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All the King's Men

... I have a story. It is the story of a man who lived in the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and very different way. The change did not happen all at once. Many things happened, and that man did not know when he had any responsibility for them and when he did not. There was, in fact, a time when he came to believe that nobody had any responsibility for anything.... But later, much later, he woke up.¹

Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men is primarily a novel of one man's search for self-realization, culminating in the development of his moral awareness and his acceptance of individual responsibility. Jack Burden, the narrator, stumbles through his life, searching for Truth, the discovery of which he hopes will explain why people are as they are and act as they do. He is a product of the "terrible division of the age," torn by the conflict between what the world appears to be and what he wants it to be, between experience and innocence, between action and idea. He rejects the doctrine of original sin embraced by his employer, Governor Willie Stark, yet, finding himself thrust into the midst of political corruption and violence, he is too perceptive to deny the existence of evil altogether. Attempting to seek solace in such abstract theories as idealism and mechanistic determination, he remains unsatisfied. The novel is a search into the true nature of man and evil; and the prefrontal lobectomy operation is strategically placed so as to provide specific insight into Jack's dilemma.

Adam's operation is significant for several reasons. On one level Warren clearly intends an analogy between Jack Burden and the anesthetized patient who in a very real sense is Jack's double, a grotesque reflection of certain crucial aspects of his own character. By forcing the confrontation, Warren in a brilliant stroke achieves a parody of portions of the novel's larger action, recapturing in symbolic form Jack's life and attitudes while simultaneously offering implicit criticism of that life and those attitudes. Jack's encounter with the catatonic schizophrenic is then an encounter with himself, and his failure to see himself and his plight in the condition of the patient becomes a measure of that same plight and his own self-willed blindness. Warren further utilizes the scene to illuminate the meaning of Jack's flight west and the subsequent adoption of the mechanistic theory of the Great Twitch. And, finally, by its very nature the operation stands as a symbolic representation of the theme of division so pervasive throughout the book and, in retrospect, may be viewed as one step toward the resolution of this conflict. I shall now deal with each of these points individually.

1

Adam's patient is suffering from catatonic schizophrenia, the symptoms of which are a typical pattern of gradual withdrawal from reality, the sudden loss of animation, a tendency to remain motionless for long periods of time, some degree of emotional apathy, and periods of stupor alternating with those of intense activity. As Adam puts it to Jack: "The way he is now he simply sits on a chair or lies on his back on a bed and stares into space. His brow is creased or furrowed. Occasionally he utters a low moan or an exclamation. In some cases we discover the presence of delusions of persecution. But always the patient seems to experience a numbing, grinding misery" (p. 336).

Jack displays these symptoms of catatonia throughout the novel. The most pronounced is his persistent withdrawal, real or imagined, from his immediate environment. Much earlier he had observed that "The world was full of things I didn't want to know" (p. 151) and imaged this
condition in terms of a "clammy, sad little foetus you carry around inside yourself... its eyes are blind, and it shivers cold inside you for it... wants to lie in the dark and not know, and be warm in its not-knowing" (pp. 11-12). Here Jack's comfort lies in his nonbeing, his impersonality, his complete disassociation from people. And later, shortly before he learns of Anne Stanton's affair with Willie Stark, Jack looks out from his office window and down into a nearby grove of trees and wishes himself "inside that hollow inner chamber, in the aqueous green light, inside the great globe of the tree, and not even a jay-bird in there with me now... and no chance of seeing anything beyond the green leaves" (p. 281).

The physical manifestations of these various impulses of retreat and withdrawal are Jack's four periods of the Great Sleep, a near-catatonic state in which lethargy dominates a large portion of his time:

Lots of nights I would go to bed early, too. Sometimes sleep gets to be a serious and complete thing. You stop going to sleep in order that you may be able to get up, but get up in order that you may be able to go back to sleep... you are aware of it every minute you are asleep, as though you were having a long dream of sleep itself, and in that sleep you were dreaming of sleep, sleeping and dreaming of sleep infinitely inward into the center. (p. 107)

The Great Sleep, an integrated part of Jack's personality, has overtaken him at four separate times in his life: upon the completion of his dissertation on Cass Mastern, the disintegration of his marriage with Lois, his resignation from his job as a newspaper reporter, and finally his realization of Anne Stanton's affair with the Governor. In each instance Jack makes a strategic retreat into the security of a dreamless sleep away from those periodic intervals of tremendous personal stress too painful for him to confront. And each time he lapses into this womb-like state of not-knowing, becoming completely withdrawn and refusing to acknowledge both other people and himself, his condition is similar to catatonia.

