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***From Gent to Gentil: Jed Tewksbury  
and the Function of Literary Allusion in A Place to Come To***

BILL MCCARRON AND PAUL KNOKE

Robert Penn Warren's last novel, *A Place to Come To*, provides a loci of allusions which cut across the span of western literature from the Bible to the present day. Most of these allusions have classical sources in keeping with protagonist Jed Tewksbury's academic expertise. Thoroughly schooled in Latin and poets like Virgil, he is also a renowned medievalist who has made his reputation studying Dante and lesser-known works of the Middle Ages such as the anonymous *chante fable* of *Aucassin et Nicolette*. As he struggles retrospectively to sort through his muddled past, Jed alludes to the *Aucassin* poem, the *Aeneid*, and *The Divine Comedy* in order to clarify his own life both emotionally and spiritually. The results are ultimately insightful because they reveal a Jed Tewksbury who comes to an awakening knowledge of self and the power of redemptive love.

A pattern of literary allusion peppers Jed's autobiography from the very start. For example, during his recounting of the events in the second of his three "Books," he recalls discussing the *Aucassin* fable with the widowed Mrs. Jones-Talbot and her close friend Mrs. Beacham during his weekly Friday afternoon tutorial at the Jones-Talbot mansion. In addressing certain key passages of this obscure French romance, Jed goes off on a tangent regarding the line "*De s'amie o le gent cors.*" Though he does not specify the precise reference—it occurs in *Aucassin*, *Chanté XXIII*.line 2<sup>1</sup> – he does distinguish, correctly, between *gent* and *gentil*. The medieval *gent*, meaning charming or graceful, refers to the exterior appearance of a person, either in the flesh, or in dress, or in how one carries one's self, and translates, as Jed states, to "*au corps charmant*" (i.e., a body that is sexually attractive).<sup>2</sup> He does add that "the word *gentil* is different in Latin derivation and meaning," but he never defines the second term (216). In fact, *gentil* describes someone's interior soul, one whose behavior manifests heroic conduct. For his entire life heroic conduct has been something foreign to Jed, something, until novel's end, that has completely eluded him. Instead he has become a *gent* completely oblivious to meaningful personal relationships, self-awareness, and introspection. Far from being a "noble youth" saving a "beloved Nicolette," Jed has wandered in a "dark forest" of his own making where he envisions the *corps charmant* of his lover Rozelle's body "bare and glimmering and lifted ... forked in my hands," even as he is completing a French lecture (216-17). Obviously Jed has spent too much of his life looking for a physical rather than spiritual "place to come to."

And then there is Warren's rich overlay of Latin allusion, particularly to Virgil. In Book One, Jed recalls his schoolboy experience when a high school freshman in Dugton, Claxton County, Alabama tells Jed: "'Latin,'" he said, suddenly swollen with information. 'What the Romins talked'" (25). For the first time in his life, Jed is

fascinated academically and begins to flourish in Miss McClatty's Latin class: "By Christmas of my first year she got me in Caesar; then on past the *Aeneid* to more Virgil, then lots of Horace, Catullus, Tacitus, and Sallust, not to mention lots of Cicero" (26). Thus not surprisingly, Latin allusions earmark his reevaluation of his own life.

Perhaps the most jarring of these occurs during Jed's illicit sexual escapades with Rozelle Hardcastle. At one point, in an intentional perversion of Descartes's famous *cogito ergo sum*, Jed declares "*debatuo ergo sum*," thereby transforming the phrase into libidinous Latin (218). The Latin infinitive root, *debatuere*, translates as "to thrust forcibly" and is a rarely used Latin verb. Both literally and metaphorically, this is what *gent* Jed has been doing most of his life. In this instance he is characterizing his malaise in Book Two, where as a professor in Nashville he frequently skips classes, cannot work on his notes for a scholarly article, and is totally preoccupied with his thrice-weekly liaisons with Rozelle.

