

CONDEMNED TO SOME HOPE:

R. P. Warren and the Uses of History

THOMAS H. CARTER

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

Band of Angels, by Robert Penn Warren. New York: Random House, 1957.

Mr. Warren's latest novel, *Band of Angels*, has all the gaudy, familiar trappings of an extravagant historical romance, including (as narrator-heroine) a mulatto *femme fatale* and a plot so crashingly melodramatic that one should not have been surprised to find it used by Mr. Frank Yerby. (It comes as no shock, therefore, that the movie version features Yvonne de Carlo and Clark Gable). Typically, when the novel appeared, *Time* called it "a magnolia-scented potboiler of the Civil War era"—a verdict which found few dissenters. As usual, Mr. Warren's intention was misunderstood or ignored. Still, the critics have some justice on their side. There is an element of cheapness in *Band of Angels* — a tawdry thread that runs through most of Warren's creative work; but it is, I think, largely incidental, part of the risk that Mr. Warren habitually takes. I trust that it is commonplace to say that Mr. Warren's is a profoundly serious intelligence; and that, in his poems and fictions, he attempts to engage our deepest concerns. Melodrama, the increment of violence, is his means; and for the election of that means he has sufficient reason. The obvious

pitfall is that we may mistake the accidents for the substance.

The fact that Mr. Warren's fiction is susceptible to this particular kind of misreading is evidently not without significance. Mr. Warren shares, one imagines, some of the procedures of the ordinary historical novelist; he does, it would seem, the same research into the same dusty archives. It is, I take it, his motive and his use of what he finds that distinguish him so utterly from the historical romanticist, who is incorrigibly frivolous.

History, in a sense, is what happens; normally, I suppose, it is what has happened a long time ago, and what is of such notoriety that we hear of it in school, or in the newspapers, or elsewhere; I mean those events that have, so to speak, entered the public domain. When the writer elects to deal with such events, as Mr. Warren has sometimes done, he deliberately risks violating a public image—though often enough that image is pretty dim. Such was the fate of Thomas Jefferson in Warren's long poem, *Brother to Dragons*, and it scored a temporary distraction from the point Warren meant to make. When *All the King's Men* was new, that novel, as well, suffered a similar wrenching: many readers, immediately identifying Willie Stark as the late Huey P. Long, chose to appraise

the book as "pure" history (whatever that is), and so relieved themselves of the responsibility of trying to understand it as a serious work of art.

We should mention another kind of History, which is the kind *Band of Angels* draws on, but which differs, in so far as it may be said to differ, not from the author's point of view, but from the reader's: those events about which we know so little, if we know anything, that the author has a free hand with them; in our ignorance, we can't object. Undoubtedly there are graduations, and Mr. Warren, in any case, has ranged widely. These distinctions, despite a certain pragmatic weight, do not visibly affect the discipline that the use of history insists on. "... A poem dealing with history," Mr. Warren has written in his foreword to *Brother to Dragons*, "is no more at liberty to violate what the writer takes to be the spirit of his history than it is at liberty to violate what the writer takes to be the nature of the human heart." History, then, for the writer may be a type of experience, valuable because larger, more inclusive, generally more dramatic, and perhaps more definitive than our limited, private experience; it instructs, and must in any case be accounted for; but the serious artist can no more deliberately set out to betray or deny it, and remain serious in his craft, than he can falsify his own experience. This is not to say, of course, that a writer knows immediately the significance of his subject, or that the subject necessarily has any transcendental value. It can't be pumped in, as by a bellows. The writer discovers his meaning, often (and often doesn't), in the very process of trying to write. As Warren himself, speaking of the historical documents pertaining to *Brother to Dragons*, put it,

We know that much, but what is any knowledge

Without the intrinsic mediation of the heart?

As Mr. Eric Bentley has perceptively noted, "the alpha and omega" of Mr. War-

ren's teaching has been "the necessity of self-knowledge." This is just, but too narrow: what we want to know is the *nature* of the self, as Mr. Warren would repeatedly have us see it. Poetry, Mr. Warren has said, "is committed to the obligation of trying to say something about the human condition." *The human condition*: this is better, but it is necessary to go a step beyond. An intelligent critic of fiction, Mr. Andrew Lytle, has said that *World Enough and Time* implies nothing less than "the total protestant depravity of man"—an apt but slippery summation that only partially accounts for Warren's later work.

The thematic unity and coherence of Mr. Warren's considerable achievement must result from many factors; we can select for discussion only the one that seems central; I mean, of course, Mr. Warren's working definition of Man—with which he began and which he has scarcely changed. It is upon this definition, I suggest, that his creative work is predicated; he continually subjects it to the discipline of historic fact; and it informs, in fine, his poems and fictions. If we are able to discover how this definition goes, we shall have some protection from mistaking the subject matter for the subject. (Not that this theme, or substance, is always, in fictional terms, clearly or successfully realized: Mr. Bentley was right to complain that *All the King's Men* "suffers a good deal from incomplete fusion of theme and vehicle.")

