Cass Mastern and the Awful Responsibility of Time

by Beekman W. Cottrell

It is an important fact about All the King’s Men that the major philosophical image of the novel, the Spider Web, comes directly from the journal of Cass Mastern which, almost verbatim, forms the bulk of Chapter IV. This unit of the past pervades and profoundly influences the life of Jack Burden, whose search for definition as a man in the twentieth century is as important to the novel as the more immediately dominant history of Willie Stark. The story of Cass radiates through All the King’s Men. It is only gradually that the reader comes to know how central it is as the source of Jack’s salvation and as a testament that Warren, like Faulkner, sees the past as the arbiter of the present.

But first let us see how the story of Cass Mastern becomes a part of the novel at all. Warren has so planned the story that we meet the principals as they approach crises and learn of their past histories in a series of memory flashbacks, through the eyes and words of Jack, our narrator and guide. Thus events are not chronologically arranged, and areas of the past come forward as they are useful to Jack in the telling of his story. Once we know about Willie Stark and his rise to the governorship and have become aware of Jack’s relationships, both spiritual and material, to the Boss, we are in a position to understand Burden’s reluctance to dig up scandal from his friend Judge Irwin’s past life. And yet to show us—the urge in Jack is both wryly sarcastic and proud—that he is a scholar with training in methods, perspective, and respect for the facts, Jack tells us about his first “excursion into the past”—and admits that it failed. We learn about Cass (a maternal uncle of Ellis Burden, the Scholarly Attorney), who lived during the Civil War and whose diaries and letters Jack

was using as the basis for a doctoral dissertation in American history. The Mastern papers tell about Cass’ life from its beginnings, but their focus is on his college years, his secret love affair with the wife of his best friend, and his death in a wartime hospital. Scattered references to Mastern appear throughout All the King’s Men, for Jack is continually aware of him, but as the novel progresses we learn why Jack first failed to complete his book, despite all the immediacy and intrinsic merit of Cass Mastern’s life story as material for a dissertation.

The Jack Burden who undertook a Ph.D. and decided to deal with the Mastern papers was in no sense fully alive to his world. He was uncommitted and even unaware that some kind of commitment was either desirable or necessary. A major psychological proof of this lack of contact with reality was to be found in his periods of Great Sleep. These were the soft blocks of unreality wherein Jack could hide and dream and avoid both the facts of existence and the necessary job of interpreting them. He found out that he could master the facts easily enough, but he subconsciously refused to understand that there were truths inherent in them.

There were several ways, however, in which Jack was perfectly prepared for the task of writing Cass Mastern’s life when he undertook it. The subject was, as he thought at the time, of familial concern; his love affair with Anne Stanton had come to an end because she saw that he had no goal, no direction, and little strength of character; and his work and aimless life as a newspaper reporter made the thought of settled study seem attractive. The prospect of an historical investigation, a neat job of recorded history, intrigued him, and the enterprise seemed fated once he had been sent the Mastern papers by a distant relative.

But Jack was not prepared to have the past take on greater reality than the present, nor was he prepared for a journal which began,

“...I was born...in a log cabin in north Georgia, in circumstances of poverty, and if in later years I have lain soft and have supped from silver, may the Lord not let die in my heart the knowledge of frost and of coarse diet. For all men come naked into the world, and in prosperity man is prone to evil as the sparks fly upward.” (p. 172)*

As Jack worked through the remarkable pages which followed, wrote up his notes, visited the house where Cass and Annabelle Trice had loved so passionately and so clandestinely and where her

*[Page references are to The Modern Library Edition of All the King’s Men, 1953. —Ed.]
husband had shot himself after he learned of their affair, he came to know very surely that this life, this history, was too strong for the abilities of at least one historical researcher. What stopped Jack was the fact that although Cass believed in love, he also believed in guilt and responsibility—"my single act of sin and perfidy" (p. 189).

