

## THE QUEST FOR TRUTH IN ROBERT PENN WARREN'S

*All the King's Men*

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History is a crossing of paths, and when the intersection is located in the South, it is worth a story. Penn Warren's novel shows the self trying to step off the beaten track onto his own route<sup>1</sup>. The Southerner's route forcibly stretches across the plains of their history, through the jungle of their minds, to reach a clearing where they can find a place they belong.

*All the King's Men* presents the Southerners in a continuous process of death and rebirth, of old selves giving place to new ones perpetually searching for wisdom. The Southerners are the new phoenixes, burning themselves to ashes on a pyre, and rising youthfully to a new life<sup>2</sup>.

The search may be represented by Jack Burden, the central character. His name, Burden, means either encumbrance, that caused by the South's sins, or theme, that of the quest for truth and identity. Jack is a modern Oedipus in his quest to know himself. Travelling toward illumination he meets not only Greek mythological figures, but also Christian, Irish, Norse, and Anglo-Saxon mythic characters, embodied in the people he runs into. They are a means to convey one of the Southern myths, the presence of the past in the present.

Jack Burden's similarity to the Theban king begins with his birth. Mr. Burden leaves home when he knows Mrs. Burden is expecting the son of another man. Thus Jack is brought up by a

mother he cannot love and far from a supposed father he cannot respect. In a sense, his "father" was killed by his birth, and like Oedipus's, Jack's feeling for his mother is negative. While the former's love is exaggerated, the latter's is insufficient.

*First excursion into the past:*

Oedipus's first attempt to discover his origin is a consultation of the Delphic oracle. Upon the answer that he will kill his father and marry his mother, he flees to escape an outrageous perspective. Likewise, Jack Burden retreats into American history to avoid a menacing reality. He had "stepped through the thin, crackly crust of the present, and felt the first pull of the quicksand" grab his ankle (p. 299).

Jack's first excursion into the past led to the story of an ancestor, Cass Mastern. A story of sin and expiation, of death and rebirth, it is the academic version of the South's story.

Gilbert Mastern, Cass' elderly brother, had lost his fortune in the Civil War, but a few years later he had another, greater than the first. Gilbert was able to cope with the new reality, to live "out of one world into another" (p. 162). He was like the Viking warrior, slain in combat and led to Valhala, where he was tended by the Valkiries. Although the Negro slaves were not exactly Odin's daughters, Gilbert's house was named after the Norse paradise.

Cass Mastern was brought up by Gilbert at Valhala and was given a plantation, out of which he should earn his living. Once, on a business trip, Cass met Anabelle Trice, who introduced him

to pleasure and "darkness and trouble" (p. 164). She is like Venus Cyprian, the goddess of carnal love. Penn Warren draws a parallel, using references to mythology, some direct, others more subtle. Verses written by Virgil, the Mantuan poet, are employed to describe her countenance. To light the candles, she strikes a match called lucifer. This name means 'bearing light', and is one of the attributes of Venus, the Morning Star. It is also the fallen archangel that became the Devil. The use of this word may be a pun to foreshadow the fall of Cass Mastern.

As their amour continues, it is shrouded by a cloud of darkness, "as Venus once shrouded Aeneas in a cloud so that he passed unspied among men to approach the city of Dido" (p. 170). But the clouds may be dispersed by the sun rays, and truth may be uncovered. At the funeral of Duncan Trice, the wronged suicidal husband, the sun was hot upon Anabelle and Cass, and could be felt through their clothes. "It was preternaturally bright," said Cass, "so that I was blinded by it..." (p. 172). It was an omen of the final exposure brought about by a waiting maid, Phebe. She was "given to the fits and sulls," much the same as a pythoness, the prophetic priestess of Apollo. Phebe, the 'bright moon', is one attribute of Artemis, the twin sister of Apollo, the god of light, sun, and truth. So it is the maid, gold coloured, that unmask the illicit affair:

*... she opened up the fingers - and there lay the ring on the palm of her hand - and I knew it was his ring but all I thought was, it is gold and it is lying in a gold hand. ... Then I looked up and she was still staring at me, and her eyes were*