Here a consideration of *Brother to Dragons* should prove useful: it is relatively recent; Mr. Warren has inserted himself into the poem as a principal character; and it is the obverse of the same coin for which *Band of Angels* forms the other face. As a poem, *Brother to Dragons* is neither entirely successful nor convincing. Despite its dramatic appearance, it is formally a dialectical debate, and R.P.W. (the character) already knows the answers, like Socrates, and merely waits his chance to thrust them in; hence, as far as real argument goes, he contests with straw figures. This is a dangerous flaw, but it doesn't pre-

vent the poem from being in large part genuinely admirable; and for our purposes, it is ideal¹.

Brother to Dragons ("a tale in verse and voices" transpiring *no place* and *any time*) might very well bear for sub-title, "The Re-Education of Thomas Jefferson"; of that Jefferson whom we were taught to remember as the last of the Renaissance port-manteau-men, the noted rationalist who believed that men were capable of their political salvation, and who, it need hardly be added, is yet cited with equal authority by opposing political polemicists. He is Mr. Warren's hero-villain (Warren is his own protagonist), a type of father-image who stands at the corner of the wrong turn Western, specifically American culture has taken. Mr. Warren has him recall the Philadelphia convention in these terms:

*We knew we were only men
Caught in our errors and interests.
But I, a man,
Suddenly saw in every face, face
after face,
The bleared, the puffed, the lank,
the lean, all,
On all saw the brightness blaze, and
I knew my own days,
Times, hopes, books, horsemanship,
the praise of peers,
Delight, desire, and even my love,
but straw
Fit for the flame, and in that fierce
combustion I—
Why, I was dead, I was nothing,
nothing but joy,
And my heart cried out, "Oh, this is
Man!"*

Such, Mr. Warren's Jefferson admits, was true *then*; it is not true *now*; and he is concerned to find "some justification for the natural." What has altered some pretty firmly held convictions; what makes him say that "love" is but a mask to hide the fact of the "imitigable ferocity of self;" and makes him cry out,

We are born to joy that joy may

become pain.

*We are born to hope that hope
may become pain.*

*We are born to love that love
may become pain.*

*We are born to pain that pain
may become more*

*Pain, and from that inexhaustible
superflux*

*We may give others pain as our prime
definition—*

what has worked this anguished about-face, was the unaccountably brutal crime committed in Kentucky by Jefferson's two nephews, Lilburn and Isham Lewis, who for no special reason (unless "to touch the ironic immensity of afternoon with meaning"), tied a Negro slave to the chopping block, chopped him up, and fed him to the fire. The discovery of the bones gave them away ("I am the Law, I say I want his bones."). Jefferson, so Warren tells us, never saw fit in his lifetime to comment on this occurrence; he is called up to do so now. He must also give satisfaction to his "near son," Meriwether Lewis, commander of the Lewis and Clark expedition and later governor of Louisiana who, dismayed by accusations imputed to his term (and betrayed, as the poem has it, by Jefferson's "absolute dream," "that men are capable/Of the brotherhood of justice"), committed a botched and painful suicide.

Lewis' fate, however, is but corollary and extension of the two nephews' gratuitous butchery—though stupid Isham was merely accessory to his brother Lilburn's peculiar and bloody passion. Jefferson, at first, refuses to accept his nephew:

*I still reject, cast out, repudiate,
And squeeze from my blood the
blood of Lilburn.*

It is not, as Jefferson affirms, that when alive he was a fool:

*And if I held Man innocent, I yet
knew*

Not all men innocent . . .

The fact that Jefferson must accept is not

simply that all men are not innocent, but that all men, *because* they are men, are guilty: it is because of the blood kinship that he must take the hand of his nephew; he must admit that the possibility of evil, which is in all men, is in him too. (Conversely, all men are, in a sense, innocent, Lilburn sought merely to define himself, to embrace his deepest, his *real* nature, by cutting away that darker self projected onto the slave George. This smacks of sophistry, but is merely a way of asserting that men are men. That is why "the burden of innocence is heavier than the burden of guilt.") Evil, like good, is part of the ambiguous substance of the human heart.

In Warren's stories, characters frequently move westward to the wilderness in pursuit of self-definition, free from human contact (like the father of Lilburn and Isham, Dr. Charles Lewis); but, predictably, Warren appears to view the Turner thesis and its implications in an ironic light. Many of his characters would not, however, and they often have their creator's sympathy, for once it was possible to regard the West as the fitting landscape for innocence. This, as R.P.W. grossly reminds us, was while there still existed a frontier:

*In that heyday of hope and heart's
extravagance
When Grab was watchword and earth
spread her legs
Wide as she could, like any jolly
trollop
Or bouncing girl back in the bushes
after
The preaching or the husking bee,
and said,
"Come git it, boy, hit's yourn, but
git it deep."*

But nature is neutral, not given to comfort or comment, and when Meriwether Lewis returned to civilization, he discovered "the tracklessness of the human heart." As R.P.W., who apparently represents the modern intelligence "enlightened" by such amoral disasters as atomic fission, remarks,

