

Character and Charismatic Authority in Robert Penn

Warren's *All The King's Men* and Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah*

Drawing on the work of the nineteenth century German theologian Rudolph Sohm, Max Weber famously redefined the concept of charisma, transposing it from the religious realm Sohm associated with “charismatic” early Christian rejections of tradition to the secular political domain of modernity. In this later context, Weber claimed, charisma manifests itself in the political sphere as the rejection of inherited tradition in the forms of patriarchy and kingship. This rejection was driven by a “charismatic” leader whose status derives not from birthright and/or a monopoly of violence but from a widespread social recognition of certain qualities of character. These include a capacity to combine “inner determination and inner restraint” and the ability to articulate for the mass a collective sense of “mission”.¹

However, Weber also claimed that the process went on to meet resistance as the force of “charisma” became curtailed by demands for social stability and the disciplinary imperatives of modern state bureaucratic apparatuses. Charting something close to a dialectical path for the workings of charismatic authority in the modern state, Weber also regarded the resulting “routinization” of charisma as itself serving to establish the conditions for its re-emergence. Charisma thus, Weber suggested in a number of ambiguous formulations, might be seen to provide the sometimes extra-democratic means to challenge new “rational-legal” and secular liberal orders. Even in its late modern manifestations then, charisma is once again seen to repudiate normative forms of authority, this time forms taken to be “rational” and “modern” rather than “religious” or “traditional” in character. It does so, as it has in both ancient and early modern times, by valorising the visionary and exceptional qualities of the

individual leader. This “exclusive glorification of the genuine mentality of the prophet and hero” has the capacity, in Weber’s view, to persist in the twentieth century as an entity that is “revolutionary and transvalues everything.”²

In the wake of political developments in his German homeland and elsewhere in the years following his death in 1920, Weber’s own concept itself came to be regarded by a number of mid-twentieth sociologists as somewhat prophetic. The rise of what would later be termed “totalitarian” political systems underwritten by cults of personality seemed to bear out his impression of “charisma” as a return of the pre-modern repressed. Nowhere was this view of Weber’s concept more prevalent than in the American social sciences from the mid 1930s to the 1950s. The impact of Mitteleuropa émigré scholars was, in this respect, significant with figures such as Theodore Abel, Frank Munk, Franz Neuman, Peter Drucker and others feeding Weber’s concept of charisma into accounts of the rise of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. As Joshua Derman has noted, the concept also at this time began to take on a life of its own, underwriting developing theories of “political religion” often without explicit reference to Weber.³

Among those adherents to the application of Weber’s ideas more specifically were Hans Gerth and Talcott Parsons, two of the first scholars to translate his work into English. Both viewed European and Soviet dictatorships as uneven blends of the types of charismatic and bureaucratic authority outlined by Weber. In 1947 Parsons, whilst refusing to anoint Weber as a “prophet” of any sort, nonetheless described him in powerful terms as a major social diagnostician of his age:

...with the hindsight that so greatly simplifies our problem, we can see that, considering the blindness of most of his contemporaries, Weber on the whole saw the nature of the crisis, and the general direction of change very quickly. He did not predict Hitler or the

Nazi movement, but he quite clearly saw that a large scale charismatic movement in reaction against modern 'liberal' institutions but with certain 'democratic' elements was a very real possibility.⁴

