Modern Primitives: Mergings in the poetry of Robert Penn Warren and James Dickey

by Daniel Cross Turner

Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know.
Plotinus (205?-270?)

The biographical and aesthetic intersections between Robert Penn Warren and James Dickey are many and deep. Both held degrees from Vanderbilt University, with Warren earning his Bachelor of Arts in 1925 and Dickey completing a Bachelor as well as a Master of Arts at the Nashville institution in 1949 and 1950, respectively. On a broader scale, both the Kentucky-born Warren and the Georgia-reared Dickey were sons of the South, growing up in view of the general Southern history of racial segregation, socioeconomic deprivation, and cultural "backwardness." Both were novelists of note, with Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946) winning the Pulitzer Prize and Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970) becoming a national best-seller, and both novels being converted into successful film versions. They were also of course two of the most well known and prolific poets in America during their lifetimes. Among myriad other honors, Warren earned two Pulitzers for his later poetry and was named the first poet laureate of the United States in 1985. Despite a decade-long hiatus from writing poetry in the 1940s and early 1950s, Warren distinguished himself as one of the most productive and wide-ranging poets of the twentieth century.

For his part, Dickey earned a National Book Award for *Buckdancer's Choice* in 1966 and was appointed poetry consultant at the Library of Congress from 1966-1968. Although his collecting of poetry prizes dropped off after these notable early honors, this was perhaps largely the result, as critic Ernest Suarez has argued, of Dickey's conservative political stances. Warren and Dickey were impressed with one another's work, and each one's poetry bears the mark of the other. Each poet dedicated at least one work to his counterpart: Dickey honored Warren with "Under Buzzards" (1968)—writing his fellow craftsman that he felt "some root-deep kind of affinity with [Warren's] poetic effort" (Bruccoli 281)—and Warren returned the favor with "Rattlesnake Country" (1973) and *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* (1982). Dickey read the sweeping final section of *Audubon: A Vision* (1969) as the eulogy at the funeral of his first wife Maxine, explaining this choice in a 1980 letter to Warren: "I could think of nothing of my own so fitting, or so likely to last, or to hang longer in the bearded oaks of Waccamaw Cemetery, at Litchfield, where we were all together" (Bruccoli 389). Warren and Dickey shared a long personal friendship and were even filmed together in Connecticut and South Carolina as the subjects of a CBS documentary titled *Two Poets, Two Friends* in 1982.

Deborah Dickey, James Dickey's widow, was generous enough to share with me some stories about her husband's friendship with Warren. In particular, she recalled that Warren was the first great writer she had met (besides of course her husband) when Dickey intro-

duced her during a visit to Washington, D.C. soon after they were married in December 1976. At only twenty-four years old, she was self-conscious about meeting a man admired greatly by her husband. She remembered Warren as "very sweet, very kind—a wonderful old Southern gentleman" who took pains to make her feel at ease. At a later encounter at the American Academy of Poets, she informed Warren that she and James had quit drinking nine months before. In his thoroughly gracious manner, Warren replied in his rich Kentucky drawl that, as he had gotten older, he had noticed that after his evening cocktail "a terrible torpor" often came over him. Warren also sent along a memorable note to the Dickeys upon the birth of their daughter Bronwen, telling them that he was sure that they were "still examining the new creature, finger by finger." Her last memories of her husband and Warren together were when they were at the Dickeys' house on Pawley's Island, South Carolina during the filming of *Two Poets, Two Friends*. She regrets that she was not able to take better care of them then since they were both beginning to show their age.

As modern primitivist poets, Warren and Dickey were interested in forging an original relation of the self to the underlying rhythms of the natural world. Although the terms used here invoke the language of Emerson's famous search for an "original relation" of self to universe in *Nature* (1836), primitive metaphysics diverge significantly from Emerson's ideas in at least two respects: (a) although modern primitivist poets focus on renewal through the individual's fuller integration into the workings of the natural realm—even at times extending to the level of mystical transcendence—they also emphasize the necessary role of the violence inherent in nature to the process of human as well as natural regeneration, and (b) the primitivist definition of the human relation to the universe is original not so much in the sense that it originates with the individual's imaginative consciousness, as for Emerson, but in the sense that immersion of the self into the natural world enables reconnection to a collective human past, to a kind of instinctual memory that reunites the modern individual with his primitive origins.