*Men had come West in hope. This is
the West.*

*Therefore what more is there for man
to hope for?*

The brightest promises of the Enlightenment, then, are false, and man is thrown back on his own tarnished resources. Health, Lucy Jefferson Lewis tells her brother, is to be had "not by denial,"

*But in confronting the terror of our
condition.*

The major technical problem posed by *Brother to Dragons* is how to persuade Jefferson to adopt an attitude antithetical to that professed in his lifetime. Mr. Warren's solution, which is fundamentally a trick, points up the non-dramatic structure of his poem; what he has gained in immediacy—which is considerable—he loses in weight and conviction. Jefferson is speaking to his sister, the mother of Lilburn and Isham—

*Now I should hope to find the
courage to say
That the dream of the future is not
Better than the fact of the past, no
matter how terrible.
For without the fact of the past we
cannot dream the future.*

*It would be terrible to think that
truth is lost.
It would be worse to think that
anguish is lost, ever.*

—when abruptly the murdered and dismembered slave George appears, for the only time in the poem, to speak:

*I was lost in the world, and the
trees were tall.
I was lost in the world, and the
dark swale heaved.
I was lost in my anguish, and I did
not know the reason.*

George, one gathers, is the concrete, anguished fact of history that must somehow be explained, or at least accepted.

Jefferson calls him, "My son," saying that "we have been lost in the dark"—of, I repeat, the rationalistic Enlightenment; but men are "condemned to some hope." We must, he goes on,

*Create the possibility
Of reason, and we can create it only
From the circumstances of our most
evil despair.*

. . .
*. . . all creation validates itself,
For whatever you create, you create
yourself by it,
And in creating yourself you will
create
The whole wide world and gleaming
West anew.*

If that is heresy, I will leave others to define it.

Mr. Warren's interest in Shakespeare is well known, and no work of his own is more Shakespearian than *Brother to Dragons*: he uses the pathetic fallacy (compare especially *Macbeth*) as often as his protagonist sneers at it. And like a Shakespeare character, he hankers for an absolute belief in the powers of rhetoric; this belief, however, has not been earned: it would have required plot and character, not just "voices"; and its absence undercuts "the justification of the natural" achieved by Jefferson:

*For nothing we had,
Nothing we were,
Is lost.
All is redeemed,
In knowledge.
But knowledge is the most powerful
cost.
It is the bitter bread.
I have eaten the bitter bread.
In joy, I would end.*

It is possible to conjecture why Mr. Warren felt impelled to write *Brother to Dragons*. The historical image of Jefferson and its implications are important; they cannot be side-stepped, for the superficialities of "Jefferson democracy" are still potent ele-

ments in much of our thinking². It seems trite to say it, but it is so, that Jefferson, however worthy of our admiration, was a man of his time; what is external will change; and contemporary intellectuals are properly disturbed because nature no longer wears a benign face. (It didn't in Jefferson's century, either, but there was the possibility that man might sweeten its expression.) Hence Jefferson is something of a political (and philosophical) lion in the path. Wyndham Lewis states the question in terms I imagine Mr. Warren would accept:

When it is said that Jefferson stands for what is best, most idealistic and youthful, in America, we must accept that as substantially true. Had it not been for Jefferson America would have been a far less attractive place. On the other hand it is a *legacy of unreality, like the dream of a golden age.* (My italics.—T.C.)

Mr. Warren's real interest, even in *All the King's Men*, has never been merely in politics, though as a symptom or manifestation I am sure that it interests him very much. The "alpha and omega" of Mr. Warren's teaching is evidently that all men must, as necessary condition of their humanity, eat the same "bitter bread" that his Jefferson speaks of; and that is the knowledge of evil in the world, and in the human heart:

*And that's the instructive fact of
history,
That evil's done for good, and in
good's name—.*

Many critics have commentated on Mr. Warren's concern with the perennial dialectic of good and evil; I want to call attention to two brief passages in *Brother to Dragons* that, from nearly any point of view, are strange. Both are spoken, with some lines between, by R.P.W.

*We must believe in virtue. There is no
Escape. . . .*

*For virtue is
Only the irremediable logic of all
the anguish
Your cunning could admit or heart
devise.*

It may properly be objected that these are but partial definitions, later picked up and synthesized by the development of the poem; so they are; but the theology they suggest is odd—the dregs of a recalcitrant Calvinism. It is reinforced by Jefferson's remark to his sister, early in *Brother to Dragons*, in what appears to be its most memorable single cluster of lines:

*There's no forgiveness for our being
human.
It is the unexpugnable error. It is,
Dear Sister, the one thing we have
overlooked
In our outrageous dreams and
cunningest contrivances.*

This statement, too, is but partial; there is forgiveness; but it is we who must give it, forgiving others and by extension ourselves. Just so, there is virtue, but it must come from ourselves.

All of this, I believe, is a version of that old dogma which progressive America, for a time at least, put by, the doctrine of Original Sin. What makes it so curious, however, is that man must work out his own salvation.