Significantly, Adam performs his operation shortly after Jack's return from the West Coast and his most recent bout with the Great Sleep. Adam's explanation of the typical behavioral patterns of the catatonic schizophrenic stands as a remarkable summary of Jack's experience in California. There he had withdrawn into a Long Beach hotel room and slept for thirty-six hours. He also had his hallucinations: "as soon as I shut my eyes to go to sleep the whole hot and heaving continent would begin charging at me out of the dark" (p. 287). Adam's patient "lies on his back on a bed and stares into space" (p. 336); and Jack in his hotel room "lay on the bed, with my light off, watching the neon sign across the street flare on and off again to the time of my heartbeat" (p. 287). He, too, has his "delusions of persecution," seeing Anne's affair as a "betrayal" and deciding that she had never loved him in the first place, but only "had a mysterious itch in the blood and he was handy and the word love was a word for the mysterious itch" (pp. 327-28). Furthermore, like the catatonic schizophrenic, he experiences a "numbing, grinding misery." As Jack puts it: "Then I didn't feel anything. I didn't even feel sorry for myself. I felt as wooden as a wooden Indian" (p. 284). And finally those thirty-six hours of immobility and stasis are sandwiched in between the frenzied, excited drives to and from the West Coast, times of extreme motion; again this sudden fluctuation between extreme stasis and extreme activity is symptomatic of the catatonic schizophrenic.

II

The character of Jack Burden in the passage treating the lobectomy operation is consistent with the Jack Burden we have come to know from the beginning. He is the newspaper reporter: the detached, curious, distant, and accurate observer of events, the aloof commentator who falls back on his flippant and sarcastic wit to maintain the distance and keep himself uninvolved. His impulsive curiosity—"I felt all of a sudden that I had to see it. I had never seen an operation" (p. 336)—manifests itself throughout the novel. This "plain curiosity," reflected in his interest in Cass Mastern and all his various "digging" jobs for Willie Stark, is always exclusive of himself; he remains uninvolved, and his curiosity excludes any situation or person which obviously threatens introspection.

However, this is also the Jack who has just returned from his flight to the West with a new concept of the "Truth"—a theory of mechanistic determination that he calls "The Great Twitch," or the accident of circumstance. This is his "secret.
knowledge,” his “mystic vision,” that allows him to feel “clean and free” (p. 334). Jack’s symbol of the Great Twitch, reducing, as it does, all actions to independent phenomena, unrelated in any way to any other phenomena in the world, is the extreme antithesis of Cass Mastern’s image of the cobweb, denoting interdependence and interresponsibility, so that “if you touch it, however lightly at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter” (p. 200).

Such a philosophy, of course, serves the immediate function of releasing Jack from the mixed emotions of guilt and love, his growing awareness of his own complicity in the affair of Anne Stanton and Willie Stark. It enables him to escape the confrontation with himself and the growing sense of guilt over Anne’s seduction: “somehow by an obscure and necessary logic I had handed her over to him. That fact was too horrible to face, for it robbed me of something out of the past. . . . So I fled west from the fact, and in the West . . . I had discovered the dream” (p. 329). Thus, Jack’s trip to Long Beach and his subsequent theory of the Great Twitch are, in actual fact, merely other escape mechanisms and the new “vision” a more sophisticated form of the Great Sleep.

Jack’s new interest in the lobectomy and his narration of the operation reflect his new vision. The lobectomy in one sense stands as the perfect demonstration of his theory of the Great Twitch, offering as it does the means of radically changing a man’s personality by mechanical means; indeed, it is a test of that theory which holds man to be merely “a complicated piece of mechanism” and, by extension, conceives of the human personality as something existing in a dimension where it can be directly altered by “an electric curling iron.” Thus, for Jack at this point every aspect of man, including his personality, exists on the same plane of being; that is, the “cutting” of the personality is not to be considered as anything really different from the removal of a gallstone (or a ball bearing). Furthermore, his description of the operation in terms of the disassembly and reassembly of a complicated machine reflects precisely the fundamental ramifications of the theory of the Great Twitch. Adam works with “a contraption like a brace and bit,” and then a “Gigli saw” in order to get through the skull to “the real mechanism inside.” It is all “high-grade carpenter work,” Jack concludes from his vantage point in the pit, and he easily forgets that “the thing on the table was a man” (p. 337).