This impulse is what Casey Clabough has aptly described in *Elements: The Novels of James Dickey* (2002) as the phenomenon of "merging": the assumption of the individual into the essence of nature, producing a kind of energized fugue state when unconsciousness takes over. Although both Warren and Dickey were deeply involved with modern primitivist thought, Dickey's work typically exploits such primal returns as an escape from the social realm, whereas Warren is more often concerned with addressing the political dimensions of primitivism. Dickey views the primitive as a denial of history; Warren uses it as a means for historical confrontation.[1]

In his earlier poems, Dickey manipulates incantatory rhythms and ritualistic repetitions in order to articulate a willful denial of the ultimate contingency of human existence. These techniques underlie his attempt to counter the loss of stable definitions of individual and collective identity in the postwar era by espousing primitive transcendence in his verse. Though fully aware of the existential predicament—a concept given not merely philosophical but personal significance through his experience as a bombardier in World War II[2]—he attempts to lend some kind of temporary permanence to existence by merging with primal nature.

Perhaps the quintessential manifestation of Dickey's poetic primitivism is "The Heaven of Animals" (1962), a poem that delivers on its titular promise by offering a primal vision of a starkly animalistic heaven. This bestial Eden reflects a level of undivided

consciousness where the Adamic power to name holds no sway. In *The Immense Journey* (1957), Loren Eiseley offers a literal-minded interpretation of the mythic fall in the Garden. The fall of man was the fall into consciousness, into imagination, into the capacity to dream other realities beyond the present: "The Eden of the eternal present that the animal world had known for ages was shattered at last. Through the human mind, time and darkness, good and evil, would enter and possess the world" (120). Eiseley provides a description of the evolutionary shift in human biology (the enlargement of the brain) that created the mythic fall away from instinctual reliance on the rhythms of nature and into a fully conscious state—a fall away from a preconscious integration with the things of the world into the symbolic use of language:

> [Man] was becoming something the world had never seen before—a dream animal—living at least partially within a secret universe of his own creation and sharing that secret universe in his head with other, similar heads. Symbolic communication had begun. Man had escaped out of the eternal present of the animal world into a knowledge of past and future. The unseen gods, the powers behind the world of phenomenal appearance, began to stalk through his dreams. (120)

In "The Heaven of Animals," Dickey attempts through adept manipulation of symbolic language to return us to a time before symbols, before the rise of consciousness when, like animals, humans were motivated wholly by instinct. The poet's implicit faith in the power of imagination is ironic since it is the imagination itself that condemns man to awareness of time and death, of possibilities other than present actualities. The conscious ability to imagine a better condition—and ultimately a life without death—is exercised by the poet in this instance to create an ideal set of conditions, not for humans, but for animals. Paradoxically, Dickey creates a heaven that is marked by its earthiness:

> Here they are. The soft eyes open.
> If they have lived in a wood
> It is a wood.
> If they have lived on plains
> It is grass rolling
> Under their feet forever. (78-79)

This heaven is not a blanched-out abstraction, replete with disembodied souls plucking out celestial harmonies on golden harp-strings, but a place where the preconscious instincts of animals can "wholly bloom" (79). That the full realization of these instinctual drives involves violence and death is an inevitability, for "It could not be the place / It is, without blood" (79). Even those animals marked forevermore as prey acquiesce in full compliance with the natural order, "Fulfilling themselves without pain / At the cycle's center" (79). The poem's rhythmic repetitions underscore these verbal reiterations, imbuing the poem with a sense of heavy-handed fixity, and the decided stresses evoke an almost shamanistic cadence. Dave Smith notes that Dickey's early style reflects "the slow and steady development of the dense, drummingly cadenced poem that was intensely personal and privately imagistic in statemental lines alternately composed of kinetic verbals and

mystic assertions with the present tense" (171).

Robert Kirschten further describes Dickey's "preference for marchlike anapests—hypnotic, compulsive, primitive" (37) and suggests that his "rhythmic music conveys the persistent power of his principles by constituting a recurrent ground rhythm that itself seems magically independent of the speaker" (37). In "The Heaven of Animals," sound and sense, like the paradisal predators and prey, seem bound together in unalterable blood marriage. The initial statement of the poem, "Here they are," announces the fixity of the cycle of violence and renewal, as it forcefully declares the whereabouts of all the animals, leaving no place for the reader to imagine them elsewhere; we, like the animals, seem to be stuck in the eternal present. There is no space for imagination, a human liability. Here, without question, whatever is is right. This sense of permanence is seen again in the repetition of particular words or phrases (e.g., "The soft eyes open," "Outdoing," "It is") and in the repetition of like rhythms throughout the poem.

