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An Exile's Return in Robert Penn Warren's *A Place to Come To*

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In a previous essay, "The Fall and Rebirth in *All the King's Men*," I have pointed out that the most unsettling problem of the first-person narrator of Robert Penn Warren's acclaimed fourth novel is that he suffers from a sense of discontinuity of his self. He simply cannot have a unified identity. For example, while riding in his car, Jack Burden at one time feels:

> There is only the flow of the motor under your foot spinning that frail thread of sound out of its metal gut like a spider, that filament, that nexus, which isn't really there, between the you which you have just left in one place and the you which you will be when you get to the other place. (128-9)

In other words, Jack temporarily feels that he is disconnected from his past or his future. It is worth noticing here that Jack describes his feeling in spatial terms. Jediah Tewksbury, the first-person narrator of *A Place to Come To* (1977), Warren's tenth and final novel, finds himself in a similar

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position, although he finds a perverse pleasure in it:

> You might, I supposed, say that this [new] happiness springs from the discovery of the essence of selfhood: when before you the dark waters boom in with the driving, snow-laden wind, and behind you the tundra stretches, then selfhood is the moment of perception between pastlessness and futurelessness. (320)

This perception is occasioned when Jed faces Lake Michigan on a snowy afternoon in 1952, feeling as if he were the last surviving human. Again, his sense of discontinuity is described in both temporal and spatial terms. In this essay, I will attempt to examine how Robert Penn Warren further deals with the problem of one's search for identity in *A Place to Come To.*

i

Jack Burden's inability to accept his past mainly stems from his painful memory of being deserted, when he was about six, by Ellis Burden, the man whom he believed to be his father. Jack's anguish becomes greater because he simply cannot understand why Ellis forsook him. Obviously Ellis did not leave Jack and his mother for a better job or a better spouse, because, after deserting his family, he has chosen to live alone in a slum section of the state capital, writing obscure religious tracts. Jed Tewksbury, the protagonist of *A Place to Come To,* feels disconnected from his past primarily because he has tried to disown the memories of his father and his childhood and boyhood. Jed has willfully tried to separate himself from his past in the Heaven's Hope neighborhood and Dugton, a small town nearby, in Claxford County in northern Alabama.[1] While he was living in the Heaven's Hope neighborhood, his father, Buck Tewksbury, a poor farmer known for his womanizing and heavy drinking, died an ignoble death. When Jed was nine yeas old, his

father was killed in an accident. He was found dead, still holding his "dong" (3). Jed knew that his father fell off from the wagon while urinating on the hindquarters of one of the span of mules and that his father's neck was broken by the rear wheels of the wagon. As the neighbors gathered under the chinaberry tree in the front yard of the run-down farmhouse on the morning of Buck's death, one of them made an obscene suggestion that Buck fell off while masturbating. At this remark, Jed felt so ashamed that he burst into tears. Soon after his father's funeral, he and his mother began to live on Jonquil Street in Dugton, partly because she now needed a job in the new canning factory there. At the elementary school there, Jed was ridiculed by his schoolmates as a son of a man who died while masturbating. He again found himself weeping in shame. Thus he began to hate his dead father, who brought such contempt and humiliation upon him.

Jed Tewksbury has never hated his mother, Elvira, but he has obviously found her very limited. He tells his first wife, a Ph.D. candidate in English, that "she is of minimal education and no talent for handling abstractions, and you and she would find few ideas to exchange" (98).

His mother contributed greatly to his sense of alienation from his past as she succeeded in having her son leave not just Dugton, which was a "hellhole" (47), according to her, but Alabama. Subsequently, she kept insisting that Jed should never return to Dugton. Dugton offered Jed nothing to look back to with pleasure. While he was a student at the Dugton High School, for instance, he had to work for a period as a helper four afternoons a week at a grocery store. He was friendless in Dugton, too. As he reminisces later on, he "was never asked into any house in Dugton, nice or not" (33).