*gold, too, and bright and hard like gold.  
And I knew that she knew! (p. 175)*

Fear and remorse made Anabelle sell Phebe down the river, and give all the money to a blind negro. As Cass hears his mistress account delivered in a "wild sibilance," he becomes aware of his guilt:

*... 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... (p.178)*

Cass then travels after Phebe to free her and clear his conscience. Although he never sees the golden maid again, he meets another pythoness, named after Apollo's oracle, in a slave auction. It is Delphi, with "deep dark liquid eyes, slightly bloodshot, which stared at a spot... as though in a trance" (pp. 179-80).

Cass perceives that:

*... the world is all of one piece... 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. (pp. 188-89)*

As Cirlot points out, "the spider sitting in its web is a symbol of the centre of the world, and is hence regarded in India as Maya, the eternal weaver of the web of illusion."<sup>3</sup> Cass was able to perceive the web and understand the primordial unity of the universe. In Nietzschean terms, the Dionysian tore the Apollinian and Cass was one with the world.

The spider, with its ceaseless weaving and killing, also represents the alternation of forces that give the universe its stability. Thus, the spider symbolizes "that 'continuous sacrifice' which is the means of man's continual transmutation throughout the course of his life."<sup>4</sup> In that way, from Cass' spiritual death (sin) a new self was born.

Now, why was Cass Master's story included in the novel? It is a narrative technique called 'mise en abyme', i.e., the whole novel (Jack Burden's story) is represented by a smaller tale (Cass Master's story), whose purpose is to create a distancing effect. Penn Warren inverts these ideas of a microcosm representing a macrocosm by making Cass' story that of the whole South. Therefore, the South's story is "smaller" or less important than that of the individual Jack Burden's. This means that the self's quest must be placed above and beyond the single historic moment.

The 'mise en abyme' effect conveys the approach Jack Burden had to history: a story in a story in a story. Unlike Cass, he could not see that everything has a right place to fit in:

*... to him the world then was simply an accumulation [sic] of items, odds and ends of things like the broken and misused and dust-shrouded things gathered in a garret. (p. 189)*

This shattered worldview made him wish to "return to the womb" and sleep the Great Sleep:

*You don't dream in that kind of sleep, but you are aware of it every minute you are asleep, as though you were having a long dream of sleep itself, and in that dream you were dreaming of sleep, sleeping and dreaming of sleep infinitely inward into the center. (p. 100).*

What Jack's intellectual side cannot perceive his instinctive side can: he needs to go inward, toward himself to find a solution. After a period of lethargic gestation, he walked out of his womb-like room into the world.

#### *Second excursion into the past*

After inadvertently killing his father, Oedipus goes on his way and meets the Sphinx, a mixture of woman and animal that gives him a riddle. When he gives the right answer, the Sphinx kills herself and Oedipus is crowned king of Thebes and is given his own mother in marriage.

Jack's Sphinx was not as lethal as the original one. She was Lois, "a kind of mystic combination of filet mignon and a Georgia peach" (p. 303). When she saw that Lois was no longer a love-machine but "a greedy, avid, delicious quagmire which would swallow up the lost, benighted traveler with a last, tired, liquid, contented sigh," he plunged into the Great Sleep (p. 304). And out of his marriage, he went into the world.

Like Oedipus who sent for a living person, Tiresias, to know the truth, Jack Burden decides to learn it from the living beings. Instead of sending for answers, he went himself, following Highway 58, into Mason City. There he met Governor Willie Stark and his people: Lucy, his wife; Tom, his son; Tini Duffy, Sugar-Boy, and Sadie, his aids. And Jack also met some of his old friends from Burden's Landing: Anne and Adam Stanton, Ellis Burden, Judge Irwin, and Mrs. Burden, his mother, with her temporary husbands.

These people form the web Jack ought to tread on, as carefully as possible so as not to wake the spider that lies in ambush. The problem is he cannot perceive how all destinies are interwoven in a net and how the individual is impotent, by his own efforts (suicide included), to escape from being entangled and devoured by the universal spider.

