

LITERATURE

ASSERTION OF LONELINESS (ROBERT PENN WARREN'S *THE BALLAD OF BILLIE POTTS*)

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The composition of Warren's *The ballad of Billie Potts* depends on the alternation of the folk narrative with sophisticated commentary. This combination is often found to be incongruous and, consequently, the whole poem is considered flawed as a work of art, since: "The passages of commentary seem contrived, pretentious in their insistence on wringing profundities from what is, basically, little more than an anecdote, massive in its ironies. By contrast, the ballad seems arch and folksy" (Charles H. Bohner 1964 : 59). It is in this contrast where the structural strength of the poem lies. Paul West regards it as "A bizarre poem, it approaches caricature and cartoon, yet the moral — wasted chance of trust — comes through unspoiled and, if anything, sharpened and straitened through contrast" (Paul West 1964 : 16). The story is indeed little more than an anecdote which Warren drew from the folk history of his home country. But it is also an anecdote well known in other regions of the world and this universality indicates its archetypal significance. Babette Deutsch traces its origin back to the story of Sohrab and Rustum. Albert Camus mentions it in *Stranger*. Marcus Cunliffe suggests that "it would be most interesting to compare the existentialist implications of Camus with Warren's sense of Southern wanderer coming back to his home, to evoke love of his parents after they have killed him" (Marcus Cunliffe 1961 : 335). The author instinctively withdrew from meddling with the folk material in order to leave intact the meaning of the irony of fate in its most recognizable form. Were the folk section of the ballad worked into an intellectual statement, the whole poem would then become incongruous since its ending must preserve the rigidity of the original version — out of place in a sophisticated form — besides, the character of Little Billie with its rustic simplicity is not a subject fit for the Eliotesque musings on time and the mutability of things contained in the commentary.

The poem is divided into eight parts. Each of them contains a ballad part followed by a parenthetical commentary, and the difference in tone between them is indeed striking but never jarring. In fact, each section of the commentary can be conceived as a separate whole. But these wholes are designed to

express and illustrate one central idea and they have within themselves significant action sustained by the plot of the ballad. Since the same ideas and preoccupations tend to recur, one can discern thematic and even formal relationship between the different episodes of the ballad and commentary. The general thematic intentions, therefore, modify the formal elements and serve to unify the work.

Thus, in the first part the tone of the imagery in the commentary is correlated with description of the characters who signal some kind of hidden evil. This is achieved through the feline figure of Big Billie's wife, his own brutal joviality and even the clumsiness of their son Little Billie. This should evoke in the reader a feeling of dramatic irony, strengthened by the sunless ominous "fetid bottoms", the "starkness of the muskrat's astute face", etc. It is a land from which beauty has departed together with the "cabin where the shag-bark stood and magnificent tulip-tree". The whole section suggests man's innate depravity.

The second part of the poem consists in the contrast between the seemingly hospitable inn and the ghost-like pilgrims heading West. They are nameless and rootless, condemned to perish in time and space. They exhibit the fate of all those who lose their identity through abandonment.

The third part reveals the true occupation of the innkeeper which is that of ambushing solitary travellers in order to kill and rob them. It is followed by comments on the inscrutability of the meaning of time and history. There is an indication that once all this was revealed, that: "The answer is in the back of the book but the page is gone. / And the grandma told you to tell the truth but she is dead." It reiterates the theme of lost innocence from the first part of the poem.

The fourth and the fifth parts can be read together. Little Billie decides to ambush and kill a traveller himself only to be beaten to the draw and wounded. As the result he has to leave home and go west where he stays for ten years. The protagonist of the commentary will now join the legion of the rootless wanderers travelling to the end of time — which is unfathomable — in search of an identity which is unattainable since the newness of experience is always obliterated by the present, turning inevitably into a forgotten past. The past and the present merge into loneliness and a spiritual void which paradoxically is time: "Time is always the new place, / And no-place. / For Time is always the new name and the new face, / And no-name and no-face. For Time is motion / For Time is innocence / For Time is West." The word innocence is slightly disturbing in such context but not at all ambiguous in the total meaning of the poem.

The sixth part deals with Billie's return to the homestead, since it is essential as the commentary has it, for the weary traveller to come home which is the only place where man can regain his identity. It is in these middle parts of

the poem that the main image is that of the river, which, according to John L. Stewart means "fluid continuum of birth, growth, decay, death".

In the seventh section Billie is killed by his parents who mistake him for a stranger. The traveller escapes from the burden of "time" to the "no-time" of the homeland but, symbolically, he can not recognize his face in the water of the river. Paradoxically he finds his identity in death and thus his destiny is fulfilled. The parents are told that the bearded stranger they have robbed and buried is their son. They dig him up, confirm his identity and speak his true name which now has "a part, a history, a content" (eighth section).

In the last section the plot of the ballad merges with that of the commentary in the figure of the prodigal son returned home: "kneeling at the feet of the old man (who is evil, ignorant and old)". Through the dignity of death the figure of Billie Potts acquires new tragic dimensions. He is no longer a country bumpkin, but a hero compatible with the unnamed traveller of the commentary.

