HUMPTY DUMPTY AND ALL THE KING'S MEN: 
A NOTE ON ROBERT PENN WARREN'S 
TELEOLOGY

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Since the Pulitzer Prize novel All the King's Men (1946) is coming to be recognized as the most comprehensive statement of Robert Penn Warren's philosophy and art,1 it might be worth while to remark upon a very general misconception regarding the title of the novel. Now, ordinarily, of course, a title is not a matter of any great significance, but in this case it is important because it constitutes a symbolic expression of some of the author's basic ideas. It is, in fact, a Pandora's box which opens up to reveal the profoundly spiritual nature of Warren's convictions about the broad themes of man and God; and once we have properly understood the title in its relation to the context of the novel, we shall be in a position to see exactly what the author intended when he remarked recently of All the King's Men: "The book . . . was never intended to be a book about politics. Politics merely provided the framework story in which the deeper concerns, whatever their final significance, might work themselves out."2

There are a number of reasons why Willie Stark cannot be "the King" in All the King's Men. There is, first, the nursery rhyme from which the title was derived: Willie is Humpty Dumpty, not "King." Like Humpty Dumpty, Willie "sat on a wall" when he rose to become governor and "had a great fall" when shot down by Adam Stanton. Willie is, like his legendary counterpart, a synthetic creation, a grotesque composite of the abstract needs of the people who have shaped him. As Warren has pointed out, Willie's "power was based on the fact that somehow he could vicariously fulfill the secret needs of the people about him."3 Hence the principal characters in All the King's Men, like Mr. Munn in Warren's Night Rider (1939), attempt to find themselves by merging their identities with another person. In Willie Stark
the people of the state satisfy their craving for justice—hence Willie’s easy political slogan “Your need is my justice”—while to the narrator, Jack Burden, Willie fulfills Jack’s need of a father, his need of the purpose and direction and decisive authority which have been lacking in his aimless life. To Adam Stanton, “the man of idea” who eventually destroys him, Willie represents the concrete power to accomplish the idealistic, humanitarian good which Adam has dedicated his whole life to achieve. In short, it is an obvious truism to say that to Sadie Burke, to Anne Stanton—to virtually every character in the novel—Willie Stark represents the fulfillment of some secret compulsion, some indigenous shortcoming or incompleteness, and in this sense, most of all, Willie is Humpty Dumpty—an artificial composite of the needs inherent in the society which has created him. After Willie’s assassination Tiny Duffy performs the futile ritual of attempting to put Humpty Dumpty “back together again” when he seeks to employ Jack Burden, Sadie Burke, and Sugar Boy, Willie Stark’s political aides.

But if Willie Stark is Humpty Dumpty, who then is king? In view of the nursery rhyme it is difficult to see how Willie can be Humpty Dumpty and king, too. Part of a solution to our problem is to be found in Warren’s introduction to the Modern Library Edition, where he states that in All the King’s Men he tried “to avoid writing a straight naturalistic novel, the kind of novel the material so readily invited.” By the phrase “straight naturalistic novel” Warren apparently intended the bleakly deterministic and materialistic novel which portrays its characters as being merely biological organisms attracted and repelled by hereditary or environmental forces over which they have no control. As we shall see, the “material” of All the King’s Men “readily invited” a novel of this description, for there is a temptation to think of Willie Stark as an ineluctable demi-urge riding the beast of the people to their moral collapse while the rider himself is pulled to destruction by a gloomy necessity. And yet one of Warren’s main problems in writing All the King’s Men was, I think, to avoid any implications of determinism, to establish a sure balance between the fact of Willie’s diabolic attraction for others and the fact of their free wills; for it was essential to Warren’s moral purpose, to his whole concept of man, that his characters exercise free will, that Willie Stark remain, after all, only Humpty Dumpty and not king—not Necessity, not God. In Warren’s teleology only God is King, and we are all of us “all the King’s men.”

God is not only King but absolute monarch informing every moment of life with His purposive Will, and this predestination, which under Warren’s hand becomes something quite different from determinism of a theological order, is “the material” that “readily invited” what Warren calls “the straight naturalistic novel,” the novel which, in the tradition of Zola and Crane and Dreiser, is informed by biological necessitarianism and psychological behaviorism. This naturalistic tradition is emphatically repudiated in All the King’s Men when determinism, a chief characteristic of “the straight naturalistic novel,” is sardonically labeled “The Big Twitch” by Jack Burden, who abjures it as totally inadequate to explain the events that take place in the story. The philosophy Jack Burden does come to accept, however, is one which has to do with the enigmatic paradox of Christianity—the omnipotence of God and the moral
responsibility of man. And if at the end of the novelJack’s acceptance of this view of life is not without some reservations, we must remember that the paradox is baffling, is one that derives not from a spontaneous rational acquiescence but from a hard discipline of faith.