Since the 1930s, Parsons had sought to understand political events in both Europe and North America with reference to Weber's account of "charisma", annotating his own personal copies of the relevant studies with references to Hitler and the National Socialist Party.⁵ This process culminated in the publication of Parsons' essay "Max Weber and the Contemporary Political Crisis" in 1942. Interestingly, however, Parsons also alludes in this piece to the bearing of the Weberian "charismatic" framework on homegrown religious and political organisations such as Christian Science and Huey "Kingfish" Long's "Share Our Wealth" movement.⁶ That a link might be drawn in this way between charisma-driven dictatorial politics in Europe and political demagoguery closer to home should come as no surprise. In the years preceding his assassination in September 1935, when Long served as both Governor of Louisiana and then as a US Senator, the analogy was frequently made. Many critics, from across the political spectrum, claimed that Long's populist style was better suited to Hitler and Mussolini's rabble-rousing despotism than it was to the sober deliberative workings of republican government.⁷ That Long disavowed important dimensions of fascist ideology such as anti-Semitism, even as he shared its anti-Bolshevism, made little difference.⁸ Nonetheless there undoubtedly was something in the life and career but perhaps most of all in the *character* of Huey Long, it seemed, that made the comparison irresistible. There was the rise from regional obscurity to challenge an entrenched political status quo; the powerful button-pushing oratory astutely positioned in the rhetorical sweet spot between a constituency's ethnos and its ethos; even Long's windblown hair and

abrupt physical gestures must have resonated among a US public by then familiar with newsreels depicting the public appearances of Hitler and Mussolini. The qualities of tenacity, presence and suasion such elements betray then, clearly fall in line with those “exceptional” leadership attributes Weber associated with modern “charisma”.

Yet it wasn't just in the uniquely under-developed conditions of Louisiana that “charismatic authority” of this type might be said to have manifested itself in the US during these years.⁹ For a barely uninterrupted period between 1911 and 1950 James Michael Curley, the son of poor post-civil war Irish immigrants, served highly controversial terms as Mayor of Boston, US congressman and Governor of Massachusetts.¹⁰ Moreover, the zenith of Curley's influence over national as well as local politics came at roughly the same time as that of Long's, that is, from the early to mid 1930s. As with Long, Curley's rise had been premised on “outsider” appeals to the long disenfranchised—this time the urban Irish poor rather than backwoods dirt farmers—and his periods in office dominated by frequent accusations of graft, bribery and ruthless treatment of political opponents. Such charges emanated not only from the long entrenched WASP-dominated Republican Party in Boston but also from the Irish establishment within the Democratic Party itself that by 1928 had become powerful enough to secure Al Smith, an Irish-American Catholic, the presidential nomination.¹¹ Like Long, Curley was flamboyant in personal appearance and an excellent public speaker. Like Long too, by the mid-1930s, Curley had played a major role in addressing the plight and raising the profile of the poor in his political constituency and, by the same token, attaining a degree of national attention by tapping into the anger and disenchantment that prompted Roosevelt's New Deal.¹²

Once again, then, it is unsurprising that Curley should also have been the object of fear and loathing from both locally and nationally rooted political

establishments. Indeed, accusations of dictatorial behaviour directed at the Boston politician often made explicit comparative reference to the methods and mindset of the “Kingfish” of Louisiana.¹³ Curley’s political decisions, particularly after his successful gubernatorial campaign in 1934—like Long’s only a few years earlier which similarly sought to concentrate a greater degree of power in the governor’s mansion—also provoked comparisons with Hitler.¹⁴ The impression that such national and transnational analogies held water were only strengthened by Long’s self-professed admiration for Curley as well as Curley’s own high regard for Mussolini whom he had actually visited and subsequently praised whilst touring Europe in 1931.¹⁵ The distorted nature of Curley’s ideas about democracy was even more evident a couple of years later when, in a somewhat misguided attempt to curry favour with the White House, he claimed: “The faith of Columbus, of Washington, of Lincoln and of Mussolini is now being exemplified by Franklin Delano Roosevelt.”¹⁶

It is apparent then that Weberian conceptions of “charisma” as an index to a modern political phenomenon largely populist in style were applicable to the domestic as well as the European scene. This was a dimension registered implicitly within the popular and middlebrow print cultures of the time but only, it seems, acknowledged in passing, if at all, by Weber-influenced American sociologists of the immediate pre- and post-war years. Yet the compelling “charismatic” nature of homegrown figures such as Curley and, especially, no doubt, because of his even higher profile and the supplementary drama afforded by his assassination, Long, attracted novelists like storytelling flies to narrative and thematic honey. Indeed between 1934 and 1946, as literary scholar Keith Perry has documented, Long inspired or partly inspired no less than six novels by American authors. Alongside Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1946), these ranged from works by well-established literary luminaries such as