*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!*

This God, whatever he owes to some Jonathan Edwards, seems more distant than the vague deistic one. "Your reason," wrote Mr. Jefferson, concerning religion, to Peter Carr, "is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of your decision." In contrast, Warren's final line—*Would that we were!*—seems the very embodiment of what we are sometimes pleased to call the tortured "modern" conscious-

ness. What is lacking, then, from Mr. Warren's version of original sin is its corollary of divine grace; what we get is hell, but little heaven—or at least one that is secular and humanistic.

II.

In discussing any fiction thematically, we are liable to envision the novelist as a man with an abstract thesis that he attempts to body out with a story. (In the case of the poet, the situation will differ but the point is the same.) I do not doubt that many good novels have been written just so; but it has been in spite of that; and the procedure has betrayed many good fictionists. (Cf. Mr. Faulkner's *Fable*.) Fiction is neither a tract nor a series of syllogisms; it may simultaneously be these things and more; but most of all, as Mr. Ezra Pound has observed, it is a story. Still, a story, lacking a substantial theme or congeries of themes, may be thin as a moral abstracted from the human situations which define it, and which at the same time it structures. ". . . In fiction," Mr. Warren has said, "one should never do a thing merely for a single reason (not if he hopes to achieve that feeling of a mysterious depth which is one of the chief beauties of the art) . . ." On the other hand (as the example of Conrad reminds us), sheer craftsmanship, however scrupulous, cannot altogether prevent a story from ringing false and hollow, at least portentous, if that story has been made to carry more weight than inheres in it. And what a writer has to say, of course, is not entirely up to him: since he needs to render for us, in all its possible contradiction and complexity, what Allen Tate, in a famous phrase, has called "knowledge carried to the heart." Or, in Warren's own words,

*The only knowledge worth the
knowing is
The knowledge too deep for knowing.*

For knowing, that is, mechanically, with the mind merely: a work of art (we are speaking specifically but not exclusively of

fiction) must be more than the sum of its parts; it must be alive. M. Jacques Maritain, in his essay on the poetic experience (which I take to be a kind of "knowledge carried to the heart"), provides a valuable description, at the same time reminding us that, as we know, the achieved work of art is an object:

And it is only through and in the object, through and in sensible signs in which the object abounds, that at the terminous of the poetic operation the content of the poetic experience is finally manifested and known in an express and communicable way.

To abstract is inevitably to falsify all but the flattest experience. What M. Maritain describes as the poetic experience, which must likewise be involved in the writing of fiction, cannot be conceptualized; hence it must be communicated "through the symbolic mode." And this, in fiction, amounts to an expert manipulation of the naturalistic surface.

What is implied here, of course, is more that sort of poetics, a technical strategy by itself; a way of looking at life is implied and, which is our present concern, a way of looking at history: or, more exactly, a way of ordering life and therefore, we say, of ordering history. (Its opposite, an emasculation of the creative intelligence, is a way of *not* ordering history and *not* ordering life.) We can take history, as the late A. N. Whitehead did, in terms of the ideas manifested in various cultures: take those we like, that is; or we may, as the serious writer like Mr. Warren must, take it seriously. Mr. Tate is writing of religion; but his description will also be recognized as the essential procedure of the good historical fictionist:

These sad, more concrete minds may be said to look at their history in a definite and now quite unfashionable way. They look at it as a concrete series that has taken place in a very real time—by which I mean, without

too much definition, a time as sensible, as full of sensation, and as replete with accident and uncertainty as the time they themselves are living in, moment by moment.

Needless to say, this isn't limited to the writer who is, as Mr. Warren is not, concerned exclusively with the past; you tend to look at the past and the present, and no doubt the future, from the same point of view.

Those matters, almost inescapably, bring to mind the question of Mr. Warren as a *specifically* Southern writer; but the "Southern" quality of many different writers has lately been overstressed; I prefer now to stress it as little as possible. As I understand it, however, the "Southern Renaissance" may be boiled down somewhat as follows: certain writers, thanks to a mostly coherent, at least partially articulated mode of living manifested by a society in the process of being obliterated even by 1920, were permitted to possess a special knowledge "carried to the heart"—a knowledge which, at this time, did not appear to be available anywhere else; they enjoyed, if nothing more, a feeling of continuity and tradition—though not a "literary" tradition—and the privilege of speaking for a community that really did exist. The imminent disintegration of that community aroused in them a self-consciousness that served to liberate their energies for artistic creation. ("It seems to be a law of intellectual development," wrote A. J. Symonds in the 1880's, to account for the literature of the Italian renaissance, "that the highest works of art can only be achieved when the forces which produced them are already doomed and in the act of disappearance.") And the society that so privileged these writers, without any way intending to, happened to be the Old South³.

III

Externally, *Band of Angels* is an adventure story, though scarcely one for children; it details, with its author's usual

impressive vitality, the fate of Amantha Starr—"pore little Manty," as everyone, to her growing irritation, insists on calling her. As the book opens, she is, as far as she knows, the well-loved daughter of Aaron Starr, a Kentucky plantation owner before the Civil War, and a mother now dead. Her childhood at Starrwood, spent playing by herself or with the children of the "people," indulged by Aunt Sukie (she of the comforting "warm, spicy smell") and her father, and kept company by a grotesque doll created by the privileged slave Shadrach, proprietor of the workshop, has been lonely but not unhappy. This bittersweet idyll (in no sense, let me add, a "justification" of the Old South) moves to an inevitable end when her father decides that Manty must be educated.