It was Jack's first confrontation with the most important philosophical theme of All the King's Men: "... if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future" (p. 461). Cass wrote,

It was, instead, the fact that all of these things—the death of my friend, the betrayal of Phebe, the suffering and rage and great change of the woman I had loved—all had come from my single act of sin and perfidy, as the boughs from the bole and the leaves from the bough. Or to figure the matter differently, it was as though the vibration set up in the whole fabric of the world by my act had spread infinitely and with ever increasing power and no man could know the end. (p. 189)

At a considerable distance from his first contact with the idea, and once again working on the life of Cass, Jack can rephrase and elaborate the second image, which conveys Warren's theme and reveals Jack's own painfully developed philosophy of life.

Cass Mastern lived for a few years and in that time he learned that the world is all of one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils about you who have touched the web and then inject the black, numbing poison under your hide. It does not matter whether or not you meant to brush the web of things. Your happy foot or your gay wing may have brushed it ever so lightly, but what happens always happens and there is the spider, bearded black and with his great faceted eyes glittering like mirrors in the sun, or like God's eye, and the fangs dripping. (p. 200)

The Spider Web theory demands responsibility, and Jack only gradually learns to become responsible. At first he simply put aside the journals and boxed up the three-by-five cards. He moved, instead, toward his wife Lois, and into the oblivion of the Great Sleep. But gradually the lesson Cass holds out from the vital past begins to affect him; he comes to perceive the interresponsibility of things in the world at large. What is most difficult for him to accept is the fact that "it does not matter whether or not you meant to brush the web of things." The revelation of his paternity, the loss of Judge Irwin
and Willie and Adam by circumstantial tragedy, and the realization that he himself had been a factor in driving Anne to Willie Stark—all these injections of the black and numbing poison finally lead Jack to an understanding of truth in the Spider Web sense.

Basically it was the personal sense of responsibility in Cass Mastern which Jack had at first been unable to accept or even recognize. Cass did not brush the Spider Web voluntarily. Chance threw him in with Annabelle Trice, and the vibrations of the web began. Their intense affair was wrong—sinful—in every way and Cass knew it. His sense of guilt came quickly and had far-reaching consequences. The suicide of Duncan Trice was the greatest personal confirmation for Cass that he was guilty of mortal sin and must atone. Close after it came Annabelle’s revelation that she had sold the Negro slave Phebe down the Ohio River because “...she was still staring at me, and her eyes were gold...and bright and hard like gold. And I knew that she knew” (p. 186). What Phebe knew was that Duncan had removed his golden wedding ring, for the first time since marriage, before the suicide and left it under his pillow as a mute testament to his knowledge of Annabelle’s infidelity. She could not keep the ring, and gave it to Cass, who wore it always around his neck like a tiny albatross, to remind him of his sin. This indestructible evidence eventually comes, along with a photograph of Cass and the journals, to Jack Burden.

A hounding sense of guilt drove Cass to seek out Phebe, but in this he failed. After a quarrel of honor over the treatment of slaves, he lay gravely ill, willing death until he realized that such a wish was also a sin. Recovered, he prayed, read his Bible, prospered on the plantation, and freed his slaves. In so doing he extended his sense of personal responsibility from Phebe to all those in bondage. Still in an attempt to atone (but in addition, a convinced Abolitionist), Cass entered the Civil War as a private for the South though his brother Gilbert offered him a commission. He was determined to march with the men of his own heritage, and yet in his heart had decided not to use the rifle he carried even though it might save his life. Twice Cass met Jefferson Davis, the idealist whom practical, confident Gilbert Mastern ridiculed in these words, “What we want now they’ve got into this is not a good man but a man who can win, and I am not interested in the luxury of Mr. Davis’s conscience” (p. 197). Cass, admiring Davis, reflected, “Mr. Davis was a good man. But the world is full of good men...and yet the world drives hard into darkness and the blindness of blood” (pp. 197-198). In Davis he saw a
parallel for his own lonely choice. Both were committed to a course of action which they abhorred but which, as men aware of responsibility, they could not avoid.