Sinclair Lewis and John Dos Passos as well as popular middlebrow authors of the 1940s such as Hamilton Basso and Adria Locke Langley.¹⁷

One explanation for this returns us to the limitations of “charisma” as an organizing sociological concept in complex modern societies. By the end of the 1950s, the term began to be questioned as it had commonly been invoked in the social sciences—even as its currency rose in popular usage in the wake of understandings of President Kennedy as a new breed of “charismatic” politician.¹⁸ In an argument first presented in 1960, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. had all but dismissed the relevance of charisma. He did so by disconnecting it not only from modern democratic societies—association with which, he believed, “drain[s] the concept of all meaning”—but also from leaders of modern authoritarian and totalitarian regimes such as Napoleon, Mussolini, Lenin, and Stalin. “Even if these men had charisma for certain associates or followers, their essential success was not due to divine afflatus of a charismatic—i.e. compulsive, thaumaturgic, unorganized, irrational—sort but precisely to highly conscious and rational organization.”¹⁹ Only a few years later the prominent British social anthropologist Peter Worsley would be even more dismissive, describing the concept of charisma as “by now, all too often a substitute for serious research, and a barrier to thinking equalled by few other sponge-words of our time.”²⁰

The sense among scholars that there was something deeply unsatisfactory about Weber’s concept at the definitional level represented a void that mid-twentieth century imaginative writers might be said to have filled. Charisma, it seemed, was like pornography: difficult to define in the abstract but you know it when you see it. It was an entity that lay beyond interpretive routes determined by conventional rational criteria. In this way, as John Potts has noted, its deployment by Weber bespeaks a “late Romantic impulse” in his work which is at odds with those modern social forces

that commanded much of his attention: impersonal, de-humanising forces that dissolve the bonds of organic communities in the name of progress.²¹ Weber views the “charismatic” leader as something of a Romantic visionary who refuses to be hostage to the fortunes of modernity or to dismiss idealized pasts as irretrievable. Weber’s charismatic leader is a figure imbued then with the type of creative political and/or artistic genius Ralph Waldo Emerson saw in various civilizations’ “representative men”.²²

Something of this Romantic esteem underwrites the depictions of Long and Curley in *All The King’s Men* and Edwin O’Connor’s *The Last Hurrah* (1956) though it is tempered, undoubtedly, by the post-war climate in which the concepts of “dictatorship” and “totalitarianism” re-shaped the US political psyche. Both novels negotiate “charisma” by demonstrative rather than didactic narrative strategies, that is, they more often “show” rather than “tell” in representing the concept to the reader. The process is mediated primarily in terms of the two novels’ structures which replicate and foreshadow what I have described elsewhere with extended reference to other post-1945 works of fiction, as the “republican” narrative form of the American political novel. This structure is built around a central “dictatorial” figure depicted in an explicitly political context but focalized via the perceptions of a “conflicted” narrator. This latter character can be understood as “senatorial” in terms of their more detached and reflective relationship to the operations of political power. The template for this form is the Ishmael-Ahab dynamic within the “ship of state” presented in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851) but it is a structure that continually re-emerges in US political novels from Henry Adams’ *Democracy* (1880) to that notable late twentieth century roman á clef *Primary Colors* (1996). It equally serves to structure

the narrative forms of other works of political fiction by writers such as Lionel Trilling, Gore Vidal, Russell Banks and Philip Roth.²³

Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah* tells the story of an ageing Boston-Irish Mayor, Frank Skeffington, whose career is clearly delineated as following a pattern laid down by the urban spoils system and "boss" politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁴ Much of the narrative is focalised through the consciousness of Skeffington's nephew, Adam Caulfield, a political naïf, whose interest in politics is only piqued after his uncle invites him to observe what he believes will be his final mayoral campaign. Through Caulfield's perspective, a number of sharply depicted set-pieces are depicted that serve to provide the reader with an acute and affecting depiction of a world by then quickly sliding from view. The methods that define Skeffington's electioneering style—a "charisma of rhetoric" and intimate mode of engagement with the electorate—are shown to be rapidly losing traction in an age where new visually oriented technologies and more centralised party and state apparatuses determine outcomes. This is the kind of relentless institutional change that Weber saw as characteristic of modern societies' evolution which would invariably at periodic moments result in the "castration of charisma" in whatever form it had previously found expression.²⁵

Robert Penn Warren's novel is constructed around a slightly more complex narrative structure but still one that recognisably conforms to the "republican" form outlined above. The narrator of *All The King's Men*, Jack Burden, as his name suggests, offers a more chastened perspective in his account of the rise and fall of Willie Stark, the Long-inspired source of "charismatic authority" in the novel.²⁶ Unlike Caulfield, a cartoonist for an anti-Skeffington newspaper associated with Boston's political establishment, Burden bears the load of Southern history—a theme

that is reinforced by his failure to complete a doctoral thesis on that very topic. Communal and familial connections are crucial here too in so far as Burden is forced to mediate between Stark and his childhood friend Adam Stanton, a doctor, whose forename, like Caulfield's, transparently signals pre-lapsarian innocence. *All The King's Men* is a more ruminative and digressive exploration of charisma in action than *The Last Hurrah*. Burden too, as a metaphysician, is also an undoubtedly more intellectually compelling presence than Caulfield. The centrifugal modernist tendencies of Warren's narrative—its pre-disposition toward lengthy interior monologue, intertextual excursion and so on—lead the reader into the type of philosophical territory that O'Connor's more orthodox approach discounts.

Yet, crucially, it must be noted that both works contextualise their explorations of charismatic authority with reference to religious frameworks. They do so by maintaining a critical distance from impulses and moral codes that have previously underwritten religious manifestations of charisma. Moreover, when these misplaced forms of "faith" and rigid enforcements of morality re-appear in the secular realm, both Skeffington and Stark decidedly set themselves against them. In responding to the telegenic, university educated ex-navy man Kevin McCluskey, for example, old-time Boston-Irish politicians such as Skeffington and Charlie Hennessey perceive their young political opponent's charisma in identifiably postmodern terms, that is, as operating primarily within a symbolic realm of image and floating signification.²⁷ McCluskey is mocked as a handsome lightweight manipulated by Boston's business elite, in thrall to an insidious new medium that allows him to avoid the more exacting physical and mental demands of traditional campaigning. "Oh, I tell you, dear folks", Hennessey says during a conventional stump address, "if it wasn't for the miracle of television we'd hardly catch a glimpse of him at all!"²⁸ Both Skeffington and

Hennessey draw attention to the McCluskey campaign's pre-occupation with public image after they discover that an Irish setter was hired for a television political broadcast, the less wholesome looking family dog being deemed unsuitable. Remarking that the McCluskey team might have thought to rent the family an additional child, Skeffington continues:

Little Valerie's useful...but a girl is under a handicap in a situation like that. You can't very well call her Franklin D. Whereas think what they could have done with a bright-eyed little boy, procured by the week from some friendly orphanage. Little Franklin Delano McCluskey. And best of all, *this* Franklin Delano could be given back the day after the election. Unhappily, you couldn't do that with the original (300).