Various details of the operation suggest Jack’s own conversion, which was also traumatic and sudden, and from which he emerged an advocate of the “secret knowledge” of the Great Twitch. The doctors work in “white nightshirts” over the anesthetized patient, recalling Jack on his West Coast hotel bed drowsy with sleep and Scotch. They drill a series of “burr holes” in the man’s skull; and earlier Jack lay on his bed “with an electric fan burring and burrowing away into my brain” (p. 335). In effect, during his thirty-six hours in California and his espousal of the philosophy of the Great Twitch, Jack has experienced a symbolic lobectomy. And certainly Adam’s diagnosis of the positive effects of the operation are an effective description of Jack after his trip: after a successful lobectomy the patient would be “relaxed and cheerful and friendly. He will smooth his brow. He will sleep well and eat well and will love to hang over the back fence and compliment the neighbors on their nasturtiums and cabbages. He will be perfectly happy” (p. 336). After Jack’s “cure,” he finds his depression eased and returns from Long Beach in “good spirits,” coolly complacent in his new knowledge of the Great Twitch. He is more relaxed, cheerful, and friendly than on the trip out, picking up the hitchhiker in New Mexico on his way back, mixing sociably with the people in Stark’s office (smiling “benignly like a priest”), and is, in short, “perfectly happy.” But his contentment and his relationships with other people are, like those of the patient, unnatural and superficial. The patient’s felicity and gregariousness are products of another’s man’s skill, artificially induced, and empty of all emotional involvement. Similarly, Jack’s “happiness” and socializing are based on a denial of empathy and a stiff suppression of all emotions. He has accepted the notion that relationships are dangerous when they become too emotionally involved. The pain he received from Anne resulted because he allowed her to get too close to him; he let her affect him as a person. To assure that no one will ever hurt him again, Jack disengages himself from all meaningful personal relationships, seeking a state of “invulnerability.”

Jack’s theory of mechanistic determination effectively increases his distance and remoteness from people through a process of dehumanization,
that is, by seeing people and their actions in terms of random impulses of electricity throbbing through the muscle tissue, as sequences of mindless, meaningless, unrelated stimuli that provide an automatic response. This aspect is clearly reflected in the machine imagery used by Jack in his narration of the operation. The result of treating people as machines (precisely what the Great Twitch theory does) is identical to that of his symbolic catatonia. Both attitudes induce impersonality and noninvolvement and thus serve to negate Jack's chances for the realization of his total personality through a meaningful social relationship. His statement that "the man there on the table didn't seem real. I forgot that he was a man at all, and kept watching the high-grade carpenter work" (p. 337) suggests an attitude toward others little different from that displayed earlier in his account of his marriage to Lois, a relationship described, significantly, in similar terms. There, too, he tried to separate Lois the person from Lois the machine, and have a relationship only with the latter, assuring himself of an impersonal, dehumanized involvement and keeping himself aloof and invulnerable. "As long as I regarded Lois as a beautiful, juicy, soft, vibrant, sweet-smelling, sweet-breathed machine for provoking and satisfying the appetite (and that was the Lois I had married), all was well" (pp. 321–22). But when he began to think of her as a human being, conflict set in, and Jack found his comfortable seclusion compromised. His response was the catatonic Great Sleep and eventual flight, foreshadowing his later reaction to the discovery of Anne's affair with Stark:

"It was bracing because after the dream I felt that, in a way, Anne Stanton did not exist. The words Anne Stanton were simply a name for a peculiarly complicated piece of mechanism which should mean nothing whatsoever to Jack Burden, when he murmurs to her, "'My dear, my dear,' . . . Then as I seized her hands pressed around the glass, the words wrenched out of me, 'Oh, Anne, why did you do it?'" (pp. 344–45). And with this initial admission that Anne is much more to him than a mere piece of machinery comes the first tentative and halting acceptance of his own guilt in the matter, something that moves him still farther away from his California vision that negated all sense of individual responsibility and thus abolished guilt. "I knew why she had done it. The answer was in all the years before, and the things in them and not in them. The answer was in me, for I had told her" (p. 345).