Thus a love affair had progressively expanded to include the death of a friend, the question of enslavement, and finally, the engagement of a peaceful man in war. Cass Mastern had lost his life for a cause he could not in conscious support, and his journals dramatized the moral struggle for Jack Burden. Despite all its painfully acquired self-knowledge and the shift from personal guilt to collective responsibility, Cass' life seemed a failure to Jack. But the passionate convictions and the steps Cass took toward a responsible erasure of personal sin remained to be examined by an unmoored and drifting student of history. The lesson when first read was neither fully understood nor challenging enough to do anything but make Jack balk and run.

But Warren has seen to it that Cass' story will be understood, both by the reader and finally by Jack. It is unique in color, tone, and personal appeal; and the episode is effectively placed in All the King's Men so that its impact will be both intense and pervasive. In addition to the general first-person narrative, Warren offers another level, a yet more personal and vivid "I" in Cass Mastern, telling a story which is complete before the judgment of history. Further, the Mastern story has a sense of immediacy which stems from its very words, suddenly romantic, high-sounding, personal, and emotionally charged, and from a technique of direct quotation which invites participation in the drama. By means of Cass, Warren creates a past which brings both Jack and the reader up sharply. This past, so important to the philosophy of the novel, must seem valid, believable, and real. Both the shift in tone and Warren's mastery (again, like Faulkner's) of the Civil War period help to make the point.

To indicate their power, the events are told in a unit, as Jack learned them, and the reader then becomes aware how heavily this lump of history weighs upon Jack's conscious and subconscious mind. Cass' story is told before we know all of the contemporary events of the novel and thus reinforces a major thesis: the interdependence of past and present. All of the major plot revelations follow the Mastern episode in the time scheme of the novel, and the author can build on the bulk of current time, the strong events it offers, and a growing involvement on the part of the reader as Jack gradually absorbs the lessons of Cass' life. Coming as it does into the grey life of Jack the student, half-alive and uncommitted to any course of action, the story of Cass Mastern is patently one of the few
vivid aspects of his existence just then. His boyhood at Burden's Landing has taken on a dream-of-gold quality, there has been only a foretaste of Willie Stark's potential influence, and love has failed him. Cass Mastern's love affair with Annabelle stands for the kind of magnificent sexual fulfillment which he might have had with Anne. Thinking of the fateful frustration of a rainy evening, Jack comments dryly,

    So, I observed, my nobility (or whatever it was) had had in my world almost as dire a consequence as Cass Mastern's sin had had in his. Which may tell something about the two worlds. (p. 315)

Gradually, however, the worlds begin to join, as the events and decisions of Cass' life begin to pervade Jack's own. Neither the Great Sleep nor a complete change of occupation can dispel the haunting quality of Cass' words or the burning zeal in the eyes of the photograph. Since the maturing Jack is a man who thinks primarily in concrete images, his mind gradually seizes upon the vibrating web and works it into a very complete philosophical example. Thus the spider web as responsibility becomes for Jack a kind of opposite view to his earlier convictions, for which he also eventually finds an image in the Great Twitch, inspired by the hitchhiker he picks up on his drive east from California. Thoughts inspired by Cass are never far from Jack's mind. The image of a telegram—any telegram—half-shoved under any door, its contents unknown, brings to Jack's imagination the great all-seeing eye of the spider who looks "with his great faceted eyes glittering like mirrors in the sun, or like God's eye," watching the little man—any little man—who is caught in the web of unknown facts concealed within such a telegram. Jack loves to stop briefly in thought to generalize or sum up, and most often these generalizations are connected with Cass. Contrasting facts and truth he says, "So I walked out of a room, the room where the facts lived in a big box of three-by-five-inch note cards..." (p. 167), and carries the memory even further into the abstract with "...maybe you cannot ever really walk away from the things you want most to walk away from" (p. 48).

