of "how that shift of scale may excite the heart" is that R.P.W. now feels able to objectify his own past immaturity from his present more mature state of mind. Thus, the scene of winter decay turns out to be congenial to R.P.W. who has found the meaning of the past. His new task will be to convey what he has redeemed through his poem to the next generation ("But now I passed the gate into a world / Sweeter than hope in that confirmation of late light" (*BD* 132)). In this broad and communicative sense, R.P.W. has achieved a restitution of selfhood through the resolving of this *Bildungsroman*-like poem.

Conclusion

The ultimate theme of *BD* lies in prompting the reader into a general consideration of the positive transformation that can occur in a person's way of thinking after the experience of a destructive event. Persisting in one's ideals may sometimes turn out inimical to others, as the author shows in his demolition of the public image of Thomas Jefferson as a rational moralist whose ethos is the root of American idealism. In explaining the role of a destructive force, the author confesses in a letter to Allen

Tate that:

> On the point of human depravity, the poem doesn't say anything that isn't pretty orthodox. Man is capable of great vileness, sure, but he is equally capable of the opposite—but not so, ultimately, unless he can face up to the depravity and make something of it. Etc. I'm tired of being told by some reviewers that I take a pessimistic view of human nature. I think I take a very optimistic view. I think it is capable of total redemption as well as total depravity. But redemption takes a little work. (Hendricks, *Letters* vol. 4 52)

This statement makes it clear that the long inner journey of conversion, both for Jefferson and for R.P.W., is the main theme of *BD* and, more especially, Warren tries to convey the importance of negative elements in our emotional education. *BD* does not set out to supply readers with any didactic guiding principles. However, it does insist on the importance of a continuous reconsideration of one's ideals in the light of a keen sense of the past. Warren's 1976 lecture "America and the Diminished Self" further clarifies this position. Warren points out how "our poetry, in fulfilling its function of bringing us face to face with our nature and our fate, has told us, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, that we are driving toward the destruction of the very assumption on which our nation is presumably founded" (*Democracy* 31). Warren's belief that American poetry, in common with all literature, must adopt a critical attitude to American virtue is mirrored in those of his works that fundamentally scrutinize the founding ideals of America in the light of his knowledge of human finitude and corruption. Thus the role of the peripheral characters in *BD* is to reveal human depravity, embodied in Thomas Jefferson as a critical target. The intentional fusion of the past and the present in *BD* is a kind of anticipation of today's multicultural standards, and highlights the responsibility of the reader to extract meaning from the narrative.

The methodology of this narrative poem, furthermore, can help to dispel the popular image of Robert Penn Warren as a pure New Critic author focusing solely upon intrinsic elements of the text; in *BD*, clearly, external elements such as historical events are employed in the text itself. Warren states that "[h]istorical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for, if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake" (*BD* xiii). This future-oriented remark affirms that *BD* is a metaphor for the imaginary reproduction of knowledge based on the past. R.P.W.'s meditational conversation represents the trajectory of a participant narrator in recognizing the existence of the

deceased who have constructed our present social institutions and bequeathed them to us. *BD* can thus be described as a forward-looking work, but one that aims to resurrect the meaning of death as a core of human dignity. Notwithstanding his prominence as a New Critic, in reality Warren, through his sensitive use of peripheral characters, was criticizing the cultural biases within the established American ideal as early as 1953, the year of the first publication of *BD*. Moreover, his concern here did not change, for he prepared a new version of this work 26 years after the publication of the original. Through the social chaos of the 1960s and the 1970s his emphasis remained the same, to contribute to endorsing "a human constant" in his literary works.

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