

THE CAVE *

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PART I:

IN THE MIDST of italicized ironies at the conclusion of *World Enough and Time*, Warren's commentary modulates long enough to contrast modern commercial distractions with the reverence of Indians once afoot in "The Hollow Land," place of great caves, Kentucky. Here the tribes fought and hunted but never dared dwell because "It was a holy land, it was a land of mystery . . . the gods lived here." Before the officious disregard of European settlers, self-instructed in justice, "The gods fled, either into the upper air or deeper into the dark earth."

Any mythic reference here is too fleeting even to be enigmatic. But the reader who *does* bother to wonder, on the run, can scarcely accommodate those sacred caves to earlier womb-tomb imagery in the novel. There is a uterine remoteness about both Gran Boz' hideaway, his canebrake settlement; and Beaumont's dungeon prison where, while awaiting execution, he recalls those impulses to hide forever which came to him as a boy secure in secret underground passages. Like recurring submarine images in Warren's canon, these are symbols of a characteristic desire to be unborn, to be among the uncommitted dead, to be relieved of both time and eternity; and as such they are contrary to any concept of caves as a place of sanctified encounter. In *World Enough and Time* Warren was unprepared to explore fully the still-buried meaning of his many-chambered symbol. The reference is a memorandum only, a mapping of coordinates for some long day's later search.

Warren, a Vanderbilt student at the time of Floyd Collins' entrapment at Sant Cave, Kentucky in 1925, refused to take part in the heroic exploitations that followed. Nevertheless, the inci-

* Robert Penn Warren, *The Cave* (New York: Random House, 1959).

dent was too revealing of the dark side of man's good intentions to be forgotten. During the last stages of *World Enough and Time* Warren felt those commotions—the collision, interpolation, peremptory fusion, projection—which mark the burdening of simply chronicled character with eventfulness. Four more works were to intervene before, in late summer 1957, the actual writing of this communal attendance on disaster could begin. However, the minotaur and clutch-doll imagery, respectively, in *Brother to Dragons* and *Band of Angels* were preparations for the work in progress.

SUCH PROGRESS of historic accident through a labyrinth of associations towards personal configuration in fiction is the writer's equivalent, practicing his craft, of his own life-web philosophy, the inevitability of revealed interconnections. An initial insight has grown, appropriately, into a system of correspondences massively engaged, in *The Cave*. No previous work of Warren's has been structured so completely according to apparently discrete but thoroughly parallel multiple points-of-view. Here, theme is influential in form almost totally. Yet only to the reader is the interpenetration of dreams, both evil and hopeful, visible; and self-admission is withheld from just enough characters, who like Mrs. Bingham resist introspection or take refuge in fabrication, to prevent the over-perfection of a *tour de force*.

While the essential problem of each—reconciliation of man's many identities—has been a commonplace with Warren ever since "Brother, My Brother" appeared in the June, 1925 issue of *Fugitive* magazine, never has it found such epitome and focal occasion as in the enigma of Jasper Harrick's motives. Jasper is no Floyd Collins in disguise (Ike Sumpter's reference to the original establishes it fictively as a much earlier analogue and even as an incentive to his own exploitation); but rather an image only in the moving minds of others. He is opportunity—and his own ambiguity is well-commemorated in their uneasy grappling with choice and consequence. Although he is the immediate cause for the whole moiling activity around the cave, the disclosure of his death functions as neither climax nor conclusion because in the interim the novel, through its characters, recognizes that his fate is only accessory to their own conflict with first and final causes.

Greater than the temptation to make Jasper a fractional counterpart of Collins, and thereby to burden history with sole responsibility for inferences drawn from its casual facts, must have been the attractiveness of familiar romantic mythology associated with the land. Jasper's half-Indian heritage, together with those affini-

ties already remarked in *World Enough and Time*, suggest an appropriateness to the character's end, his being sealed up forever enshrined in an earth-chamber, his sacred source. Nevertheless, Warren's intimate connection with the New Agrarian philosophy in the 1930's did not leave him susceptible to the sentimental, however engagingly elevated. His repeated indictment of the Western Dream—that change of place alone can restore innocence, in full fresh righteousness—reached a climax in *Brother to Dragons* with his accusations against Jefferson, visionary of human perfectibility and, to some disciples, the very prophet of Agrarian life. Jasper is not the spirit of the wilderness, returning to its kind. Nor is he presented as the “buried god” of fertility rites sacrificial death will redeem the countryside—although his father and Nick Papadoulous wish for their own sake that he were. His deliberate removal from visible action and the equivocal nature of his own reasons for cave-crawling prevent assignment of any single, simple, or positive meaning to Jasper: this is as the theme requires.