If omnipotent God has power over everything, how can man be said to have responsibility for anything? All the King’s Men confronts this question cautiously, with a full cognizance of the critical tensions created by Darwin, Marx, Freud, and the holocaust of two world wars. From these spirit-shattering, enervating experiences, we must preserve, Warren tells us, what is most distinctive, significant and compelling about man, his consciousness and spirituality. According to Warren, man has moral choice, lives in an “agony of will,” but, paradoxically, he has no choice, no power whatever, in the consequences of his moral life. To put it another way, in Original Sin—which looms darkly in the background of all Warren’s novels from Night Rider to Band of Angels—Adam and Eve devoured a fruit of agony when they ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, for in that fatal act they took upon themselves the knowledge of what was right and wrong, and consequently the responsibility for their actions; but they were denied the divinity which Satan had promised them, the power to transcend time and perceive, as God perceives, the ultimate consequences of good and evil. (In Milton’s Paradise Lost, for example, a travesty on those supernal powers promised to Adam and Eve by Satan is implicit when Michael comes to inform them of the Atonement, of the real consequences of the Fall which only God can know.)

Ironically, then, the Fall simultaneously gave man moral vision and struck him blind: it gave him an immediate, a priori knowledge of good and evil as it related to any moral decision, to any incoherent fact, but it left him blind to the ultimate purpose or direction or consequences of the fact. As an individual, he is the master of his soul in a moment of crucial moral decision; as a species, he is a pawn in a cosmic game the ultimate meaning or purpose of which he can never know. In All the King’s Men Hugh Miller expresses the human viewpoint, indeed the only view man has capacity for, when he remarks at the end of the novel that “History is blind, but man is not.”

This concept of history as a fleeting montage of seemingly purposeless causes and effects, of good and evil events so complex and confoundingly intermingled that man cannot perceive the ultimate good or evil of anything, is profoundly confirmed in All the King’s Men. Several years before the story of Willie Stark unfolds, Judge Irwin accepted a bribe which Irwin’s friend Jack Burden uncovers in one of his investigations as Willie Stark’s research man. This bribe, a completely voluntary act, sets off a chain reaction of mediate causes and effects. First, her discovery that her father concealed Irwin’s crime so disillusioned Anne Stanton that she becomes Willie Stark’s mistress, while her brother Adam so modifies his militant idealism that he agrees to accept Willie’s offer of the directorship of the Willie Stark Memorial Hospital. When Adam learns of Anne’s affair, he assassinates Willie. But Irwin’s bribe has even more far-reaching consequences. Jack’s discovery of the bribe leads to Irwin’s suicide, to Jack’s realization that Irwin is his real father, to a reconciliation of Jack and his estranged mother. Was Judge Irwin’s crime an evil? Although Warren is neither a weak-headed immor-
alist nor a sentimental relativist, his answer remains ambiguous. For his crime Irwin suffers guilt, repentance, absolution by atonement, just as do the other characters, whose particular crimes have been the indirect result of Irwin's: Jack Burden for uncovering Irwin's bribe, Anne Stanton for her adulterous relationship with Willie, Sadie Burke for her malicious jealousy of Anne and betrayal of Willie, and Lucy Stark for her pride of virtue and weakness of mind. Irwin's crime is evil because it results in the destruction of Willie, of Adam, of Irwin himself, and yet it has the undeniably good effects of saving Mrs. Burden's soul, of uniting her with her son, of bringing together Anne and Jack, and finally—if the reader chooses to remain skeptical of Willie's deathbed assurance that "things might have been different"—of freeing the people of the state from the grip of an unscrupulous demagogue. Hence Judge Irwin's crime and its results confirm what Jack Burden describes as the "moral neutrality of history." As an isolated, incoherent fact it is evil, but as a part of history, as one stitch in a complex, variegated tapestry, it has shades of both good and evil.