When Jack meets Willie he thinks of Cass' strong-willed brother, Gilbert, who was just as much a man of expedience and driving strength. He makes a parallel: "...perhaps the Gilbert Masterns are always at home in any world. As the Cass Masterns are never at home in any world" (p. 173). What Jack learned about Gilbert Mastern as compromiser and about Cass as idealist he applied to himself and to Adam Stanton. Much later, when he was able to see the life of
Mastern in perspective, he found parallels between Cass and himself, and contrasts between Annabelle and Anne Stanton. Later still, he thought of Trice and Cass as he pondered the love affair which Judge Irwin had carried on with his mother in the home of the Scholarly Attorney.

When Jack reads in the journals that Cass moved down the crowded road after his first Civil War battle "as in a dream" and felt that henceforward he would "live in that dream..." (p. 198), Jack thinks of his own dreamlike existence, a major segment of which followed his work with the Mastern papers. And after he has unearthed the scandal in Judge Irwin's life, consciously mindful of the slave Phebe's direct gaze which proclaimed full knowledge of Cass' sin, he writes with growing personal knowledge of the Spider Web: "And all times are one time, and all those dead in the past never lived before our definition gives them life, and out of the shadow their eyes implore us" (p. 242).

So much a part of him have the journals become that Jack even thinks of Cass when he is describing himself retrospectively as the boy Anne Stanton loved that summer by the bay:

She was in love with a rather tall, somewhat gangly, slightly stooped youth of twenty-one, with a bony horse face, a big almost askew hook of a nose, dark unkempt hair, dark eyes (not burning and deep like the eyes of Cass Mastern, but frequently vague or veiled, bloodshot in the mornings, brightening only with excitement), big hands that worked and twisted slowly on his lap, plucking at each other, and twisted big feet that were inclined to shamble... (p. 299)

But in spite of a growing realization that he must accept the past, and a constantly changing knowledge of the past he must absorb and adjust to, Jack's own unreal idealism persists in a roundabout way. He is not strong enough to accept full responsibility, as Cass was. To delay the inevitable self-test, he fixes on Adam Stanton, an unswerving idealist. He reveals to Adam and Anne the collusion of Governor Stanton in the Judge Irwin affair. Actually, this is a kind of self-punishment for his own position of uneasy compromise with Willie, given perversely to those he loves. He is testing the idealism of the White Knight to the utmost, almost driving Adam toward murder or violence. It is a subconscious desire to have Adam—whose brand of purity Jack still feels may be an answer to compromise—act for him, even against Willie. In the end this does happen, although by then Jack has tried desperately to hide the facts and thus bank Adam's idealistic fires.
Cass Mastern and the Awful Responsibility of Time

The truths for Jack in Cass Mastern's life become more persistently clear. Even in Willie, whose declarations once appeared so sure and so opposite to responsibility, Jack perceives glimpses of truth.

Now I had a new question to ask him: If he believed that you had to make the good out of the bad because there wasn't anything else to make it out of, why did he stir up such a fuss about keeping Tiny's hands off the Willie Stark Hospital? (p. 278)

This, and that uncertain wink, and Willie's dying words—together they begin to mean that a hidden layer of value and responsibility now and again showed through the rough surface material of Willie Stark.