DID JASPER BECOME a caver, in casual “dark-dreaming” completion of himself “with the whole earth tucked in around him,” as Monty enviously says; or to escape having to live up to his father's spitting image, as Celia charges? When Jasper prefers the seasonless underground because “a lot of things don't matter down there,” is this a death-wish subtly stated, womb-longing, the trap of timelessness-as-despairing-disengagement, a new Great Sleep? Or is it some superior stage in the act of transcendence, relinquishment of the “boot”-body which liberates his spirit for enjoyment of the immutable, timelessness-as-eternity? If his inward journeying earns him the name of new frontiersman, is his search for easement (as it was with Western Dreamers) or for steadfast truth, midpoint unmoving? To such riddles there are almost as many answers as there are images of Jasper; for he is no more knowable than the need of others—which expresses him—permits. Does Truth change, as Jack Harrick and Mac Sumpter agree; does God? Or only the image of these in the sickly human eye? The heart of each man's mystery lies with Jasper in that weightless center of the world “where all bargains are debated, and all transactions are made.” But who is there unafraid to go, confront himself in loneliness? On different occasions Jack and Nick complain that no man can trace how he came to be himself (partially because there is a natural resistance to certain admissions). How, then, can one expect to pass judgment on another? Yet—Warren argues the dilemma—others are necessary context and cause for self-knowledge.

In earlier novels the affected search for identity often was, in fact, a search for impossible innocence. It proceeded vicariously, and therefore vainly, through submission to, then vengeful disavowal of another's role as projected prototype. Senator Tolliver is Perse Munn's proxy father—and scapegoat; Murdock is Jerry Calhoun's; Fort is Jeremiah Beaumont's; Bond and Rau-Ru are Manty's; more deviously, Willie Stark is Jack Burden's. In their frustration a few discover confirmation of that ideal process prescribed by Cass Mastern: "It is human defect—to try to know oneself by the self of another. One can only know oneself in God and in His great eye." Struggling towards this ideal, man's passionate appetite for exaltation may find expression in religious travesties such as those orgies inspired by evangelist Corinthian McClardy in *World Enough and Time*. The confusion of desires, the violent insistence on self-discovery through exploration of another's body is a motif current throughout the novels but perhaps epitomized in the tortuous history of Sue Murdock's failure to find fulfillment with any of three lovers; or condemned Beaumont's division of his dungeon hours between minute recordings of his motives and lustful use of his wife—both mechanisms for justification.

In *The Cave* selfhood is asserted not through night-riding violence or meat-axe vengeance, but through sexual outrage and quasi-violation. With an impulse largely unconscious (described independently by two characters as the fierce "clawing out" of some inner animal) human need gropes through lust for love, through desire for a reality beyond desire. Rachel's protest—"I'm just not going to let you use me for some kind of Grade-A masturbation"—is descriptive of both Ike's self-glutting and those substitutes for higher satisfactions generally acceptable to society. During intimacies with his wife, Nick Papadoupalous keeps his eyes closed, to assist the illusion that platinum-blond Jean Harlow is the partner in this love-act and, consequently, that it is purified. For the same reason—self-assurance: no one even gets Nick's name right—when his wife is sick, he uses Dorothy Cutlick, a near-albino, in the dark of her rented room. Similarly, Isaac, sensing that his father's marriage was prompted by envy of his wife's first lover, feels that he was conceived in the dark, as a kind of accidental by-product of Mac Sumpter's self-gratification. Even Rachel acts most pleased with her lover because "You give me, me, Ikev." She kisses him, eyes closed, remote, withheld. Old Jack Harrick, in a fit of confession, recalls the unnumbered girls, many unnamed as well, "wanting something from him, always a different something, but something, and always something he didn't care whether in their

emptiness, they ever got or not." His enumeration of the ignored and ignorant is counterpart to the orgies, appropriately in the dark, committed when word of Jasper's death panics spectators into proof of their own brute vigor and their will to survive.

THE PATTERN of sexualism as violation or indifference, as an act of self-assertion only, is most prominent in the first third of the novel. Only gradually, in a kind of inverted Freudianism, does it become clear that far from all acts and objects symbolizing sexual drives, these drives themselves are kinetic accessories or expressions—shadows in a Platonic cave—of even more intangible metaphysical needs. Realization comes at a pace suited to the unsteady struggle of those few for whom the sex act purges physical desire without satisfying some deeper raging claim. In the midst of his resentment of Jo-Lea's cold sufficiency, and with intentions of another sort altogether, Monty finds himself pleading his love, for once, from his very "innards." The same blinding compulsion had once driven his father to his knees, during a night walk among the dogwood with Celia. Their bodies were dreaming the same dream, in joy; when suddenly he felt the terror of not knowing who he was, and only her hand sustained him; so that he croaked out, "Marry me . . ." Years later Nick Papadoupalous as suddenly senses the decency in his overfed, bed-ridden wife, an ex-stripteaser, as she refuses to earn blackmail for them by performing an abortion. Holding her cupped hand in his, he examines its emptiness and recognizes his own. A single touch—instinctive, not violent—silences the loneliness of people even in the act of expressing it.

(To be concluded)

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Mother Complex

Father: Your young man approached me and asked for your hand, and I consented.

Daughter: But I don't wish to leave mother.

Father: Such feeling displayed by a child is admirable. Take your mother with you.

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