Willie Stark expresses a profound truth when he insists throughout the novel that good must come from evil because "evil is all you have to work with," while Adam Stanton, the more conventionally "noble" of the two, lives a dangerous error when he arbitrarily separates people and events into moral categories. The point is made by Jack Burden at the conclusion of the story: "As a student of history, Jack Burden could see that Adam Stanton, whom he came to call the man of idea, and Willie Stark, whom he came to call the man of fact, were doomed to destroy each other, just as each was doomed to try to use the other and to yearn toward and try to become the other, because each was incomplete with the terrible division of their age." Willie brings about his own destruction when he tries to be like Adam, when, like "the man of idea" that he is not, he sets out to create something which is completely devoid of evil. Inconsistent with his own philosophy that any good there is must come from evil, Willie dreams of building a magnificent hospital that will stand as the purely good achievement of his political administration, and yet, unknown to Willie, the hospital is tainted by evil in the moment of its conception, for the idea of the hospital is really the result of Willie's unconscious effort to compensate for the guilt he feels in protecting from prosecution his corrupt state auditor, Bryam B. White. The hospital becomes an instrument of Willie's downfall when he refuses to permit the venal Gummy Larson from having the contract to construct it, when he refuses, in other words, to allow the good he dreams of achieving to be contaminated by evil, and this refusal prompts Tiny Duffy to inform Adam of Willie's affair with Anne. In shooting Willie Stark, Adam becomes himself "the man of fact," acknowledging Willie's dictum that the end justifies the means, but more than that, he proclaims by his act that he has God's knowledge, a final knowledge of good and evil. In his arrogant effort to usurp divinity, Adam repeats the folly of the Fall.

The fact that Willie's hospital is never built underscores man's tragic limitations. Confined to a tenuous reality of isolated facts, hemmed in by illusory absolutes of good and evil, man cannot perceive the transcendent reality, the ultimate moral purpose and direction of life. Willie, "the man of fact," thinks he knows how things really are, and Adam Stanton, "the man of idea," thinks he knows
how things ought to be, but both are incomplete, both presumptuous. So man lives on one moral level of reality, where he suffers an "agony of will," of personal responsibility, and God exists on another, the level of "history" or "direction," a level unknown to man, who yearns toward the fulfillment of some ideal good which in the "moral neutrality of history" has no objective existence. On God's level, good and evil are not as inseparable as man persists in making them. What man conceives as a completed moral action is, in God's omniscient comprehension, merely another phase in man's continuous struggle to create some good in a fallen world he only faintly understands. Warren's concept of man as a fallen, debased, limited, and therefore heroic, creature working out moral decisions in an "agony of will" yet oblivious to the eventual good or evil of those decisions is one which recalls St. Augustine and medieval nominalists like Duns Scotus (the analogues of Warren's Puritanism), who stressed God's awful power and mystery, and man's irrationality and impotence. Like these medieval nominalists who reacted against the liberal rationalism of the Scholastics, Warren has repudiated the optimistic rationalism of the liberal reformers, just as he has repudiated their scientism and materialism—what Jack Burden refers to as "the dream of our age."

In All the King's Men man finds solace not in the liberal experience, not in the nineteenth-century dream of power through reason, but in the more ancient Christian experience of humility, repentance and hope; for Warren sees this world as a Dantesque purgatory where man works out his salvation by a process of transgression, acknowledgement of guilt, and contrition. Every character in All the King's Men who is worth saving eventually submits to this tortuous ritual of life: Cass Mastern, Judge Irwin, Willie Stark, Jack Burden, Mrs. Burden, Sadie Burke, and Anne Stanton. Tiny Duffy, like his friend Gummy Larson, is a mere shade, an abstraction, while Adam Stanton, paradoxically the "noblest" character in the novel, is, by the fact of his fierce and insistent pride in virtue, quite beyond all hope of redemption. For the remainder of the characters in All the King's Men, however, the epigraph to the novel applies. Appropriately, the epigraph to All the King's Men is Manfred's tortured cry of hope in Canto III of Dante's Purgatorio: "Mentre che la speranze ha fior del verde."

As if to turn back at the end of the novel to interpret his story, Warren spells out these ideas about God and man in a religious tract dictated to Jack by Ellis Burden:

The creation of man whom God in His foreknowledge knew doomed to sin was an awful index of God's omnipotence. For it would have been a thing of trifling and contemptible ease for Perfection to create mere perfection. To do so would, to speak truth, be not creation but extension. Separateness is identity and the only way for God to create, truly create, man was to make him separate from God Himself, and to be separate from God is to be sinful. The creation of evil is therefore the index of God's glory and His power. But by His help. By His help and in His wisdom.

Jack Burden tentatively concurs in Ellis Burden's credo. "I did so to keep his mind untroubled," he says, "but later I was not certain that in my own way I did not believe what he had said." Jack's statement, although not an unqualified affirmation, is nevertheless a long step away from his earlier cynicism and philosophical de-
terminism. It signifies a gradual awakening of Jack's spirituality, the beginning of an unconscious application of Cass Mastern's story to his own tragic experience in life. In his diary, which Jack had studied but could not understand until his own experiences confirmed its views, Cass Mastern had written: "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 in His Holy Name" (p. 199). Cass Mastern sees the world as a vast spider web of intersecting lives:

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. (Italics mine, p. 200.)