One salient idea here is that of self-definition in terms of others. Jack's major fear is that of self-knowledge; his disassociation from others is, in effect, an escape from himself.

They say you are not you except in terms of relation to other people. If there weren't any other people there wouldn't be any you because what you do, which is what you are, only has meaning in relation to other people. That is a very comforting thought when you are in a car in the rain at night alone, for then you aren't you, and not being you or anything, you can really lie back and get some rest. It is a vacation from being you. (pp. 136–37)

Implicit in the above meditations is the idea of Jack as a product of "the terrible division of the age" (p. 462), reflecting that division constantly, not only in his "family reunions" with his other self (p. 137), but also in his pronounced tendency to view others as divided and disintegrated individuals.

Jack's continual flight from involvement is then, finally, a flight from himself and self-knowledge. From his fear of self-awareness he dehumanizes others, and thus, in effect, dehumanizes himself. Jack holds himself back from viewing the patient on the operating table as a human being because, should he do so, he would then be forced to view himself in the same light, and this would necessitate coming to terms with himself. In the opening pages of the novel Jack had voiced the fear that he enacts in the operating room: "The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing he can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him" (p. 12). Throughout Jack lacks the courage to take that chance. Therefore, years
before he had dropped his investigation into the history of Cass Mastern when he realized that implications could be drawn and applied to himself.

As long as Jack remains coldly detached, clinically analyzing the proceedings in the operating room, his mechanistic theory prevails. However, he finds himself unable to maintain the desired distance throughout the entire operation:

I did fine until they started the burning... At first it wasn’t so bad, but then I knew where I had smelled an odor like that before. It was the night, long back when I was a kid, when the old livery stable had burned down at the Landing, and they hadn’t managed to get all the horses out... As soon as I realized that the burning brain had a smell like the burning horses, I didn’t feel good. (pp. 337-38)

This reaction is significant for two reasons. It foreshadows Jack’s eventual dissatisfaction with the mechanistic theory of the Great Twitch by demonstrating his response to the sudden realization that the brain and the man are alive. Significantly, the response is an emotional one, and, like that aroused by Anne a short time later, contradicts the code of the Great Twitch. Secondly, it is appropriate that it is a childhood memory that thwarts the theory, for Jack is a man haunted by the past to such an extent that he is incapable of acting in the present or planning for the future. At this point he is aware of the past but paralyzed by it, unable to understand or accept it. It is highly appropriate, then, that an event from out of the past should intrude upon and interfere with the present philosophy, which is in itself a negation of the past and its influence on the present.

For Jack, ultimate participation in the present and the opportunity for a full and rich life come only when he achieves a reconciliation with the past. His reaction to the childhood memory of the livery stable suggests what this acceptance of the past entails. At this point he is aware of the past but paralyzed by it, unable to understand or accept it. It is highly appropriate, then, that an event from out of the past should intrude upon and interfere with the present philosophy, which is in itself a negation of the past and its influence on the present.

For Jack, ultimate participation in the present and the opportunity for a full and rich life come only when he achieves a reconciliation with the past. His reaction to the childhood memory of the livery stable suggests what this acceptance of the past entails. At this point, he is unable to cope with the past, here the fire, for several reasons. There is a subconscious sense of guilt on his part over his inability to help the horses after he had sensed a feeling of responsibility toward them. He feels guilty as he recalls “the shrieks that horses had made” because he had failed to act independently and rescue them. In order for Jack to accept the past, he must recognize that he is a member of a large, unified family (the meaning of Cass Mastern’s vision of the cobweb). As a child and during the operation, he is unable to identify his relationship and responsibility to the horses. As a man, Jack must confront the fact that he is a part of a family and must actively care for its members. Only through the rediscovery of the past is a reconstruction of the present possible, and with this a spiritual rebirth into life.