He takes her to Cincinnati where, advised by Miss Idell, wife of his business associate, he outfits Manty in stylish new clothes, and then packs her off to study among the "whey-faces" and "knob heads" (as Miss Idell aptly calls them) of Oberlin, a school whose atmosphere is compounded about equally of sanctity and abolitionism. There the impressionable Manty becomes obsessed with religious fervor, tells her baffled father that she doesn't want to live off "black sweat," and falls, not too piously, in love with an outrageously holy pre-ministerial student, equipped with deep voice, large wrists, and outsize Adam's apple, named Seth Parton. By now, Manty has "ripened" (the verb is unfortunately Mr. Warren's) into such an attractive young lady that she has Seth babbling, undoubtedly with mixed motives, of "the fullness of joy" possible in God, kissing her chastely on the forehead, and dunking himself in a snowbank to cool off. Shortly thereafter, this depressing young man accosts Manty one afternoon following class in order to inform her, on the authority of a friend who cannot lie, that her father has been engaged in carnal sin with Miss Idell (while her husband languished in jail), and further, that her father has passed away in the very act of adultery. Manty, though pre-

viously aware that the relationship between Miss Idell and her father was not exactly above-board, is humanly more concerned with his death. Not so Seth, who seems abnormally interested in the "using in lust" involved. The richly comic interlude at Oberlin, which has a definite structural function, is concluded as Manty tells Seth coldly, "I hate you," and heads home for Starrwood. Arriving at dusk, just as her father is being buried, she learns from the sheriff that her mother was a slave, that she herself has never been legally freed, and is consequently now a chattel. If all this were not shocking enough, Manty is claimed on the spot by her father's chief creditor (the price of adultery is apparently not cheap), rushed off to town and sold to a slave dealer, and eventually purchased by prosperous, middle-aged Hamish Bond, one of New Orleans' wealthiest citizens.

These early events, baldly paraphrased, make *Band of Angels* seem as lurid an affair as another novel that has become an almost legendary archetype of the seriously-meant, modern "thriller," Mr. Faulkner's *Sanctuary*. That much the two books do have in common. *Sanctuary*, however, is a complex and powerful satire; the vehicle into which Mr. Faulkner discharged his moralistic disgust was the well-known stereotype of the decadent South, enlivened by the jitters of the jazz age and a strong dash of ubiquitous if psychopathic gangsterism. In the present novel, Mr. Warren has likewise chosen to exploit a stereotype; but one that is quite different, and, I am inclined to think, equally if not more deceptive: it might be called, with some fairness, the hackneyed South of *Gone with the Wind*.

Despite this similarity, the intentions behind the two novels, as well as their execution, appear to be radically dissimilar. Mr. Faulkner must have meant, for whatever salutary purpose, to shock his readers; Mr. Warren, conversely, is out to shock *his protagonist*. The book's first two sentences—remember that Manty is the narrator—make it clear that we are confronted again

by Warren's characteristic preoccupation: "Oh, who am I? For so long that was, you might say, the cry of my heart." It continues to be Manty's cry, and Warren's concern, throughout the course of *Band of Angels*; Manty is trying not merely to define herself, but to achieve a positive sense of identity, to be a "self" secured from the knocks of fortune. What, at first glance, seems to be the complement of this theme occurs lower on the same page:

If I could only be free, I used to think, free from the lonely nothingness of only being yourself when the world flees away, and free from the closing walls that would crush you to nothingness.

It would be readily apparent, I expect, that the two questions—of the self, and of the nature of freedom—are for Mr. Warren identical, and that their separation is false and arbitrary. If freedom is not to be construed as a lofty abstraction, the hollow vehicle for any meaning we care to assign to it, there must be *someone* to be

free. And freedom, it is sometimes conceded, is not a matter limited exclusively to politics—even though its political aspect has its own undeniable pragmatic urgency.

What I am trying to suggest, in a negative way, is the nature of the freedom that Manty hankers for; and to indicate, less negatively, the close thematic relation *Band of Angels* does bear to Mr. Warren's other work.

Band of Angels, like any novel spanning a considerable interval of time, tends to be episodic: it is possible, in fact, to break it down into large, more or less self-sufficient blocks, in which secondary actions are begun and even brought to a temporary conclusion—only to be picked up later and definitely settled. But if *Band of Angels* is not what we commonly call a "well-made" novel, still it is highly unified. Mr. Warren holds rigorously to Manty's point of view, deviating from it in but one instance, and then briefly, to introduce the history of Hamish Bond. Many of the characters have their dramatic existence, inde-

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pendent of the narrator (not all of them, however: Tobias Sears, Manty's eventual husband, generally seems barely to exist at all). Each of these characters, in his way, stands as an analogue to Manty and her quest for identity: each seeks to define escape, remake, or somehow tamper with the self.