But the most prominent Latin allusions are to the *Aeneid*. As Jed enters the Nashville phase of his academic life, he compares his smoke-filled car on a train from Chicago to Aeneas's emergence in Carthage from a radiant cloud as he meets Dido for the first time (123). Jed, however, is far more subdued and complacent than his classical counterpart, and Nashville will never offer him a royal welcome despite his stay—like Aeneas's—of less than a year. In fact, Jed subsequently cites a fragment of an earlier portion of Book I of the *Aeneid* to lament his sense of *lacrimae rerum* (227). The full line in Virgil reads, "*Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*" ("There are tears concerning these things and human sufferings touch the mind"), and it occurs as Aeneas views the sad depiction of the fall of Troy on a wall.<sup>3</sup> Jed's own spiritual conflagration has been the death of his wife Agnes, and her burial in the wind-blown fields of Ripley, South Dakota.

Other parallels between Jed and Aeneas are evident, most notably their wartime experiences. Aeneas will engage in battles with Turnus to establish control of Latium and eventually to found Rome. Captain Tewksbury has worked behind the lines with Italian partisans who conduct a guerilla-style war against the Nazis. However, it is essential to note that Jed seems largely unconscious of how his life coincides with that of Aeneas beyond the two Virgil references just cited. Indeed, he only fragmentally associates the literary allusions he does cite to moments in his own life. Even in the time-present of his reminiscences, he is still only vaguely self-aware and vaguely in tune with the academia he only superficially appreciates. Typically, Warren leaves most literary allusion up for the reader to discern. And nowhere is this more evident than in the intentional parallels Warren draws between Jed, Dante Alighieri, and *The Divine Comedy*.

Book One recounts Jed's personal "Inferno" of humiliation, homelessness, violence, and loneliness, and most of his "guides" are akin to inhabitants of Dante's hellish circles. There is, first of all, his father Buck, who in his incontinent control of his carnal desires, his "brutishness," his fraudulence, is thus a personification of all three of Aristotle's nominees for man's worst "moral states"<sup>4</sup> and who dies ignominiously in a drunken fall in front of a wagon "... holding his dong" (1). Soon after comes the lustful Rozelle, the queen of Dugton High, the "she-wolf" of the *Inferno*'s Canto I,<sup>5</sup> Jed's once and future seductress, who tries to "suck forth [his] soul" (42). A flatterer and epicure, Rozelle, at least at this point, epitomizes a sinner from Canto VI's third circle of gluttony. And then there is Professor Pillsbun of Blackwell College, a liar and hypocrite who sends

Jed to graduate school under false pretenses and is thus worthy of the *Inferno*'s eighth circle (Canto XVIII), followed by the worldly Dr. Stahlmann, Jed's Dante mentor and father figure at the University of Chicago, who attempts to reassure Jed that only *sancta simplicitas*, the youthful "innocence" of "ignorance," will "ever lead to greatness" (72). But as for Stahlmann himself, though he has gained *patria* or desired citizenship in the U.S. (67), he still lacks *terra*—what Jed will later learn, in one of his discussions about Dante with Mrs. Talbot-Jones, means the dirt, earth, soil which one can touch (231-33). Moreover, his Dante-esque suicide leaves Jed stranded to complete the degree on his own, a self-violence which surely makes him a candidate for Dante's seventh circle of hell (Canto XIII). No wonder that in Chicago, as he did at Blackwell and in Dugton, Jed feels like a "stranger in a strange land" with "no place to go" (66, 54).

Not that he hasn't also been guided by a Virgilian voice of "Worldly Wisdom." The positive influence of Miss McClatty is dwarfed by that of his *gentil* mother Elvira, Jed's Venus figure, who has nurtured him ever since he was born in Heaven's Hope neighborhood, who has done her best to raise him "good and decent" (53), who is the first to recognize Rozelle for the pathetic "Miss Pritty-Pants" she is (78), and who practically kicks Jed out of "this durn hellhole" called Dugton because he is getting to be too much like his father (47).