The sardonic tone directed at Roosevelt is instructive here. The president whose consecutive administrations over a thirteen year period effectively re-structured the political, social and economic order did so, in many ways, by keeping his distance from old-style "boss" politicians such as Long and Curley.²⁹ O'Connor makes this clear in *The Last Hurrah* towards the end of the novel when Skeffington's defeat is subject to an inquest held between Caulfield and his friend, the young Democratic Party activist Jack Mangan. Skeffington himself is mystified by the result. He can only attempt to understand it with reference to an outmoded explanatory framework which prompts him to entertain "the possibility of betrayal [or] a failure in his organization". Finally, he is forced to accept that the magnitude of McCluskey's victory must indicate that "what had beaten him was not something old but something new" (348). Mangan, on the other hand, is less confused. Having acknowledged in an earlier episode in the novel that Skeffington is a "powerhouse in that league" (114) of politics within which he emerged, after the election Mangan provides broader historical context by way of a post-mortem. In his view it is the social change brought

in during the New Deal era that destroyed the type of “old-time boss” that Skeffington exemplified. Most importantly,

What Roosevelt did was take the handouts out of the local hands. A few little things like Social Security, Unemployment Insurance and the like—that’s what shifted the gears, sport. No need now to depend on the boss for everything: the Federal Government was getting into the act (374).

This resulted in a generational shift wherein younger constituents had less and less contact, direct or indirect, with a figure such as Skeffington. Mangan is depicted as representative of a new managerial breed of political operative, more worldly and intelligent, to be sure, than someone like McCluskey but still part of what is referred to in the novel as a “generation of ciphers”. The term is used by Nathaniel Gardiner, Skeffington’s longstanding political opponent of five decades. The sense that political divisions are as much along generational as they are ideological lines is reinforced by Mangan’s admission that he supported the Republican Party Irish patsy McCluskey. He did so, he tells Caulfield, on the basis that “maybe we can work with him and we knew we couldn’t work with your uncle. There wasn’t a chance. He didn’t believe in our ways and we didn’t believe in his” (376). Here we see then the forces of “rationalisation”—the emphasis on managerialism and consensus-seeking that had emerged by the Eisenhower-Kennedy era—overwhelming the forces of an older generation of “charismatic” politicians. Kennedy himself would famously distinguish the challenges faced by his own McCluskey-Mangan generation from those faced by their American forebears in something approaching these pragmatic and decidedly non-charismatic terms.³⁰

Like John F. Kennedy, McCluskey and Mangan can be seen as part of what has been termed the “Ivy League Irish” generation who fought their way into various

political establishments with the financial backing of newly wealthy families.³¹ The fact that Mangan's speech is peppered with the somewhat affected term of endearment "sport" is testimony to O'Connor's desire to expose the pretensions of a certain sort of Irish-American parvenu.³² In a panoramic depiction of Irish Boston social life O'Connor must also inevitably acknowledge the role played by religion. By Skeffington's time the influence of the Catholic Church as a source of *material* (as much as spiritual) wellbeing had long been usurped by the Democratic Party machine. In *The Last Hurrah*, the city Cardinal perceives Skeffington in decidedly diabolical terms, that is, as a venal overlord who has corrupted a populace that his church once held sway over. The Monsignor, by contrast, admits that Skeffington "held his imagination" and seemed a "a man of considerable parts" (94).

It's important to note here however that the secular machine politician's brand of charisma only bears a loose family resemblance to that of the priest or shaman with which it was associated in the pre-modern era. This is made explicit in the novel in a number of ways. Firstly, Skeffington positions himself as a hard-headed empiricist in philosophical terms, a politician for whom *experience* should be the key factor in voter evaluations of candidates. It is his own experience that keeps him realistic about both the possibility of political change and his own capacity to effect it. His opponent, on the other hand, is dismissed as a "miracle man" (312) who offers a purely faith-based alternative that consists of unrealistic promises of an administration entirely free from graft and able to guarantee both low taxation levels and well-paid municipal workers. Skeffington responds to McCluskey's exhortations that the electorate "have faith" by referring to Jemima Wilkinson, an eighteenth century Quaker woman. Wilkinson attracted followers by claiming to have died in 1776 and to have subsequently been re-born as a reincarnation of God. Promising to demonstrate her

divine nature by walking on water, Wilkinson postpones the moment indefinitely to the point that her followers begin to drift away. For Skeffington, the parallels are unavoidable:

The familiar promissory note is once more extended; the cry of “Have faith!” is heard once more from our own local water-walker. The question is, I think, how many of us are willing to believe that a miracle will be passed, and the note redeemed. For my own part I must confess to having exceedingly grave doubts (313).