It is therefore no wonder that Jed dreamed of escaping from Dugton, Alabama. While he was at the Dugton High School, he found a symbolic avenue of escape. When he first encountered Latin, he felt that he was

able to peep through a Latin word into a bright world entirely different from the real world in Dugton. This feeling was to determine his later career as a scholar in classical and medieval literature.

ii

After graduating in 1939 from Blackwell College, a fictitious rural college of no particular distinction in Alabama, Jed enters the graduate school of the University of Chicago, through the aid of Dr. Heinrich Stahlmann, an authority in classical and medieval literature. He has thus succeeded in escaping from the South. Dr. Stahlmann provides Jed not only with housing and employment but also with the vision of an alternative to the actual chaotic world. Dr. Stahlmann says:

> "I dreamed [. . .] of a world not of the nations. Of a timeless and placeless, sunlit lawn, like that of Dante's vision, where the poets and philosophers and sages sit, and where we who are none of those things may come to make obeisance and listen. We may even, if a little grace is vouchsafed, report something of what we have heard. That others may come. [. . .] As the *Civitas Dei*, for the Christian, sheds light on the cities of men, so the *imperium intellectus* may illuminate and quicken the world of our bewildered body and bestial members." (69-70)

Jed Tewksbury is completely enthralled by Dr. Stahlmann's idea of the "Empire of Intellect" because by this time he is convinced that through the study of foreign languages, classical and modern, he is able to witness a redeemed world. He is also attracted by its attendant features of timelessness and placelessness as he is fleeing from his past and from Dugton, Alabama. The alternative world of the *imperium intellectus* seems to promise Jed, an exile from the South, a way to escape from

reality itself. Dr. Stahlmann himself, however, in a few years, ceases to believe in the *imperium intellectus.* Having escaped from Hitler's regime to come to Chicago with his Jewish wife, he has tried to be a citizen of the "Empire of Intellect." Dr. Stahlmann, however, can never succeed in transcending reality. He is finally unable to face the death of his wife from grief over the Nazis' murder of her mother and he is tormented by his sense of guilt for his failure to return to Germany to offer "the public testimony of [his] curse upon what [his] land had become" (71). Shortly before he commits suicide in 1942, Dr. Stahlmann says, in reference to the *imperium intellectus,* "Junk! All Junk!" (75) And then, he continues:

> "Well, we of the *imperium intellectus* prop up a man who, we pretend to think, is so great he must be dead, in a chair, and, like the Romans, make speeches about him. And some of us, again just like the Romans, put on our portrait masks of other illustrious dead and pretend to be them, while others make speeches about us. Oh, it is jolly! That's what we do in the *imperium intellectus.*" (75)

The message is clearly that the vision of the "Empire of Intellect," dissociated from reality, can never ultimately sustain us. It is fitting, in a way, that Dr. Stahlmann kills himself on the very day when he is granted his American citizenship. His becoming an American citizen has intensified his sense of betrayal of his homeland, Germany.

After Dr. Stahlmann's funeral, Jed volunteers and joins the infantry. What he learns in Italy while fighting with the Partisans against the Nazi forces is that, unlike such an uprooted man as he is, they have a special innate feeling for their *terra.* Jed and Mrs. Rebecca Jones-Talbot later agree that there is no English word equivalent to the Italian word. The word suggests to Mrs. Jones-Talbot "[t]hat piety for place and all the blood-experience that has gone into it over the years" (233). Through her

stay in Italy and more particularly through her association with her Italian lover, Sergio, Mrs. Jones-Talbot has come to know about this special feeling. It is probably because of this knowledge that she comes back to her birthplace, Nashville, Tennessee, after wandering in the North and in Europe over a period of 25 years.