The centrality of the phenomenon of savage violence and renewal to Dickey's sense of primitive essentialism is evident in the permanence of the natural order fulfilled by the animals and in the inescapability of each animal's instinctual role. As Thom Gunn notes in his review of *Drowning with Others*, the poem expresses "an almost feudal vision of order: The hunted are as satisfied with their place in creation as the hunters; they are part of 'the cycle'" (14). The final stanza merges form to content, as the rhythmic repetition shadows the fixed repetition of the primitive cycle of predators and prey:

> At the cycle's center
> They tremble, they walk
> Under the tree,
> They fall, they are torn,
> They rise, they walk again. (79)[3]

That all of the animals, predators as well as their victims, fully embrace this pattern is emphasized by the repetition of active verbs in final stanza. Even though it describes the victimage of the hunted animals, it contains only one passive verb ("they are torn"); the predominance of active verbs suggests that completing their instinctual role as victims is not a mark of their sheer passivity, but is the active fulfillment of the primary and preordained reason for their existence.

Although these animals have no souls and have come here "beyond their knowing," they are later described as existing "in full knowledge" of their condition. This apparent contradiction alludes to the implications of the Eden myth and signals the divide between human experience and that of preconscious animals. The animals designated as prey are rewarded by walking "Under such trees in full knowledge / Of what is in glory above them" (79). According to the myth of Eden, full knowledge of good and evil led to human awareness of guilt and regret. By contrast, the only kind of "knowledge" the animals experience is purely instinctual. As a result, they are able to kill without remorse and to die without regret, each in its ordered place. If this arrangement is translated into the human realm, it starts to resemble—chillingly—the politics of social Darwinism. Kept safely out in the primitive netherworld, however, the poem represents a fantasy of returning to a preconscious state of being, of reconnecting to the primal reservoir of our collective origin,

of remembering our instincts. Yet the poem itself cannot effect such a return; it can only approximate this experience, and the reconstruction will always be tainted by the intrusion of the rational, conscious mind. That is, there are both conscious and unconscious elements at work in Dickey's poetic description of the heaven of animals, which is the product of the poet's highly conscious arrangement of materials drawn from the realm of the unconscious, such as the ostensibly "primal" rhythms and the recurrence of archetypal images.

Although a number of Warren's poems would fit neatly alongside "The Heaven of Animals" as depictions of escapes into a primitive otherworld ("Rattlesnake Country," "Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth," "Heart of Autumn," and arguably even *Audubon: A Vision* would meet this description[4]), much of Warren's poetry is intensely interested in the friction between primal nature and cultural nurture. Nowhere is this friction more apparent—or more shockingly imparted—than in *Brother to Dragons* (1953; 1979).[5] To invoke Warren's description of the emergence of fascism, this volume-length narrative poem reveals the unmasking of a blank oblivion of power. In *Brother to Dragons*, modern primitivism takes the historical turn, posing the question, if the primal impulse is an implacable part of the modern unconscious, personal and collective, then how do we confront the social and political problem of primitivism?

The volume recounts the story of two of Thomas Jefferson's nephews, Lilburne and Isham Lewis, who had removed themselves from Virginia to establish a plantation on the western Kentucky frontier. After their mother, Jefferson's sister Lucy, passed away and was buried in Kentucky, their father Charles returned to Virginia and left the plantation for Lilburne to manage. Falling into alcoholism and marital troubles with his second wife, named Letitia, Lilburne became increasingly harsh in his treatment of his slaves. One young slave named George (renamed "John" in the 1979 version) seemed particularly to draw Lilburne's ire. On the night of December 15, 1811, while a series of severe earthquakes shook the territory, even causing the Mississippi River to flow backward momentarily, Lilburne and Isham had the slave tied to a table in the meat-house and hacked him to death with an axe, casting his mutilated body parts into a roaring fire before the eyes of the other slaves. The supposed reason for this brutality was that the slave had broken a favorite pitcher of Lilburne and Isham's dead mother. Eventually news spread about the murder (a fire-blackened bone was discovered, having been sniffed out and gnawed by a curious hound) and the brothers were arrested and indicted. After they were released on bail, Lilburne convinced his younger brother to engage in a suicide pact, according to which each brother would fire a fatal shot simultaneously into the other. Things did not go according to plan, and Lilburne was killed, while his brother survived unscathed. Isham was taken into custody again, but escaped and fled before being brought to trial. There were reports that he was killed while serving under Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. As Warren himself noted in a 1953 letter explaining the genesis of his poem, "the story is a shocker" (Robert Penn Warren Papers).