The transplantation of charisma from the religious to the secular sphere is also evident in the novel’s most famous scene, an extended set-piece built around Skeffington’s appearance at constituent Knocko Minihan’s wake. O’Connor here depicts the boss politician in his communal element in a scene that presents a colourful cast of Irish-American characters and combines comic power with great observational acuity. Much of the comedy is generated by the slow puncturing of the occasion’s solemnity. By somewhere around its mid-point we find that, after being brought along by his uncle to witness a “custom that’s dying out” (175), Adam Caulfield “could not help marvelling at the completeness of Knocko’s failure to dominate, or even intrude upon, his own wake” (191). The deceased was a loyal Skeffington voter but undistinguished either as a businessman or a husband. However, Knocko was married to a well-respected woman who was also a friend of Skeffington’s wife. It soon becomes clear though that Skeffington, who at the outset informs his nephew that a wake “isn’t quite the same as a popularity contest” (173), is here for other purposes.

Accompanied by his party associates, Skeffington works the various rooms of the house expertly consolidating the social and political capital he has accumulated in

the community over the decades. This is illustrated in various ways, from a perfectly pitched compliment to a local gossip, Delia Boylan—“every time I get thinking about the wisdom of giving women the vote I think of you and my fears become quiet” (184)—to more significant acts. Exercising deft ethical tact, Skeffington ensures that the widow is financially provided for. He also takes the opportunity at the wake to reprimand the young funeral director in public for overcharging for his services. Both these manoeuvres involve a charismatic deployment of power representative of the “boss” figure. The first act demonstrates the subtle empathetic and consolatory qualities redolent of the priest. Skeffington persuades the widow that his wife had left her the money on her own death despite the fact that he—and perhaps even the widow herself—knows this not to be the case: “She knew, he thought, but she didn’t *quite* know, and that was all right: as long as there was the doubt, her pride was saved” (182). The second transaction is conducted more in the style of the mafia don with Skeffington threatening to approach the licensing board unless the funeral director drastically reduces the bill. When the latter claims that this is “impossible” Skeffington exhibits that brand of menace-infused wit that often characterises those in whom power is over-invested: “Why that’s one of the words that doesn’t belong to the bright lexicon of youth” (210). The central point here is that the wake provides a communal though still relatively intimate environment within which such charismatic acts can be undertaken. Word of such acts can then subsequently be disseminated to the wider community as a means of consolidating perception of Skeffington’s charismatic power. In this sense, as Skeffington acknowledges, he is as much a “tribal chieftain” (216) as he is an elected official.

After Skeffington’s death at the end of the novel the ambivalent Monsignor provides a eulogy which effectively dismantles the Manichean vision that has framed

perceptions of Skeffington in the city. The mayor, he notes, “moved in a world where both praise and blame seem to have a habit of starting out of very little and becoming vastly exaggerated in no time at all.” Nonetheless he affirms that he has reached the conclusion that “as I look around me ...it seems to me now to be a better city for most of the people than it used to be” (407). This assertion, offered alongside the news that Skeffington, with the Monsignor as witness, “died in God’s good grace” (408), adds to the sense that the eulogy has been building towards a somewhat beatific final image of the mayor. This metaphysical note is re-struck in the novel’s closing sentence which has Adam Caulfield reflecting that his own “pilgrimage, and with it, part of his life, was over” (427). The eulogy then runs pragmatic, structural interpretations of Skeffington’s character and career alongside more metaphysical accounts of his status and ultimate meaning. The key bridging term here is “big”, primarily in its figurative sense. As the Monsignor claims: “The bigger the man is in public life, the bigger the praise or the blame—and we have to remember that Frank Skeffington was quite a big man” (407).