Jack's fragmentary perception of the world is illustrated by his cataloguing people. They are the Scholarly Attorney, the Friend of His Youth, the Young Executive, the Count, the Upright Judge, the Sophomore Thunderbolt, Old-Man Stark, Old-Leather Face, and himself, the Student of History.

The idea of History being an intertwinement of phenomena is exemplified by the mēlange of multiracial mythologies that are

referred to. Of course, this is also a token for the conception of recurring past, but as the myths merge to form a single pattern, it is the concept of fusion that matters.

From Greek mythology Penn Warren took the following gods and applied them to his characters:

Apollo, the god of sun, light, and truth is Adam Stanton, always looking straight at who is before him. A great healer and doctor, Apollo begot Aesculapius, the father of Medicine. Adam is a most skillful surgeon, whom everybody consults when in need. Every time Dr. Stanton wants to ease his spirits, he plays the piano and makes it sound as if Apollo, the god of Music, inspired him.

Adam's sister, Anne, is liked to Artemis, the twin sister of Apollo. Artemis is the virgin goddess of the moon that takes pleasure in hunting and running through the pine forests. Anne Stanton is just the same, athletic, mannish by day and romantic when the moon is shining. To every proposal Jack makes her, Anne answers that she loves him but does not consent to marriage. Another aspect common to Artemis and Anne is that both protect little children: the goddess assures a successful birth and the Southern maid houses orphans.

It is interesting to notice that Phebe, the golden wench that appeared in Cass Masterns' episode, is the name of the Titaness of the Moon and an ancestor of both Apollo and Artemis.

Sadie Burke is Athena Gorgopis, the negative aspect of the warrior goddess. Gorgopis means 'Gorgon-faced', an epithet that comes from the fact that Athena's shield is engraved with the face of Medusa, one of the Gorgons. Sadie is just the same, "with her black chapped-off hair wild and her face like a riddled plaster-



of-Paris mask of Medusa" (p. 266).

Another goddess in the novel is Hestia, the protectress of the heart that never takes part in wars or disputes. Hestia's southern counterpart is Lucy Stark, the faithful wife that lives in a country house and helps Willie keep his image of honourable man.

Artemis, Athena, and Hestia always resisted the offers of the gods, Titans, and mortal men; Aphrodite, the goddess of love, had no power over them. Interesting enough, Anne, Sadie, and Lucy fell for the same man, Willie Stark. This weakness and fall shows that other values are taking charge of the mythos.

These new values come from the Arthurian cycle of legends and myths. Sometimes the Arthurian characters mix with the Greek ones to emphasize the idea of death and rebirth, of old values being replaced, and of the interaction of lives.

Willie Stark, the Boss in Mason City, is like King Arthur in Camelot: both understand that the ends justify the means and that from evil can spring good. Willie senses that his sins have caused the state of suspended life of his son and therefore he needs redemption. Like the legendary Fisher King, whose sins caused the ruin of everything around him, Willie's spiritual death may be overcome by a mystic object. For the Fisher King it is the Holy Grail, whereas for Willie it is the Hospital. In search of the Grail went all the King's men, among them Sir Galahad, the best of the knights. But Galahad failed because he was not pure in his heart. In the same way, Adam Stanton, the best doctor, is the director of the Hospital, but his inability to understand that everything is "not good or bad but good or bad"

at the same time, destroyed him (p. 248).

The Merlin figure in Mason City is Jack Burden, the one who always finds a flaw in everybody's past. The information Jack gives Willie Stark is as efficiently destructive as the magic sword Excalibur, which Merlin gave King Arthur.

As in all quests there is an evildoer. In the Saxon king's it was Morgan le Fay, his half-sister that conspired with their son Mordred to kill him. Willie's Morgana is Sadie Burke, who, although a former ally, cannot stand being "two-timed" and, together with Tiny Duffy, causes the Boss' death.

These mythological associations prove that even the legendary gods and heroes can be found fault with. In fact, they were made in man's image.