But Jed nonetheless continues to proceed through life in his own spiritual and intellectual limbo, lonely and clueless. Even during World War II, when he fittingly rereads his *Divine Comedy*, he can only be struck by the contrast between its "vision of all-embracing meaningfulness, in the midst of ... incessant violence and perfidy" and his own "awareness of the blankness of spirit that was then my way of life" (84). And there is the *gentil* though pitiful Agnes, a potential Beatrice figure from Dante's *Purgatorio/Paradiso* whose terminal illness inspires Jed to finally begin his doctoral dissertation, appropriately entitled "Dante and the Metaphysics of Death," which in turn inspires him to write an award-winning essay that secures his academic reputation. He is forced, however, to admit that "my success would have been impossible except for the protracted death of Agnes Andresen. It was as though the essay had been, in the deepest sense of the word, her death warrant" (117), that "[her] death had been the birth of love [but] her life would have been its death" (120). If in Dante, as Jed notes, "death defines the meaning of life," for the time being that paradox only triggers "deep tensions," and his smug conviction that the Ripley City where Agnes is buried might eventually be a "place to come to" (106, 114) is delusory at best. It is noteworthy that nowhere in the novel does Jed discuss the contents of either the dissertation or the essay, nor does he ever openly acknowledge how the works he teaches are different from the life he leads. In other words, he seems insensitive to the values which make literature what it is. It's almost as if Jed, a self-indulgent devotee of pleasure-seeking and pain-avoidance, has now been entrapped in Dante's sixth circle of Epicurean heresy.

In Book Two, Jed enters upon his "Purgatorio" in Nashville. He continues on a journey which is essentially punctuated by two of the seven deadly sins, lust and sloth, and continues to seek a Beatrice in all the wrong places. Sloth is the middle sin depicted in Dante's own Book II: wrath, envy, and pride fall below, while sloth, Dante indicates, is the sort of evil that yields to avarice, gluttony, and lust, the most physical of the deadly sins (Dante, Cantos X-XXVI). Interestingly, this central portion of the *Purgatorio* contains one of the longest digressions in *The Divine Comedy*, as Virgil enlightens Dante

about the philosophical nature of human love, and Dante learns that earthly love must be modeled on its heavenly equivalent (see Cantos XVII and XVIII). But Jed is absolutely bereft of such awareness of the true nature of *caritas* or right-loving, and continues, instead, to indulge his lust for Rozelle—and even Aunt Talbot-Jones.

Indeed, early on he resolves to “put my life in order” and approaches his new teaching position with industry if not passion (138-39). Before long he begins shamefully to neglect his professional pursuits and slothfully float along, supported mostly by renown for his earlier scholarly work. Take, for example, his recollections from his Dante lectures, which are more filled with skirt-watching than intellectual substance. Or the graduate course he teaches in Nashville, ironically entitled “Love in the Middle Ages: Sacred and Profane,” the content of which we learn absolutely nothing (136). Or those Dante tutorial sessions with Mrs. Talbot-Jones, which are more exercises in literal translation than in thematic interpretation. When they do get to potentially meaningful dialogue, as in a discussion of Dante’s encounter with the Sordello of the *Purgatorio*’s Cantos VI-VII, it is she and not he who initiates it, and she and not he who seems to have a better feel for the connotation of the Latin noun *terra*, as when she comments, “It doesn’t seem to matter what kind of *terra* it is, just so it is *la mia*” (233).

Sordello in good faith guides Dante and Virgil to a safe passage through the seven terraces of deadly sin, while Jed, in not-so-good faith, will commit at least three more of those sins with a vengeance. Throw avarice and gluttony into the mix, and then add lust, as Jed begins to indulge his copulation with the re-emergent Rozelle and ultimately Aunt Talbot-Jones. And particularly the former, the “she-wolf” turned “siren” of the *Purgatorio*’s Canto XIX (ll. 7-33). Jed is once again adrift in carnal knowledge, this time from sexual encounter to sexual encounter with Rozelle, by now an adulteress with whom Jed has an affair while she is still married to her second husband, J. Lawford Carrington—after her first spouse has been mysteriously swept or pushed overboard from Carrington’s yacht. Rozelle, who studied high-school Latin alongside Jed and went on to take a degree from the University of Alabama, is, like Jed, all too obviously interested in physical rather than intellectual pursuits, and has now added matrimonial betrayal and possible violence to her resumé. She is akin to Francesca in Canto V of the *Inferno*, firmly ensconced in Dante’s second circle of hell. As for Jed, his sometimes almost violent sex with her metaphorically matches Jones-Talbot’s stallion “Big Boy,” who “covers” a mare “with more of a deep-chested snort than a whicker,” his “big ... dong , rigid and looking like a baseball bat ...” (276-77). So, in much the same way as his father, *gent* Jed continues to spiral downward through the *Divine Comedy* of his own life, his behavior always “profane,” his journey through purgatory more a slipping down than a climbing up.