According to Warren's version of this real-life horror story, Lilburne plays the part of the primitive monster revealed. Isham is the incompetent, but doggedly loyal younger brother who is pliable to Lilburne's direction. John is given only a few lines; he is less a character in his own right than a vehicle for demonstrating the stark irrationality of the slaveholding mentality. Even in light of his famous statement about the poetic quality of

historical representation in the foreword, Warren takes considerable poetic license in adding and inventing characters, most notably the figure of Jefferson and an ironic stand-in for the poet himself, aptly named R.P.W, who serves as a kind of meta-narrator for the poem, Warren's fictive doppelgänger. Jefferson is depicted as naive and is made complicit in his nephews' murder of the slave for believing too much his own Enlightenment principles, which, by poem's end, have been reduced to nothing more than the rotting corpse of a long-buried ideology. The other additions of note are Aunt Cat, Lilburne's former wet-nurse and a stereotypical "Black mammy" figure, and Meriwether Lewis, of Lewis and Clark fame and another of Jefferson's kin. The figure of Meriwether Lewis brings to light the issue of manifest destiny in the territorialization of the American frontier, and his suicide provides another graphic spectacle that returns to haunt Jefferson. All the characters are long dead, gathered together again in a psychically tortuous afterlife.

Although the poem is set in "no place" and at "any time," there is continuous tension between the "eternal" time of instinctual memory and the historically bound brutalities we are made to witness. Warren's brand of historicized primitivism is announced early as one of the poem's major themes, as he positions his depictions of unleashed primal savagery squarely in the realm of American and Southern history. In one of their initial conversations, R.P.W. interrupts Jefferson to give his description of the fall of the literal house of Lewis, a landscape replete with the remains of an undying familial and regional past:

R.P.W.: Yes, I have seen it. 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 the historical imagination, while grass,
In idiot innocence, has fingered all to peace.
Anyway, I saw the house— (9)

As it turns out, the "historical imagination" is not so benign, nor indifferent. Nature may forget, but human memory is not yet done with this place. The historical primitive is reiterated through the figure of the black snake that haunts the ruins of the Lewis estate. This primal, yet historical serpent is encountered by R.P.W. and his father as they make a field trip to view the remains of the former plantation's bloodstained past:

Well, standing there, I'd felt, I guess, the first
Faint tremor of that natural chill, but then,
In some deep aperture among the stones,
I saw the eyes, their glitter in that dark,
And suddenly the head thrust forth, and the fat, black
Body, molten, out-flowed as though those stones
Bled forth earth's inner darkness to the day—
As though the bung had broke on that intolerable inwardness. (24)

Though the snake is literally nothing more than "just a snake, / Black Snake, Black Pilot Snake, the Mountain Blacksnake, / Hog-snout or Chicken Snake" (25), it irrepressibly takes on symbolic meaning as a figure combining the primitive ("the black lust all men fear and long for") with the political ("spirit of the nigger boy named John, / Whose anguish spangled midnight once like stars") (25). Thus, the serpent's primal form, "the ictus of horror," converts R.P.W.'s "natural tremor of fatigue" into "the metaphysical chill, and [his] soul / Sat in [his] hand and could not move" (24). It is perhaps wishful thinking on R.P.W.'s part that the snake offers a kind of *quid pro quo* absolution to its human intruders, past and present, "As though it understood our human limitation, / And forgave all, and asked forgiveness, too" (25), apologizing for the shared darkness of the reptile brain. However, as communicative, self-conscious "dream animals," humans, though equally marked by primal impulses, must accept the existential limitations of judgment and responsibility; as the subsequent narrative of Lilburne's murder of John makes clear, human action carries with it social liability. The serpent does not exist wholly in a primitive netherworld, but is set in a recognized time and place and is therefore historically bound to the ruins of Southern history, physically embodied in the plantation's ruins. Its black skin metonymically plays on the recurrent figures of blackness throughout the volume, as moral blackness becomes intertwined inextricably with violently enforced racial divisions, the blackness of the human heart with that of human skin.