As he finds out that his beloved Anne was having an affair with Willie Stark, Jack fled westward to find illumination. He follows the path of the sun and undergoes a mystical death, to be reborn and give continuity to the cycle of life.

According to the previous pattern, Burden lies down and sleeps the Great Sleep. As he wakes up everything is clear again: the sun shines and darkness is gone. It is time to go back and face the world with its Willies and Annes.

On his way back, Jack approaches a man with a twitch on his face, independently moving, "like a dead frog's leg in the experiment when the electric current goes through" (p. 310). Jack then realizes that one's life must be like that twitch, complete in itself, "an independent phenomenon, unrelated to the face or to what was behind the face or to anything in the whole tissue of phenomena which is the world we are lost in" (p. 313). What

is implicit in Jack's words is that one should look for his individuation, keeping in mind that each deed omitted or committed causes a ripple on the world's web. Therefore, the knowledge of the self is not in the knowledge of the self of another. "Know thyself" is the answer to The Riddle.

*Third excursion into the past*

Oedipus' preoccupation with the Riddle led to his killing Laius and marrying Jocasta. When Oedipus eventually unveils the truth, his mother commits suicide and he blinds himself. Notwithstanding, his strength is affirmed: no god will prevail over Oedipus.

Much the same, Jack Burden leads Judge Irwin to commit suicide only to find out that he was his real father. It is bitterly ironic that Jack's searches for material truth should provoke the death of a father he could respect and, at the same time, should cause the rebirth of his true self. But the real assurance of Jack Burden's might happened when he met Sugar-Boy and told him who the Boss' murderer was. Had Jack confirmed this information, Willie Stark's former bodyguard would have killed Tiny Duffy in a matter of hours. Sugar-Boy was once described as "an undernourished leprechaun," i.e., an elf of Irish folklore who would hand over a treasure if caught. When Jack reveals the truth to Sugar-Boy, the leprechaun is in Jack's hands and delivers a treasure to him. Jack Burden is like a god: he has the power over a man's life and death. Then he becomes more than

a god: he decides to be a man.

He understands that truth must be sometimes withheld for the sake of human dignity. Had he confirmed his revelation, Jack would have been equated with the very corruption he repudiated.

Unlike Oedipus who reveals his crime and causes Jocasta's death, Jack Burden lies to his mother about Judge Irwin's sin:

*I had given my mother a present, which was a lie. But in return she had given me a present, too, which was a truth. She gave me a new picture of herself, and that meant, in the end, a new picture of the world. Or rather, that new picture of herself filled in the blank space which was perhaps the center of the new picture of the world which had been given me by many people, by Sadie Burke, Lucy Stark, Sugar-Boy, Adam Stanton. And that meant that my mother gave me back the past, I could now accept the past which I had before felt tainted and horrible. I could accept her and be at peace with her and myself. (p. 432).*

Robert Penn Warren quotes Dante's *La Divina Commedia* to profess his faith in mankind: "Mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde."<sup>5</sup> It is very significant that Penn Warren should have chosen this quotation from a book about the hero's descent to hell and ascent to heaven to open *All the King's Men*. This novel depicts man in his continual sacrifice until he understands that "one can only know oneself in God and in His great eye" (p. 173). The motif of the eye, along with that of rebirth, permeates the

text and is loaded with symbols, of which the most important is the relation of seeing and enlightenment. It should be remembered, nonetheless, that in Egypt the eye is the maternal bosom and the pupil its child. Thus, the solar hero in quest for light becomes a child again and seeks renovation at his mother's bosom.

Jack Burden's reconciliation with his mother, with the world, and with himself, illuminates the human condition and asserts that while hope flourishes man will prevail.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Bantam, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Ma: Merriam-Webster, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> J.E. Cirlot, *A dictionary of symbols*, trans. Jack Sage, 2nd. ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 304.

<sup>4</sup> Cirlot, p. 304.

<sup>5</sup> My translation: "While hope flourishes."

*All knowledge that is worth  
anything is paid for by blood...  
But the end of man is knowledge,  
for knowledge is power.*

*Robert Penn Warren*