This theme of rebirth is, of course, basic to Warren’s novel. Immediately after the lobectomy operation Jack baptizes the patient, “‘for he is born again and not of woman’” (p. 338). In one sense there is a fundamental truth hiding behind his sarcasm; the man, in effect, has experienced a rebirth but, as Warren makes clear, this is an aborted rebirth, a death-in-life existence. But it does represent, in terms of the novel’s symbolic analogy in this section, one possible alternative for Jack.

Jack is not, of course, the only individual in the novel to experience a rebirth. This is also true of Willie Stark, who during his first campaign for the governorship had been “blundering and groping his unwitting way toward the discovery of himself, of his great gift” (p. 388). His first speech, after learning from Sadie Burke that he had been a dupe of the Harrison machine, is a measure of his new knowledge—about himself and his world; and the result has been the birth of a new man, a new personality.

And once more we find ourselves returning to the lobectomy scene. As Jack himself says much earlier in the novel, “the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden are, in one sense, the same story” (p. 168). And this idea is reiterated here in the narration of the operation. That the patient stands symbolically for both Jack Burden and Willie Stark is perhaps suggested by the initial description of the man on the table, who reminds Jack “vaguely of Andrew Jackson or a back-country evangelist” (p. 337), terms perfectly applicable to Willie Stark. This is not to suggest that Willie, like Jack, consistently displays the symptoms of the catatonic schizophrenic. Nevertheless, Willie’s experiences in the twenty-four hours following his discovery of the true nature of things are, for all practical purposes, traumatic enough to produce a new personality and a new set of values. The talented “surgeon” in this case is Sadie Burke who works on Willie’s “head”
with the "tools" of sarcasm and blunt truth: "'Listen, if you can get this through your thick head. They wanted you to split the MacMurfee vote. . . . Can you get that straight, you wooden-head?'' (p. 87). Willie's immediate response to the news is severe shock followed by a withdrawal into the catatonic state of a drunken stupor. This action, of course, suggests the response typical of Jack's confrontations with the unpleasant moments in his life, but with this major difference—Willie's retreat from reality is only temporary, a matter of a few hours at most; Jack's is fundamental to his whole life.

Jack's narration of the operation includes details of "the little pieces of brain which had been cut out [and] put away to think their little thoughts quietly somewhere among the garbage, and what was left inside . . . was sealed back up and left to think up an entirely new personality" (p. 338). The "little pieces of brain" suggest the old personality that must be cast off in one way or another before rebirth is possible. The morning following his encounter with Sadie Burke, Willie is sick—"'I puked' " (p. 93)—and in a sense this is analogous to the small bits of brain. This is what he leaves behind in the garbage of the hotel room, the old Willie, Cousin Willie from the country, as he sets out for the fair where he will assume his new personality.

Adam tells Jack that the operation would be a failure if the patient emerged from it cheerfully amoral. And this is what happens to Willie, who emerges from his "operation" at the hands of Sadie Burke as politically amoral, working with a philosophy of the ends justifying the means. His "operation," then, was a failure; he has metamorphosed into the antithesis of his former self.

III

In summation, we can say that the entire lobectomy scene poses the question of whether or not man is responsible for evil, whether, in fact, the philosophy of the Great Twitch is valid. In the closing line of the episode, Jack admits that "from the height of my Olympian wisdom, I seemed to find a great many things funny which now do not appear quite as funny" (p. 319). Thus, he informs us that the Great Twitch was merely a phase he passed through in his search for Truth. But, in retrospect, it is interesting that he employs the word "Olympian" to describe his acquired knowledge at that moment, for Olympus was the home of the Greek gods who had no moral responsibility and were, by the nature of their divinity, outside of Time and human affairs. Jack will be forced, by the sequence of events to follow, to recognize his human ties and, having done so, he will be able to "go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time" (p. 464). The image of the divided man, suggested by Adam's prefrontal lobectomy, will have been replaced by that of the connecting web of mutual guilt and responsibility.

Note

1 Robert Penn Warren, All the King's Men (New York, 1953), p. 461. Subsequent references from this, the Modern Library edition, are included in the text. I should also like to acknowledge a debt to Diane Eisenberg, Roberta Fischkes, and Susan Leeds, former students of mine at Boston Univ., whose insights into the novel have found a place in this article.