The meaning of the ballad section is there in the story and needs no interpretation except, perhaps a comment that no crime will go unpunished. Read together with the commentary, however, the poem becomes complex and its full meaning is not at all clear since it touches upon a number of different themes. Fortunately, they all point to Warren's favourite archetypal pattern — the homeward journey — which unifies the structural and textural elements of the poem. Thus Babette Deutsch interprets the poem as "a rootless man's search for identity and to blind betrayal" (Babette Deutsch 1963 : 220). According to Marcus Cunliffe it is "a complicated exercise in morality, in which villainy and virtue are mixed together and inseparable" (Marcus Cunliffe 1961 : 334). John L. Stewart seems to see it in terms of the past-present dilemma; a study in irony in which the return to the past means death (John L. Stewart 1965). Charles H. Bohner also sees the poem as a dramatization of the past in the present: "its effect is that of juxtaposing past and present, of particularizing the facts into an archetypal pattern of discovery of guilt, the attempt of flight and the necessity of return." He also reads the poem "within the context of American experience, the pattern is that of the Western pioneer still haunted by the tie to the heartland" (Charles Bohner 1964 : 58). In his interpretation the poem illustrates the plight of the modern man for whom there is no more an escape from the past than there is an escape from the self.

Acceptance of the past or a return to the traditional way of life may not necessarily mean death as some of the interpretations covertly suggest. It may mean a renewal of spiritual strength. However, there is indeed death waiting for the traveller at the end of his journey. A particular kind of death — unintentional filicide. Eric Bentley draws a parallel between *The Ballad ...* and Warren's novel *At heaven's gate* stressing their similarity of motifs. "Here in *At heaven's gate* the fulfilment of Jerry Calhoun is symbolized by similar pattern, and even a greater favorite of Warren's, the return to the father.

The ballad of Billie Potts has it: And the father waits for the son / The hour is late, / The scene familiar even in Shadow, / The transaction brief, / And you, wanderer, back, / After this striving and the wind's word, / To kneel / ... At the feet of the old man ... /" (Eric Bentley 1964 : 621). Bentley does not finish the quotation which in the line "Who is evil and ignorant and old," reveals the unintentionally malevolent nature of the father figure. The comparison is an apt one. Attention, however, should be drawn not to Jerry Calhoun who found peace in the paternal house but to the relationship between Bogan Murdock and his daughter Sue. Contrary to Jerry who only sporadically is aware of his hatred for his father because he wants to be free of the past which his father represents, Sue genuinely despises and hates her father for his greed and acquisitiveness. Her rejection is complete and sets her on a course of events that terminate in her death. Symbolically Murdock can be held responsible for Sue's murder as much as Old Billie's greed is the cause of Little Billie's tragic end. The novel then, like the ballad, also exemplifies the theme of unintentional symbolic filicide. The poem read side by side with *At heaven's gate* takes on a symbolic meaning which can justify Paul West's contention that "If Billie's father is God, striking categorically down irrespective of identity or age, then Warren has fixed on the harshness of mortality, whether it amounts to ignorance of fatalism. The only virtue in learning from experience is that life goes on, perpetually offering new chances against the old, depressing background ... innocence cannot be retrieved, but it can be created out of evil: a man's children always start clean, and all the father can do is to be humble before life's incessant renewals and seek to know himself, and his kind, better". (Paul West 1964 : 77). Such reading, no doubt valid, omits the motif of return — equally important as symbolic betrayal which Babette Deutsch calls "blind". (In fact the structure of *The ballad* bears a close resemblance to the composition of *At heaven's gate* in their use of intercalary parts.)

By reading the two parts of the poem as a whole one can interpret its meaning as a tragic theme constantly recurring in Southern writing which points out the impossibility of return. Louis D. Rubin puts this theme in the following way: "While living away he (Southern literary hero) had known a strong, sentimental attachment to his home community and its ways. But he found that he could not put down his roots again, for the soil was too thin. For better or for worse he had become confirmed in perspectives, interests, attitudes that set him apart from his neighbors in the old community." (Louis D. Rubin, Jr. 1966 : 10).

The ballad ... reiterates this theme in symbolic terms through its use of imagery. The images of the "Land between the rivers" convey the corruption and evil of the whole place from which beauty has departed and the knowledge of the secret of life has been long forgotten. The place suggests a God-forsaken Garden of Eden presided over by Billie's father acting as God in reverse, and the

protagonist brought up in this environment is hardly aware of its evil and corruption. His willingness to murder in order to please his father is a case of misplaced ethics. Tainted by sin he yet remains paradoxically innocent and his journey in the world, purposeless and lonely, however, has a redeeming value demonstrated in the image of Time river:

"The name and the face are always new.
And they are you.
Are new.
For they have been dipped in the healing flood.
For they have been dipped in the redeeming blood.
For they have been dipped in Time
And Time is always beginnings
Time is only and always beginnings
And is the redemption of our crime
And in our Saviour's priceless blood.
For time is always the new place,
And no-place.
For Time is always the new name and the new face,
And no-name and no-face.
For Time is motion
For Time is innocence
For Time is West".

The return home is essential if man's natural and instinctive search for identity and immortality is to be fulfilled. Thus the image of Time-river changes into the no-time of the homeland which also means death.

"Prodigal, back to the homeland of no-Time,
To ask forgiveness and the patrimony of your crime,
And kneel in the untutored night as to demand
What gift — oh, father, father — from that dissevering hand?"

The protagonist hopes to renew his strength through contact with his birthplace. Through his wanderings abroad he has shed the guilt of his forefathers and achieved certain innocence. He is a man changed beyond recognition; he is a stranger in danger of destruction in his own home. It is the spirit of the land that deals the blind blow and kills him through the figure of his father. This very blindness, evil as it is, begs forgiveness in the context of the poem for undoubtedly the father-land is bound to suffer from the act. Paradoxically the protagonist finds peace and long sought identity. His experience is that of George Webber in *You can't go home again* whose search for "surety" symbolically presented as the search for the father, is frustrated when he returns home since its effect is destructive and deadening.

Robert Penn Warren attempted to formulate an universal experience of mutual negation and the poem is a warning as well as a comment that explains the tragic themes of so many Southern novels and their heroes, condemned

for a constant choice between nostalgia and loneliness abroad and spiritual death at home.

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