In 1946, Jed comes back to Chicago to work on his dissertation. He marries Agnes Andresen, who is also working on her dissertation in English. In May, 1948, however, Agnes dies of cancer of the uterus. Deeply affected by her worsening condition while she is in hospital, Jed begins to write an essay entitled "Dante and The Metaphysics of Death," which, after Agnes' death, earns him his first international acclaim and a job as assistant professor at the University of Chicago. Pained by the feeling that he has earned his success in exchange for Agnes' life, he feels that he cannot stay in Chicago, the scene of his transaction with "the Prince of This World" (117). Constantly in flight from reality, he characteristically leaves Chicago behind to work as associate professor at an unnamed university in Nashville. Remembering the accusation of Agnes' former boyfriend that he has never loved Agnes, Jed muses:

> And now, as I knew too well, I loved her. I must have loved her, for my own heart, quite literally, hurt. Then it began to hurt worse; the thought, for the first time, came into my mind that if Agnes had lived I would never have loved her—would, in fact, have killed what love she had for me. Her death had been the birth of love and her life would have been its death. (120)

This is the first time that Jed seriously wonders if he can truly love somebody.

iii

Book Two, the longest of the three books which comprise the novel, concerns itself with what Jed calls "the matter of Nashville" (326). The central factor of "the matter of Nashville" is Jed's love affair with Rozelle, one of his classmates in Dugton. She is now married to Lawford Carrington, a sculptor, who is generally viewed as "Mr. Nashville" (248). Rozelle's first husband, Michael X. Butler, reportedly drowned when he fell from his boat while Rozelle was steering it. Rozelle had obviously married Butler for money. Butler was 54 years old at the time of their marriage, while Rozelle herself was about 25.

Concerning the reason why Jed begins his affair with Rozelle, James H. Justus makes a convincing comment:

> Jed flees instinctively to Rozelle, that other exile from Dugton, Alabama, not so much because she is from his hometown but because she shares his own sense of rootlessness, the faith that identities can be made irrelevantly [of], even in spite of, one's past. (305)

Being an orphan, Rozelle was raised by her uncle and aunt in a loveless atmosphere. Just like Jed, she exiled herself from Alabama to Florida, where she met Michael X. Butler. By the time Jed meets Rozelle again in Nashville, her uncle and aunt are both dead, and there is absolutely no reason to return to Dugton.

About their love-making, Jed makes a revealing comment:

> [I lived in] the enclosed world of the timelessness in which [. . .] I could plunge into the contextless darkness of passion—the moment in which Jediah Tewksbury could abolish the self that had once stood under the chinaberry tree in Claxford County, Alabama [. . .].

(208-9)

We have observed at the beginning of this essay that Jed, in 1952, comes to find a new happiness in the idea of selfhood as "the moment of perception between pastlessness and futurelessness." By this time, his adulterous affair with Rozelle is over. It is clear, however, that Jed seeks timelessless and contextlessness in his sex with Rozelle. In a similar vein, Jed refers to Rozelle's vagina as "the shadowy sanctuary of the timelessness where [he] had [his] refuge" (204). Commenting on Rozelle's orgasm, Jed says that it "was like the 'black hole' of the physicists—a devouring negativity into which all the nags and positives of life may simply disappear like dirty water when the plug is pulled at the bottom of the sink" (220-21). Thus, as Jed's parable about the two Gauls suggests, the wild sexuality that he and Rozelle engage themselves in is "a flight from actuality" (311).

It is true that Rozelle is trying to submerge the memory of her painful girlhood in Dugton in the sexual frenzy, but there is another reason why she seeks a contextless self. Rozelle has told people that she first met Lawford in September, 1946, on Long Island, a few months after the accident in which Michael X. Butler drowned. As Jed later learns, however, Rozelle met Lawford for the first time in July, 1946, at a party in New York, and soon began an illicit affair with him. Lawford was also on Butler's boat at the time of the accident, and when Butler was accidentally thrown overboard, Lawford did not attempt to throw a lifesaver for him. Although it is doubtful whether Butler could have saved himself or not with a lifesaver, Rozelle suffers from the memory of the incident. We can argue that Jed's discovery of the part which Rozelle played in the whole episode finally leads him to flee from her and from Nashville at the end of Book Two. Even without this discovery, however, we can easily conclude that Jed's and Rozelle's attempt to escape from

reality into "timeless sexuality" (317) would have come to a disastrous end.

iv

After a brief sojourn in Paris, Jed returns to the University of Chicago, where he now holds a position of a part-time assistant professor. It is shortly after his return that Jed has a peculiar sense of happiness. I have already quoted a passage at the beginning of this essay concerning this sense of happiness based on his selfhood as "the moment of perception between pastlessness and futurelessness" (320).