Because the Cass Mastern episode was printed as an independent story before the publication of *All the King's Men*, some critics have been quick to regard it as an extraneous feature, a brilliant but irrelevant tour de force, and yet, as Eric Bentley has pointed out, it is really Warren's effort to "put the whole theme of a work into one short and strongly symbolic interlude." It supplies not only an inverted contrast to Jack's own story, a contrast between a crime of commission and one of omission, but plainly underlines the dominant themes of the omnipotence of God, and the utter helplessness and brotherhood of men. Cass Mastern tripped the gossamer threads of the spider web when he seduced his best friend's wife; Judge Irwin when he accepted the bribe; Willie Stark when he refrained from prosecuting Bryam B. White; and Jack Burden when he revealed the truth about Irwin. That Jack comes to accept Cass Mastern's view of the world is suggested when he observes toward the end of the story that "each of us is the son of a million fathers" (p. 462). But more pointedly, when Jack, who has always been lashed by a compulsion to seek and reveal the truth, tells his mother an outright lie rather than impart to her the cause of Irwin's suicide, and when he lies to Sugar Boy rather than name the man who was indirectly responsible for Willie Stark's death. On both occasions Jack's prevarication, like Marlow's lie to Kurtz's Intended in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, is an honest man's acknowledgement and atonement. Now sharing Cass Mastern's vision of the world as a web of humanity, Jack dares not assume responsibility for awakening the drowsy spider. He has come to see the brotherhood of men and the universality of guilt.

To assume, then, that Willie Stark is "the King" in *All the King's Men* is to ignore the meaningful symbolism of the title, to lose sight of Warren's basic idea. As I have attempted to show, *All the King's Men* portrays a world which Willie could not have ruled; for in that world of Warren's thoughtful creation there is but one King and we are all of us "all the King's men." From first to last, Willie Stark is but Humpty Dumpty, whose fall is a form of triumph for those who survive him. As Ellis Burden states in another context, "Separateness is identity," and with the death of Willie those who involved their identities in him must find completion within themselves or not at all. As in any great tragedy, there is loss, there is gain: they have lost Willie but have gained the power to find themselves. It may not be a coincidence, therefore, that the conclusion to *All the King's Men* is reminiscent of the ending to another great tragedy as Jack Burden and Anne Stanton,
like Adam and Eve departing from the Garden after the Fall, prepare to leave Burden's Landing forever to "go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time."

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2Introduction, All the King's Men (Modern Library, 1953), vi. All quotations are from this edition.

3Ibid., i.

4Page 462. In a recent article ("The Failure of Robert Penn Warren," College English, XXVIII [April, 1957], 359), Norman Kelvin argues that there is no basis for Warren's distinction between Willie as "the man of fact" and Adam Stanton as "the man of idea": "The Willy [sic] Stark we met in the novel was as much a man of ideas as was the puritanical, compulsive Dr. Stanton. They merely held to different ideas, and while some of Willy's were outrageous, so were some of Adam's." But this appears to be a very literal reading of what, after all, is only a pair of arbitrary metaphors. It matters not, really, what phrases Warren employs to describe Willie and Adam so long as we recognize his meaning.

5In a very interesting article ("The Meaning of Robert Penn Warren's Novels," Kenyon Review, X [Summer, 1948], 417), Eric Bentley describes Warren as "utterly empirical." This is of course true; nevertheless, Professor Bentley does not appear to be sufficiently aware of how in Warren's novels the facts of experience and Christian orthodoxy coalesce. Of how, in other words, empiricism confirms Warren's essentially Christian philosophy of life.

6Page 462. I am not suggesting that Ellis Burden is a mouthpiece through which Warren expresses his views, nor that this religious tract is a violation of the novel's dramatic integrity. Ellis Burden is a fully developed, integrated character, and his tract does have a certain dramatic inevitability. Nevertheless, Ellis Burden, and to a less extent perhaps, Hugh Miller, function in a way reminiscent of a Sophoclean chorus: they may have their etiology in Warren's pseudo-Greek drama Proud Flesh, which, written in 1938, was the germinal beginning of All the King's Men.

7"The Meaning of Robert Penn Warren's Novels," 415-16. It ought to be mentioned, however, that the Cass Mastern episode is not completely successful. For one thing, it invites comparison with the adulterous relationship between Irwin and Mrs. Burden rather than with the Platonic romance of Jack and Anne. Hence at the end of the novel Warren felt it necessary to have Jack Burden point out that Judge Irwin bears no resemblance to Cass Mastern: "For Judge Irwin and Cass Mastern do not resemble each other very closely. If Judge Irwin resembles any Mastern it is Gilbert, the granite-headed brother of Cass." (p. 464).