As Manty is dragged by the sheriff from her father's grave, with hardly a chance to draw breath, she wonders wildly *who* she has been up to this moment:

I had been defined by the world around me, by the high trees and glowing cookhearth of Starrwood, and the bare classrooms and soaring hymns of Oberlin, by the faces bent on me in their warmth and concern, the faces of Aunt Sukie, Shaddy, Miss Idell, my father, Seth Parton. But now all had fled away from me, in the deserts of distance, and I was, therefore, nothing.

In the novel's structure, Manty's short existence has been building towards this minor climax. Her childhood, though secure enough, has not been without its mystifications. Manty and Aunt Sukie, the boringly-familiar "black mammy," once discovered a doll in the attic which, Aunt Sukie told her, had previously belonged to "Miss Eye-leen," the lady Aaron Starr "long back married and brung home." Miss Eileen, because she "didn't have any juice," had had no children, had died and been buried. When Manty showed her father the doll, and questioned him about Miss Eileen and then about her own mother, he sent her off to bed with unaccustomed sternness; the doll she never saw again.

Another fixture of Manty's infancy was the slave Shadrach, who bounced her on his knee and told her stories about "ole-man Carter-wright," who opened up little girls and "et they liver-and-lights lak you eat apple dumplins—." Until one night, that is, when Aunt Sukie told Shadrach that Manty had grown too big for him "to fool her up that a-way"; and Shadrach be-

coming resentful, glared at the child and exclaimed: "Her! . . . what she? — ain't nuthin, no better'n nuthin — yeah, what she?" Unfortunately for the slave, Manty mentioned the incident to her father; and he, who had never sold any of his "people," immediately sold Shadrach.

It is not till much later, after her marriage, that Manty learns why her father sent her to Oberlin, rather than merely freeing her. It was because, as she finally comes to accept, he loved her; and to give her "papers" would have constituted a sort of rejection: he hoped, by sending her North, to avoid altogether the issue of her parentage.

Mr. Warren's picture of Manty's youth, especially of her father, is done entirely without sentimentality, and certainly without nostalgia. Aaron Starr is presented as a kind and honestly bewildered man, "Southern" by circumstance and tradition, simple by nature. As his daughter, Manty has accepted slavery as one of the *donnees* of life at Starrwood. The episode concerning Shadrach, which occurred before she was old enough to understand it, caused her a certain amount of guilty feeling (for which she made her father, who had sold him, the scapegoat). Afterwards, her sojourn at Oberlin converted her to a rabid (and incidentally comic) abolitionism. This conversion, however, was largely superficial. Despite her religious zeal, she retained, particularly in her loyalty and love for her father, the vestiges of her old attitude. The net result, culminating at the crisis in her father's grave, was to create a natural (and, of course, ironic) ambiguity in her feelings toward the whole of her experience.

What Mr. Warren has done, by subjecting his protagonist to an almost traumatic shock, is to state the question of self-definition in its most extreme form; he has stripped Manty of all the props that normally we live by, to make her ask the questions we feel no need to ask. Her single resource is herself:

For in and of myself, or so it seemed, I had been nothing. I had been nothing except their continuing creation. Therefore, though I remember much of that earlier time, my own feelings, my desires, my own story, I do not know who I was. Or do we ever come to know more? Oh, are we nothing more than the events of our own story, the beads on the string, the little nodes of fear and hope, love and terror, lust and despair, appetite and calculation, and the innermost sensation of blood and dream? No, I put it badly, for by that comparison what would the string be but that self, and that is the very thing it is so hard to know the existence of.

She wonders if she is in her present predicament because of something she has done: maybe because of old Shaddy, or because she hadn't sincerely believed what they had taught her at Oberlin; the comforting assurance, in other words, that we are punished for our sins, and so there is at last justice. Then she has the most frightening thought of all: perhaps she has done nothing: "*It's because I am I. . . . It's because life is coming true: I am I.*"

Band of Angels, in its fashion, is somewhat of a transplanted *Bildungsroman*: as we follow Manty from her earliest childhood to middle-age or a bit beyond, our attention is meant to be focussed on her internal struggle to secure her identity. By the limitations of that very situation, unfortunately, that makes this struggle seem so crucial to her, she is confined to a role of nearly complete passivity. (This may be one reason Warren decided to make her physically so ravishing: her looks are just about her only weapon; otherwise she is the toy of consequence. Consequently, she is defined to an unusual degree by the people around her—each of whom, as I have suggested, is similarly preoccupied with his own version of freedom or the self. The most completely realized of these is one Hamish Bond, who easily (and perhaps, as far as Mr. Warren is concerned,

unintentionally) upstages Manty, and everyone else, whenever he appears.