After being promoted to a full-time associate professorship, he marries Dauphine Phillips, a divorcée. Although Jed truly enjoyed taking care of the baby born to him, Jed was divorced after five years of matrimony. After the separation from Dauphine, Jed lives all by himself, publishing "articles and books" (345) and getting an increasing number of "honorary degrees," (345) both at home and abroad. Although he has become a scholar of world renown, his work can never be a source of satisfaction to him. As he later tells Rozelle in Rome, he has come to feel that "the main function of work is to kill time" (361) His sense of aloneness is at its peak. Concerning his new friend, a physicist at the University of Chicago and an uncle of Dauphine, Jed says:

> My new friend Stephan Mostoski and I had nothing in common, it would seem, and yet we were true friends. Or perhaps because we had nothing in common, we would be true friends. No, we did have one thing in common: solitude. (347)

In 1973, Jed gradually begins to reassess his way of life after his talks with the Partisans that he fought with during World War II, Rozelle, and Stephan. As he plans to visit Rome to receive an honorary degree

from the University of Rome, Jed decides to regain the sense of connectedness with the Partisans to seek a way out of his solitude. As Jed says, "Long ago, in the mountains, among my desperadoes, I had found something significant: that one does not have to be alone" (351). However, his attempt is futile as he finds the Partisans totally changed individuals. Thus, this particular attempt to overcome his solitude bore no fruit.

At the time that he is feeling more alienated from himself than ever in Rome, he meets Rozelle quite by chance. It is during their meeting that Jed tells her that "the main function of work is to kill time." He also tells her that what he thought of as happiness was merely "excitement" (361). This can be construed, of course, as a very bitter comment on their illicit relationship in Nashville. Rozelle tells Jed that she is now married to a man whom Jed has met several times at the parties held by the Carringtons back in Nashville. The man presented himself as a swami at these parties. Rozelle tells Jed in Rome, however, that he is actually an African-American posing as a native of India. He is now prosperous in international drug trafficking. According to Rozelle, he is fluent in such foreign languages as Italian, Hindi, and French. In his case, being a polyglot is a prerequisite for his life of deception. It is an index to his false identity. Indeed, he got back into the United States from Britain, where he learned "real English," with "a fake passport" (364). Quite fittingly, Rozelle herself boasts to Jed of her fluency in Italian and French. At this juncture, we should remember that before leaving for Rome to receive the honorary degree, Jed has confided to Stephan that he no longer had the faith that "you could peep through a word in a foreign language into a redeemed world" (347). Shortly after the unexpected meeting with Rozelle in Rome, Jed reads a letter from Perk Simms, the man his mother married several years after Buck's death. The letter announced the death of Jed's mother. After reading the letter, Jed muses:

> The woman had thrust a being forth from her body into the blaze and strangeness of the world, and now, half a century later and half a hemisphere away, a heavy, swarthy man, running to belly and getting a little bald on the top of his head, lay naked in a strange room in a strange country, and the voices rising from the street below, as the afternoon shadow lengthened, were in a tongue that, all at once, was strange to him. It was as though that man had never heard that tongue before. (373)

Although Jed has a far greater familiarity with Italian than the swami or Rozelle, he finds the language quite strange. This is because he subconsciously feels that his true salvation is to be found in Perk's letter written in semi-literate English, telling him of his mother's unchanging love for him.