So at the end of the novel Jack can return to Burden's Landing, the symbol of his youth, to accept a new past from the eyes of his gallant mother and to resume work on the story of Cass Mastern. Referring to Judge Irwin's will he writes: "But I still had the money, and so I am spending it to live on while I write the book I began years ago, the life of Cass Mastern, whom once I could not understand but whom, perhaps, I now may come to understand" (p. 463). Life has truly been motion toward knowledge for him. This new past is the same one he had considered "tainted and horrible" until he could begin to realize the truth in Willie's belief that goodness can only come out of badness "because there isn't anything else to make it out of." Rejecting badness entirely results in the death of an Adam Stanton, the withdrawal of a Lucy Stark, the mental wandering of an Ellis Burden. Accepting badness and necessary compromise can also result in the loss of a Willie Stark, but it cannot blot out his greatness. Such greatness was due, Jack comes to believe, in large part to a sense of personal responsibility about life—a responsibility which finally linked Willie, Judge Irwin, Anne Stanton, Sadie Burke, and Jack's mother. Once Jack can realize these individuals as responsible beings, dealing with good and evil as the circumstances permit or direct, willing to accept the results of the Spider Web's vibrations, he is ripe to join their company. Anne can now see in him the maturity and potential strength she had found first in her father, then in Adam, then in Willie. Jack's mother can be reconciled to a responsible life after a sacrifice which has led her son to a compassionate understanding of her. Jack learns that all are equally balanced, equally vulnerable, on the infinite Spider Web of God.

Perhaps the hardest task of all for Jack in his new maturity is the
acceptance of Ellis Burden. The care and consideration which he gives to the Scholarly Attorney surely confirm Anne’s full faith in her husband. And the old man, in heightened awareness after a long, numbing hiatus, proclaims in a final clarity before death, “The creation of man whom God in his foreknowledge knew doomed to sin was the awful index of God’s omnipotence” (p. 462). Jack adds, “I was not certain but that in my own way I did believe what he had said” (p. 463).

Cass Mastern’s life, the Spider Web as it demands accountability of each man, and the dramatic events of the novel all proclaim that the patterns of life are tragic. It is for Jack to decide what his attitude will be in the face of the evidence. Events themselves help him to choose. Finally, as one after another of his beloved friends is lost, it becomes really only a decision to face squarely the “convulsion of the world.”

In the particular context of All the King’s Men—or, indeed, in the particular context of life—such a mature vision is not easily attained or made convincing. But both Jack and the reader must understand the hard-won philosophy. As a vital and valid testament from another epoch where such a struggle took place, the story of Cass is both relevant and persuasive. The Civil War, in which brother fought against brother, offers a well-known and appropriate framework for a parable from another time to reinforce the lesson of the present. Cass, for Jack at least a kind of Cassandra, proclaims that men must accept the burden of intolerance and strife. Ironically, as in the Trojan War, the message first falls on barren soil. Only after the wreck of lives close to Jack can he understand the prophecy which lay before him. Only in an aftermath of self-knowledge and sorrowful loss can he begin to understand what Cass meant when he wrote from his death-bed, “I do not question the Justice of God, that others have suffered for my sin, for it may be that only by the suffering of the innocent does God affirm that men are brothers…” (p. 199).

Cass wrote of his own brother, “perhaps only a man like my brother Gilbert can in the midst of evil retain enough of innocence and strength to bear their eyes upon him and to do a little justice in the terms of the great injustice” (pp. 195-196). Jack, having known Willie Stark and his struggle to make good out of bad, can at length proclaim, with Lucy, that such a battle is greatness. The words “justice in the terms of the great injustice” furnish the major clue for the mature Jack, for the revitalized Lucy, and for the reader who wishes to understand Warren’s message aright.
With the help of Cass Mastern, Jack Burden learns the difficulty of coming to terms with the world, of achieving philosophical balance in any age. Cass, facing death in the wartime hospital (his final words to Gilbert were, "Remember me, but without grief. If one of us is lucky, it is I..."—p. 199), realized fully "the awful responsibility of time" as the arbiter of existence. Jack, profiting from both senses of the phrase, comes in time to realize this truth and to face his meaningful future in kinship with the past. If the earlier world seems more vivid than the present, this may tell us, as Jack suspects, something about the two worlds, and exemplify the terrible division of the greyer, flatter, and less creative age we live in, must understand, and must accept.