For our inquiry, it is not necessary to go very much into detail concerning the events in *Band of Angels*. The Hamish Bond interlude is important, however, for not only does it occupy a good deal of the book's space, but it recapitulates the theme of the novel. Bond is Manty's first, and as it turns out, sole "owner": he buys her at public auction in New Orleans (after cracking with his cane the wrist of a local dandy intent on fingering the merchandise), transports her to his large house and, in due time and without apparent protest from her, draws Manty into his own bed. But Hamish Bond, as Manty quickly learns, is a man with peculiarities: he has kindness, as someone phrases it, "like a long disease." Bond, obviously a man of action despite his gimp, treats Manty disconcertingly like a human being, allows her not merely the restricted freedom of his estate but of New Orleans itself, and clumsily courts her favor. In return Manty, armed with money he has given her and her own fair skin, attempts to run away. At the dock she encounters his Negro overseer; and, believing mistakenly that Bond has sent the man to spy on her, loses her nerve and returns to the house. It is just about at this point that Bond, with a "hollow groan" and an electric storm for backdrop, crawls for the first time into bed with her.

Before this consummation, Manty has complained bitterly to him of her status; the next day he gives her manumission papers and money; and this time Manty, who is nothing if not unpredictable, voluntarily accompanies him to his up-river plantation. She sticks with him, in fact, until New Orleans, shelled by Farragut, has fallen; and Bond, in despair, has laid hands on her roughly—though not to hurt her. Manty (who seems obsessed on the point) cries out that he is trying to make a "nigger" of her; and Bond, who has not exactly abused her, once more sets her free. From his house she moves into the

besieged city itself, where soon enough she meets and marries Tobias Sears, a captain in the Union army.

The figure of Hamish Bond, despite his melodramatic trappings, seems to me an authentic dramatic creation, although admittedly not of a very high order. As Manty at length discovers, his name is not Hamish Bond at all, but the more commonplace Alec Hinks. In his youth, driven by a mother forever regretting the faded glories of her Southern past, he has made his fortune as master of a slave ship working off the Gold Coast; he has, at the same time, "made" his new identity. Like Manty (or Lilburn Lewis, for that matter), he wants to be free; ". . . you want to know the worst that can happen, then you feel free." Caught up in the general Southern catastrophe, spurred by his own fatalism, he ends in ruin, a kind of suicide. The point about Bond, blackthorn cane and all, is that he is one of the few central figures in *Band of Angels* rendered directly: the pity Manty feels for him, though it is an emotion she frequently mistakes for love, doesn't distort the reader's perspective on him; we see him with our own eyes.

Our view of most of the other characters, unfortunately, is limited to what Manty perceives; and Manty, really, is not very perceptive. In some cases, like that of the basically comic Seth Parton, our awareness exceeds hers, and we have no trouble recognizing Seth for what he is. In regard to Aaron Starr (to take a different kind of instance), the character has been carefully "built-up," so that Manty's temporary rejection of her dead father doesn't result in confusion. Probably the least successful character in the novel is Tobias Sears: he is immediately tabbed by Manty as "beautiful." Here is part of her description of their wedding night:

He turned toward me then and started to move toward me. He had no clothes on, and he looked like a fine statue. He looked like the statue of a Greek athlete, and every muscle swelling strong and

true in the white marble.

I can understand why this passage has a distinct structural purpose, but its air of uncensored *True Confessions* embarrasses me, and I imagine it embarrasses Mr. Warren as well.

The figure of Tobias Sears, in fact, represents a technical crisis—one that Mr. Warren doesn't manage to resolve till the last scene—in regard to the point of view adopted, for Manty's husband is understood neither by himself nor his wife (who frequently presents a distorted image of him). How then, are we to conceive him? "Statue" is indeed the operative word. Manty, too often, looks on him as the hero of a sentimental romance, and ironically the romance Tobias conjures for himself is quite as sentimental: he begins as an Emersonian avid in pursuit of the "Great Soul" alleged to be working its grand design in the lives of men; naturally, he fails to take into account that part of his nature that isn't so pure as a statue, but only wishes it were. (It should be noted here that in like fashion, but to a lesser degree, Emerson is the villain of *Band of Angels*—as was Jefferson in *Brother to Dragons*.) So, in a double sense, "statue" is the operative word for the reader too. Mr. Warren, it may be added, makes his own attitude clear: Tobias begins as an Emersonian, but ends as a human being.

What we are up against, I think, are the inherent limitations of the first-person narrator—especially the one Mr. Warren has selected for *Band of Angels*. Mr. Warren improbably invests Manty with some of the properties of his own characteristic rhetoric. When Manty sounds like Robert Penn Warren, the writing is generally excellent; when she sounds most like Manty, it is not. As narrator, Manty offers another disadvantage: the events of the Civil War must be reported by her from a distance; she sees some of them, dreams of others, and imagines herself present at yet others; but all Mr. Warren's great skill, which is thus largely reduced to a series of dodges,

cannot keep us from feeling that we are being served limp, inert chunks of History on a less than smoking platter. The basic flaw seems finally to rest in the conception of Manty herself. In her determination not to be swamped in a life of sensation, in her very human attempt to preserve her sense of identity, she is almost a miniature hero of the sensibility; but that very sensibility, unfortunately, is often in no way distinguishable from that of a soap-opera heroine.

Hence the novel's penultimate episode — when Manty at last, in middle age, confronts mentally her checkered past and realizes that she alone can truly free herself — is neither convincing nor unconvincing. Despite Mr. Warren's evocative prose, it is mostly flat. One is tempted to remember that Manty was never much good at thinking, anyway.