Concerning Italian, Warren inserts an interesting episode shortly before Jed goes home to Dugton to visit his mother's grave. Because of his competency in Italian, Jed is able to perform a great service to an old dying Italian immigrant woman. To the confused woman, Jed pretends to be her son, who has come back from San Quentin. To the semi-conscious woman, Jed keeps saying "*non la lasciarei più, mai, mai*" (388), which means "I would never go away, never." Later on, Jed, who has not been able to attend his mother's funeral, arranges a funeral for this pseudo-mother of his.

As Jed, who realized in Nashville that he "had never had a friend, a real friend" (254), says that he and Stephan Mostoski are "true friends" (347), some readers may be misled into believing that what Mostoski says to Jed contains some valuable wisdom. We should, however, realize that Mostoski is not presented as a person for Jed to try to emulate. For example, Mostoski proclaims, "I have no country that I recognize as my own, and I am trying to learn to be happy in that condition" (348). On this

occasion, Mostoski is a false prophet as Jed should be aware that he has been right in searching for a place where he belongs. While Jed misses Dauphine a great deal, Mostoski says of his own divorced wife while in talk with Jed after his return from Europe, "I do not wake up at night and try to remember what my wife looked like" (380). While Jed feels that there used to be a genuine love between him and Dauphine, Mostoski says, "Whatever affection was there between us, I had decided was only an accident [. . .]" (380). Mostoski has no fatherly feeling for his son, either, in contrast to Jed, who has enjoyed tremendously watching his son, Ephraim, grow. When Jed is desperately trying to deal with his sense of the fragmented self before coming back from Europe, he muses:

> I might write and ask [Ephraim] to go [. . .] to Alabama. Then all my life would be in one piece, somehow. Everything would come together. I would no longer wake up at night and ask where I was, ask why I had come here (wherever here happened to be), ask why nothing I did, no matter how devotedly, seemed any more to have meaning, ask why sometimes I literally could not bring myself to think of the past or speculate about the future [. . .]. (378)

Thus, Jed instinctively feels that his salvation is not possible without his son.

V

Robert Penn Warren can indulge too much in preaching. He sometimes says things that should be better left unsaid. Toward the end of *A Place to Come To,* however, Warren exhibits remarkable self-restraint in regard to the final synthesis arrived at by Jed. It is left to the reader to see the working of Jed's mind without any explicit commentary by the narrator himself. I might be blamed for belaboring the obvious, but

let me, on behalf of the narrator, explain the working of his mind.

Upon his return to Dugton to visit his mother's grave, Jed has a series of talks with Perk, his step-father. First of all, we should realize that Perk is there to give Jed crucial and revealing information about his mother's true feelings about her son. We know that Jed's mother, Elvira, repeatedly told him to get out of Dugton and stay out. Jed has taken her words at their face value. For example, he says that he told Agnes, his first wife, that "the last thing [his] mother wanted was to see [him] in Alabama" (97). According to Perk, however, his mother made Jed's bed every day, apparently to be ready to welcome him back anytime. Jed also learns from Perk that his mother read over and over again Jed's letters and the newspaper clippings about Jed. Perk tells Jed that his mother said one time that she would give a million dollars if she could hold her grandson, Ephraim, even for five minutes. According to Perk, Elvira, while looking at Ephraim's photo, said:

> "You know, if I could only be behind a post or something or in a crowd and only look at him to the content of my heart and him not know! That would be enough[.]" (398)

Earlier in the novel, learning what would happen to the body of the old Italian immigrant woman if he refused kinship with her, he decided to arrange her funeral himself. Learning of his mother's wish to see him back in Dugton, we should realize that Jed's never coming back to Dugton to see his mother is tantamount to his denial of kinship with her.