Nevertheless, Jed does manage to acquire guides of a more *gentil* variety. For example, Bill and Sally Cudworth seem to be positive role models who literally offer Jed his own place to come to. First they offer to help him purchase a farm of his own, and second their stable marriage illustrates emotional security. Then there is the *gentil* Maria McInnis, another potential Beatrice possessed of “quiet good looks, intelligence, kindness, and other sterling qualities,” with whom Jed does not have sex, who burdens him with no romantic expectations (145), and whom he inadvertently encourages (citing his mother’s words “Drive on”) to leave Nashville and make her own way in the world (187). Though typically Jed is unable to pursue such affinities, he tries at the eleventh

hour to convince himself that he is in love with Rozelle, resigns his teaching post, makes a naïve and abortive effort to convince her to leave her husband and live with him “happily ever after,” and then departs Nashville to forego permanently all its “intensities, lies, self-divisions, dubieties, duplicities, and blind and variously devised plummetings into timeless sexuality” (317). An approach to Dante’s Garden of Eden this is not; but Jed, in his loneliness and solitude and “blankness” of spirit, seems, at the least, to be making some sort of forward progress.

In Book Three Jed manages to approach some measure of “*Paradiso*”—a personal atonement approaching a “salvation” of his character, if you will—which further introspection, subsequent practice of the four cardinal virtues, and commitment to love will hopefully enhance. After leaving Nashville, his first step toward spiritual wellness is to accept a faculty position back at the University of Chicago. He tries desperately to practice fortitude in once more trying to reorder his life, in taking his teaching more seriously, in even registering to vote. In the meantime his discovery that the Cudworths have made Jed their newborn’s godfather makes him realize how much he has “loved them,” and in a wedding announcement Maria McInnis attests that she “owed all her happiness to [him]” because “in you I found certain strengths and qualities to make me recognize them in another man whose love I was lucky enough to find” (324-25). For Jed this tribute may be love experienced vicariously, but it is love nonetheless.

Jed’s second step forward is to marry his old graduate school flame Dauphine Finkel, a potential Beatrice in her own right. True, it is largely a marriage of convenience and accommodation in which Jed is forced to confess a “minimal degree of emotional attachment” (293), but at least he practices fortitude in sticking the marriage out some seven years. Along the way Jed fathers a son, Ephraim, namesake of the Biblical Joseph, who becomes “the joy of my heart” and whom Jed loves and clings to for emotional support (288). This bond is an even more important indication that Jed is investing, not in *eros* or wrong-loving, but *caritas*. The two focal points of his graduate course in Nashville—profane and sacred love—now begin to merge toward the value of redemptive love in his own life.

The next step initially appears to illustrate the Thomas Wolfe axiom that “you can’t go home again.” After his divorce from Dauphine, Jed attempts to temper his life by revisiting past haunts. First, he returns to Agnes’s grave in South Dakota, where he realizes, admittedly in self-pity, that there “was no place for me in that charmed circle around the infant that would never grow up” (350), then to Italy, where he reunites with some of his partisan comrades in order to “recover some old sense of meaning”—only to discover that Italy is no longer a “place to come to” either and that “whatever illusions I had started out with I had lost” (355-56). But while in Italy he accidentally and for one final time encounters Rozelle, now married to her third husband, the bogus Hindu swami “gentleman.” Without realizing the significance of her remark, Rozelle refers to the swami, touring the continent in his chauffeur-driven Rolls, as “oh-so-genteel.” She adds, “I am the female ornament,” an ornament “rigged out” in fancy clothes, desiring a king’s “emerald” (365). A piece of *gent* jewelry she surely is, but her swami lover is “genteel” only in the crudest slang and most corrupt sense of the term. Minutes later, despite Jed’s proclaiming that his “inner reality is [now] different” (367) because of his gradual spiritual transformation, Rozelle continues boasting of her past as the beautiful accomplice of Jed’s lovemaking. To emphasize her claim, Rozelle resorts to lines from