The concluding scene, in contrast, is extremely effective. Manty and Tobias, worn down by the trials of time, disillusion, and countless betrayals, their own and others, face each other finally as human beings asking no more (and no less) than the other can give. The scene earns its air of conviction because it has the considerable, if uneven, weight of the entire novel behind it; the author, drawing on characters by now established, projects a situation

that is achieved dramatically, rendered fully. Tobias says, "Miss Manty, you don't think it's too late, do you?" and Manty replies, "No, I don't think so."

At least, I suppose I said that. I tried to but maybe it wasn't possible with my face pressed into his chest, and the tears running out of me with the awfulness of joy—all the old shadows of our lives canceled in joy—and his hand patting men on the back while he said darling, darling, darling.

That was what he said.

If we rank works of art in categories, we have to admit that *Band of Angels* belongs to a lower order than does *Brother to Dragons*; but we must also recognize that the novel, on its own terms, is a success, and the poem is not. Concerning *Brother to Dragons*, I have already said that Mr. Warren's theme, secular though it is, deals with original sin (or the inevitable limitations of mankind). His hell is properly static—which in itself argues against dramatic success. My chief complaint against *Brother to Dragons* is that it ends, dramatically, where it should have begun. This complaint cannot be raised against the novel: the characters attempt to work out their own salvation. *Band of Angels*, which is Mr. Warren's purgatory, is ultimately a wry comedy.

NOTES

¹*World Enough and Time* is equally discursive, of course, but less illuminating, owing to the author's canny juggling of philosophical concepts; and I would make merely one point about it here. In a severe criticism of this novel, Mr. Harry Modean Campbell has accused Warren of determinism—of subscribing to the belief that we are made by external factors, such as the "land" or the "scene." If Mr. Campbell were right, I shouldn't blame him for objecting. What he mistakes for determinism, however, is not that at all, but simply a version of Calvinistic predestiny, in which the factors that shape us are largely internal.

²The question of what Jefferson himself believed, and what he is now generally thought to

have believed, may be two distinct things; Mr. Warren makes no distinction, he confronts them both; inevitably, in so doing, he has created his own Jefferson. The legacy we inherit from Thomas Jefferson has been brilliantly summarized by Mr. Allen Tate in a well-known formula: "The ends of man are sufficiently contained in his political destiny." I will not say that Mr. Warren's and Mr. Tate's interests diverge at this point; but Mr. Warren clearly makes his objection to our Jeffersonian heritage from a different perspective.

³See Donald Davidson, "Why the Modern South Has a Great Literature," *Still Rebels, Still Yankees* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press).

BRIEF OBSERVATIONS

Utopia Limited

HENRY S. KARIEL

PRODDED BY AN ample though frequently undisciplined literature and informed by some current practices of the positive social welfare state, I have been trying to develop what might be called, if it were not a rather pretentious term, a kind of hypothesis. I would have us postulate the possibility of really perfecting a total security mechanism, perfecting it not just in its parts but in its entirety. This type of mechanism would have to be thought of as a prodigious, sprawling apparatus geared to protect us fully, contrived to account for every contingency arising at the nation's core or borders, constituting an almost silent, smoothly-working defense machine, one ever alert, ever at tension, carefully fixed to release the volley of projectiles which deflect those of the attacker, and prepared—at the same time—to retaliate effectively and massively.

In such a faultless machine, in such an ideal security system, the "human factor" will at long last have become redundant. All that is irrational and undependable will have been absorbed, exhausted, or else blocked out. The soldier-technician before the radar screen—all too human, too given to the whim of the practical jokester or to the overeager response of the repressed or to the daydream of the infatuated—will have been replaced by an objective eye wholly alert to the fuzzy images before it, wholly related and adjusted to them, instantaneously relaying its perceptions, feeding them into a tabulator receiving hundreds of similar messages. And the

staff officer at the message center—all too human, too unprepared to screen out the irrelevant, the marginal, the incommensurable—will have been replaced by the data co-ordinating automaton. At the system's center, to the extent that a totalitarian whole may be said to have a true center, there will be no opportunity for discretion, no freedom for appraisal. The apparatus, its principles approved by a Congress and a President freely elected, its internal governors duly set by loyal engineers, will calculate and select appropriate alternatives. No sentiment will counteract its decisions; no hope or reminiscence will sidetrack its dictates. All that is devious, variable, or fickle will have been systematically frustrated.

Having postulated this ideal of a public defense system, having kept ourselves from discounting its improbability, let us realistically picture it as maintaining itself over the years, as stretched out over vast and different geographical regions. It should be appreciated, however momentarily, in its stupendous complexity. We should be impressed alone by its inner warning devices which will automatically initiate the exchange of the wayward tube, the petulant calculator, the weak connection, the faulty transmission. It should be envisaged concretely in all its tricky complications, its millions of parts functionally interrelated, delicately meshed and adjusted to one another, posed in fragile equilibrium and yet primed to minister to the slightest novelty, ready to be triggered by the proper emergency.

Accepting this picture, we would have