This connection is made clear in Warren's depiction of Lilburne, which shows that his primitive will to power is expressed within the historical context of chattel slavery, for his primal urges are fired and channeled through his own abject fears of contamination by contact with his slaves. In the wake of his mother's death, he begins to consider the servants as an intolerable threat to her good memory and responds by overmastering his slaves beyond the bounds of "rational" (i.e., socially sanctioned) master-slave relations. This leads to a vehement form of primal regression on Lilburne's part that culminates in the brutal spectacle of John's death. In his notes for the poem, Warren describes Lilburne's failed attempt to reject his "dark self":

> If Lilburn killed George [John] because he saw in the Negro the "black parody" . . . & the dark "self" to be expurgated—(ie a purified & therefore an "ideal" act perverted)—then Jefferson's repudiation of Lilburn is a parallel crime—that is, an attempt to purify "the self" by exclusion, suppression, not by "love," ie absorption— "Evil" the "food of good"—eat it assimilate it, love it (Robert Penn Warren Papers)

The image of darkness doubles as a sign of Lilburne's repressed primal nature, his attraction to antisocial sexuality and violence, as well as his attempted rejection of his connection with his Black slaves. Indeed, after he hears of the death of his mother, he tells Aunt Cat that he would spit out her breast milk in order to spit back out "all her niggerness" (98). He thus performs "the old charade where man dreams man can put down / The objectified bad and then feel good" (21). This charade is the "sadistic farce whereby the world is cleansed," though all the while "in the deep / Hovel of the heart the Thing lies / That will never unkennel himself to the contemptible steel" (30).

According to Warren, primal savagery is inextricable from the work of the historical imagination: the Thing may "never unkennel himself to the contemptible steel," but its darkness must be acknowledged through historical reflection. In the concluding section of *Brother to Dragons*, R.P.W. returns in wintertime to the plantation house ruins, remembering the figure of the serpent among the ruins, this time marking its absence as "winter makes things small, all things draw in" (129) and noting the inaccuracies of his earlier view of the place:

> I had plain misremembered,
> Or dreamed a world appropriate for the tale.
> One thing, however, true: old *obsoleta*
> Had reared that day, and swayed against the sun.
> But not today. He's keeping home this weather,
> Down in the rocks, I reckon, looped and snug
> And dark as dark: in dark the white belly glows,
> And deep behind the hog-snout, in that blunt head,
> The ganglia glow with what cold dream is congenial
> To fat old *obsoleta*, winterlong. (129)

The fact that the snake is in hibernation suggests something for hope at poem's end. Although the "cold dream" of primitivism may be "congenial" to the human condition, this image of a "looped and snug" serpent buried deep beneath the rocks implies the possibility of temporarily containing our collective impulse towards unleashing the primal drive to power, "dark as dark."

The final passages of *Brother to Dragons* reveal some hope of living with the confirmation of our darker drives, of sublimating these at least partially into the social and legal restraints of liability, as R.P.W. crosses the evening barnlot, opens the sagging gate, and prepares himself "To go into the world of action and liability" (132). It is no accident that Warren invokes the legal term "liability" in these final lines, since here and elsewhere in the volume he suggests that our effort to draw in the primitive rests in the strength of collective responsibility and the bonds of law, which have at least the potential to construct and enforce "a world / Sweeter than hope in that confirmation of late light" (132). Although no ledger "in the great bookkeeping / Of History" (127) has balanced yet, there is still the human duty to keep strict account of "the dark audit of blood" (127).[6] The law may well be a means of performing the old charade of objectifying good and bad, yet this social act of rationalizing human conscience into codes of action and liability is the only way to contain for the time being the violence of our instinctual nature and therefore to purge our history momentarily of blood.