two French poems in what amounts to her sole use of literary allusion in the novel. First, she proudly proclaims, “*Ou sont les neiges d’antan*” [“Where are the snows of yesteryear?”] (367). The line is probably from François Villon’s “*Ballade des dames du temps jadis*” and, in the context of Villon’s poem, conjures up the desire for an earlier life of pristine physical beauty even though the faded beauty of now older and faded women resembles the slush of French winter streets.<sup>6</sup> Rozelle’s immediate follow-on utterance is a partial line meant to recall the Nashville woods she tromped through on her clandestine sojourns to rendezvous with Jed: “*les lauriers sont coupés*” [“the laurel leaves are cut down”] (367). In fact her half-line completes the unstated first half of the opening line from a poem, most likely by Théodore de Banville: “*Nous n’irons plus au bois*,” which translates as “We will no longer go to the woods.”<sup>7</sup> Nashville and its *gent* woods near Jed’s former abode are now gone forever. Ironically, Rozelle still craves those moments, but Jed steadfastly resists her seduction efforts and permanently breaks off their relationship. For Jed this decision represents temperance with a capital “T.”

Jed’s fourth and final step forward is his adoption of the virtue of justice and its religious counterpart, selfless charity. For Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, justice is the “greatest of virtues” (V.1), just as charity is the greatest one for St. Paul: both virtues address not only one’s self, but the goodness one willingly undertakes toward another person (*KJ*, 1 Corinthians 13:13). Upon receipt of a letter from his mother’s second husband, Perk Simms, which informs him of her death and summons him back to Dugton, Jed returns to Chicago via Paris and New York, where he meets Ephraim and joins him on a ten-day bonding campout in Ontario. Unlike Buck, Jed has been growing into a true father to his own son. He even toys with the idea of inviting Ephraim to accompany him to Elvira’s gravesite, but, as yet, lacks the “courage” (378) to do so. In making such a decision, Jed ignores the advice of Stephan Mostoski, Dauphine’s uncle and Jed’s newest and dearest confidante, a man of self-confidence and integrity. He has his feet squarely planted on *terra firma*, and, as such, is an exact foil to Stahlmann’s hollow *patria*. Mostoski is a symbolic hybrid of the Virgilian voice of reason and the Dantean voice of “contemplative vision,” the equivalent of the Saint Bernard of the last three Cantos of *Paradiso*, the guide who assumes Beatrice’s role and introduces the character Dante to the “Primal Love” (Canto XXXII, l. 142). A *gent* in the purest sense of the word, a brother in “solitude” to Jed who yet appreciates (like the author Dante) “that love is the poetry of substance and that poetry is the only language of value” (382), Mostoski suggests to Jed that he has violated a cardinal virtue and has done his son an “injustice” by not inviting him to go to Alabama. Jed’s new guide concludes his admonition with these words: “I can imagine [Ephraim] wanting to go with you—to see you—his father ... be reborn” (378), but the still obtuse Jed does not immediately return to Dugton and only does so when prompted by an experience which directly threatens his own life. Jed valiantly attempts to save an elderly woman from two purse-snatchers and almost gets knifed to death in the process. When Jed visits the mugged woman just before she dies of her own wounds, in her delirium she mistakes him for her deceased “Little Joseph” whom “she’d always known [would] come back to her” (388). This surrogate mother figure, speaking in her broken Italian, provides the experiential link between Jed the passive reader of Dante and Jed the active practitioner of justice who finally practices self-sacrifice to try to save another. The incident also provides the verbal and physical

impetus Jed needs to realize he must reconcile his links to Elvira and his own little Joseph, Ephraim.