By his mother's grave, Jed muses:

> I had not been found worthy to sit on the placeless, sunlit lawn of Dante's vision and listen to the blessèd music that was the language uttered by the saints and sages—or, at least, I had brought back no

> fair report to open the ears of others. I was no citizen, after all, of the *imperium intellectus.* My naturalization papers were forged. (398)

Jed calls himself "a historian" (19), but how could he be a citizen of the "Empire of Intellect" as a genuine historian when he cannot incorporate his past in Dugton to make his personal history an integrated whole?[2]

According to Perk, Elvira asked him, to his chagrin, to bury her next to Buck, her first husband. It is reasonable to assume that Elvira anticipated Jed's visit to the cemetery. It is also reasonable to assume that Elvira anticipated Perk's mentioning to Jed her request to be buried beside Jed's father. Her request to be buried by Buck, then, is a reminder to Jack of his undeniable biological tie with Buck. It is because Jed understands his mother's message that he has "the wild impulse to lie on the earth between the two graves, the old and the new, and stretch out a hand to each" (399). Mostoski earlier told Jed that "we are all accidents of history in accidental conjunction"(381). Jed now remembers, however, that he is not an accident of history but the joint product of an act of love of Buck and Elvira.

As we recall, Jack Burden, the narrator of *All the King's Men*, also grows up estranged from Ellis Burden, the man who he believes to be his father. For a reason unknown to Jack, Ellis left Jack and his mother when Jack was 5 years old. Jack suffers from the feeling that his father ceased to love him and he is to blame for it. As it turns out, toward the end of the novel, Ellis is not Jack's real father. Jack learns that Judge Montague M. Irwin was his true biological father. As Judge Irwin is a person of greater caliber than Ellis Burden, Jack Burden has a deep sense of respect for Judge Irwin from the very beginning. Thus, Jack eventually finds a new father who is better than the man he formerly believed to be his father. As I indicated in my previous essay on *All the King's Men*, this discovery of his true father is a key element in the

regeneration of Jack Burden. It is true, however, that we get the impression that things turn out too neatly in *All the King's Men*, as the question remains in our mind: What would have happened if Jack's true father turned out to be some despicable scum? It is my contention, then, that Robert Penn Warren presents a more convincing story in *A Place to Come To,* whose unmistakable message is that one should rejoice in the fact that, because of our biological parents, we exist, no matter what kind of people they are.

The novel ends with Jed fantasizing back in Chicago that when he comes back next time, he will be accompanied by his son and he will be able to point out to his son all the spots that he has dreamed of pointing out to him. The spots that the protagonist refers to include the chinaberry tree under which he wept, the spot on the pike where Buck's body was found, Buck's grave, and the cannery where Elvira worked. These spots used to create in him a sense of humiliation and disgrace, but now he is capable of viewing his past in Dugton as an essential ingredient of his identity. The final sentence of the novel thus clearly indicates Jed's total acceptance of his past and his recognition of the flow of life from Buck and Elvira through Jed himself to Ephraim. In Jed's mind, Ephraim is definitely not an accident in history and their tie is not an accidental conjunction.

According to Perk, his mother cried at the news that Jed and Dauphine split up, saying that fame and high income do not ultimately count. Thus, just before he fantasizes revisiting Dugton with Ephraim at the very end of the novel, the protagonist writes to Dauphine to ask for her company, saying, "it is what I feel myself most deeply craving" (400). He explains to Dauphine, "It is not that I cannot stand solitude. Perhaps I stand it all too easily" (400). We never know the outcome of Jed's attempt to reconciliate with his ex-wife, but there is no doubt that the novel ends with anticipation that someday Jed will revisit Dugton with Ephraim and

that all of his life would then be in one piece, somehow, as Jed instinctively felt earlier,

Notes

[1] Since the protagonist rents a car at the Huntsville Airport to reach Dugton, Alabama (389), we can safely assume that the town is located in northern Alabama. We can also assume that, in the novel, Warren renamed Madison County, in which the airport is situated, as Claxford County. Dugton is a fictitious name.

[2] As we recall, Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* is also a historian. Ostensibly, Jack gives up his graduate study because he is unable to see the causality in the Cass Mastern episode. We can assume, however, that he gives up his study because he is unable to unite his past with his present. Thus, we realize that Warren is again working with the motif of a historian who cannot make sense of his personal history.

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