Warren and Dickey, two poets and two friends, shared a sustained interest in the philosophical argument of modern primitivism. While both accepted the primal underpinnings of human nature, Dickey offers instinctual memory as an escape from the pressures of modernity, while Warren exploits images of the primitive as a means of engaging himself with the recurrent savagery of our historical conditions. Even if modern primitivist poetry could enable us to enter fully into a preconscious state and erase the divide between instinctual experience and the conscious rearrangement of poetic form, it

could offer us only temporary reprieve. In the concluding pages of *James Dickey and the Politics of Canon*, Suarez wonders whether Dickey had not been disappointed that in all his years he had not experienced "revelation, some kind of Old Testament vision, that he expected his poetry or his life to yield, and that would allow him to deliver the 'immortal message to mankind' he spoke of in *Sorties*" (157). He poses the question to Dickey, then in his late sixties, by invoking the final lines of "Circuit" from *The Eagle's Mile* (1990) and asking why the poem ends not with a confirmation of "meaning, consequence, [and] a positive assessment of the savage ideal" (158), but with an "expression of desire" (158), the hope, left unanswered, for revelation and transcendence. Dickey responds with a sincere acknowledgment of the limits of his modern primitivist art: "Because those things can't happen" (158).

Ultimately, Dickey confesses that primitive transcendence is one of those things that can't happen, but the magnitude of the creative force with which this lie is told contains its value. By contrast, much of Warren's work suggests that primitivism presents a means not of escaping, but of confronting the historical cycle of violence. For Warren, instinctual memory is not an avenue for mystical transcendence; rather, he is more blunt than Dickey in his assessment that primitivism is a symptom, not a cure of our historical condition. To turn the phrase of Plotinus that serves as epigraph for this article, Warren contends that human nature must be a thing which doth do *and* know. History is blind, but man is not.

Notes

1. Dickey himself noted Warren's penchant for history in a 1954 letter to Andrew Lytle. Dickey suggests parallels between the historical concerns evident in both Lytle's and Warren's work:
   "Do you like [Warren's] work? I very much do. "History is blind, but man is not," Warren writes in *All the King's Men*. Critics have not said much about this side of Warren, but it seems to me to be the central preoccupation of all his work to define and evaluate the past. That is, can we see in certain happenings behind us, on which we have a kind of perspective, symbolic patterns? If so, what are their value to us? How can this be assimilated to our lives?" (Bruccoli 63).
2. Dickey was a radar specialist during World War II, not a pilot, as he sometimes claimed. In fact, he washed out of flight training. Like Faulkner, Dickey was prone to exaggerate his military achievements, among other things, consciously exploring the creative possibilities of the lie. This is the overriding thesis of Henry Hart's recent biography of Dickey, which is appropriately titled, *James Dickey: The World as Lie* (2000).
3. The rhythmic repetition of the final two lines is reminiscent of the rhythm of the opening stanza of Emerson's "Brahma" (1856):
   If the red slayer think he slays,
   Or if the slain think he is slain,
   They know not well the subtle ways
   I keep, and pass, and turn again
   Whereas Emerson's vision of an essential order in the universe is explicitly theological, supporting itself under the framework of the Hindu belief system, Dickey's creation of a heaven for animals can be read on one level as an implicit parody of religious belief (certainly of traditional Christian belief), pointing out the flimsy and unimaginative nature of conventional Christian representations of the afterlife in contrast to his own creative, though equally far-fetched, vision of an animal afterworld.
4. For primitivist readings of *Audubon: A Vision*, see Robert S. Koppelman's *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality* (1995) and Keen Butterworth's "Projections and Reflections in *Audubon: A Vision*" (2003). Koppelman posits that "immersion into primary nature is central" in the poem (149), while Butterworth examines the presence of Jungian archetypes in *Audubon*, arguing that the poem explores the primal territory of "the powerful reservoir of patterns or archetypes which inform our understanding of life that is

otherwise nothing more than unrelated events…. Here psychology is elevated to the realm of metaphysics and theology" (90).

5. All quotations are from the 1979 version of *Brother to Dragons*, which Dickey praised above and beyond the original poem in a 1980 letter to Warren:

   Later, when I have more time to dig into comparisons, I will write you at length about the new version of *Brother to Dragons*. I haven't had time to do the poem justice under the present circumstances, but do know that though I believed the original version to be a classic, I now think that you have made of it a super-classic, and I plan to tell you in detail later on why I think so. (Bruccoli 389)

6. In *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism* (1988), John Burt contends that the closing lines of *Brother to Dragons* reassert some hope in the human, but only after wisely noting that it is precisely this kind of humanist philosophy that has been battered throughout the poem.

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