After paying for the old woman's funeral, Jed returns to Claxton County to meet a *gentil* and Anchises-like stepfather who claims him "like a blood-kin son," lets him sleep in his "old bed," and reaffirms his mother's love for them both (390-91). Jed, in turn, visits Elvira's and Buck's graves in Heaven's Hope Graveyard and makes his peace with both. Subsequently he pens a letter to Dauphine begging for reconciliation, partly for Ephraim's sake, partly because "I ask for your company for what blessedness it is. But I also say that in it I may learn ... a little of what I need to know"; and then he envisions, after all, bringing Ephraim back to Dugton (401). So it turns out that Jed's real Beatrice has been his mother all along, who, as in *Paradiso*'s final Canto XXXIII, has been the one single "Living Light" who has transfigured their family into a perfect "circle" (ll. 109-35). Jed will no longer opt for what Randy Hendricks, in his recent book *Lonelier Than God*, refers to as an "surface reality" of superficiality in lieu of an "inner reality" of feeling and understanding.<sup>8</sup>

The redemptive value of love, so frequent a theme in Warren's novels, has at last spiritually awakened him as he resolves to be father to Ephraim and husband to Dauphine in imitation, not of his father, but his stepfather. In gaining self-knowledge and in coming "home" again to his own *terra* in both a literal and metaphorical sense, Jed has finally proven himself a candidate for Stahlmann's *sancta simplicitas*, has finally found his own place to come to, has in a sense been reborn, and has finally become more *gentil* than *gent*.



[Place these endnotes as footnotes on the appropriate pages.—Eds.]

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<sup>1</sup>Aucassin et Nicolette, Édition critique (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1984), 112.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Penn Warren, *A Place to Come To* (New York: Random House, 1977), 217. Subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>3</sup>Virgil, *Aeneid* (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1926), Book I. l. 462.

<sup>4</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, trans. W. D. Ross, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 1947), VII, Chapter 1, line 442.

<sup>5</sup>Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Everyman's Library, Knopf, 1995), ll. 49-54.

<sup>6</sup>François Villon, "Ballade des dames du temps jadis" (see <<http://www.poesie.webnet.fr/poemes/France/Villon/2.html>> 11/16/01), l. 8. The reference to Villon is from a link to *La Bibliothèque Nationale*. [François Villon *Oeuvres* (Genève: Slatkine Reprints, 1967); Volume 1 is the authoritative scholarly edition of Villon's poems]. In this edition, Villon's poem is listed with marginal brackets as [*B. des dames du temps jadis.*] and then headed with the term "Balade" and is part of Villon's longer *LE TESTAMENT* and numbered as ll. 329-356. Each of *Ballade's* four stanzas concludes with the verse: "Mais [But] ou sont les neiges d'antan?" (ll. 336, 344, 352, and 356).

<sup>7</sup>Théodore de Banville, "Nous n'irons plus au bois" (see <<http://mta.ca/faculty/arts-letters/frenspan/banville/edition/html>>, 11/16/01), l. 1. This web site accesses Théodore de Banville, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes Édition critique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1994-2001), 8 volumes. This particular Banville poem is in Volume II, published in 1996 and is included in Banville's *Les Stalactites*, edition established by Eileen Souffrin-Le Breton. The complete Banville line opens and closes the 10-line poem and the first half-line (and poem's title) also concludes l. 6. Further Internet research reveals that the line "Nous n'irons plus au bois, les lauriers sont coupés" also occurs in an anonymous ancient song for children, in George Sand's nineteenth-century prose work, *Histoire de Ma Vie*, and in Ivan Goll's mid-twentieth-century poem, "La Grande Misère de la France." However, the Banville poem, dated November 1845, is the most widely known and accessible reference.

<sup>8</sup>Randy Hendricks, *Lonelier Than God: Robert Penn Warren and the Southern Exile* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 176.