In Robert Penn Warren’s *All The King’s Men*, this fusion of hard-headed pragmatist consequentialism with Romantic valorisations of “representative men” is also evident throughout the unfolding of the story of the Long-inspired character Willie Stark. With respect to both texts we might even term it a *con-fusion* as much as a fusion of ideas given the degree of ambivalence and internal conflict it provokes among the central observer-narrators. Again, “big” is the operative adjective. Take, for instance, Jack Burden’s attempt to imagine Stark as a young boy studying hard into the night by a coal-oil lamp as the wind beats down on the roof of his poor family’s ramshackle farmhouse, whilst

inside him something would be big and coiling slow and clotting till he would hold his breath and the blood would beat in his head with a hollow sound as though his head were a cave as big as the dark outside. He wouldn't have any name for what was big inside him. Maybe there isn't any name.³³

Shortly after this, Burden considers the importance of books in his own intellectual formation. He views his younger self as a philosophical Idealist, that is, an anti-materialist prone to privileging metaphysical over empirically based truth claims. "If you are an Idealist", his older self reflects somewhat wryly, "it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you as it isn't real anyway" (45). Clearly then, Burden has been forced to revise his position in the light of both the personal compromises he has had to make to operate as Stark's assistant and his new-found familiarity with the often iniquitous figures and methods associated with state politics. At a social gathering for family and friends, Burden defends Stark against accusations directed at him by Mr Patton, "a bluff, burly type with lots of money and a manly candor" (185). He defends Stark on the basis that he is a man of action who is engaged on behalf of the downtrodden majority who have elected him to office to execute the Herculean task of rolling back a long history of inaction: "If the government of this state for quite a long time back had been doing anything for the folks in it", Burden replies, "...would [Stark] be having to make so many short cuts to make up for the time lost all these years in not getting something done?" (187). When Burden's mother later implores him to heed Patton's words and not get involved in any "graft", Burden, pointedly, does not attempt to rebut the charge: "Graft is what he calls it when the fellows do it who don't know which fork to use" (188).

Though Burden's view of Stark as a political visionary has undoubtedly been tempered by experience, throughout the novel there remains a residual Romantic

metaphysical element in his appraisals of the man he refers to throughout as the “Boss”. This is essentially rooted in the tragic vision of life as it manifests in the political sphere or the realm of “public man”. In his famous lecture “Politics as a Vocation”, delivered in Munich in 1918, Max Weber spoke of the ways in which “the ‘charismatic’ element of all leadership [remains] at work in the party system” that had emerged since the advent of “plebiscitarian” democracies in Anglo-Saxon nation-states.³⁴ He went on to link this with the need this new system generated for “Caesarist plebiscitarian” leadership or a charismatic “dictator of the battlefield of elections” (106). Weber identified William Gladstone’s leadership of the Liberal Party in late nineteenth century Britain as a formative moment in this context; but, as Lawrence Scaff has noted, during his 1904 visit to the United States, Weber perceived that year’s winning presidential candidate Theodore Roosevelt in similar terms.³⁵

“Politics as a Vocation” is better known for the scepticism it directs at messianic political visions and the “ethic of absolute ends” they are said to embody. Weber was reacting, of course, to the revolutionary movements that were taking root, with varying degrees of success, in Russia and Germany at the time. It is in a preferred “ethic of responsibility”, rather, that Weber’s perception of the relationship between the tragic and the political emerges. The vain, “power politician”, whose “striving for power cease to be objective and becomes purely personal self-intoxication” (116) is a symptom of the clashing “ethic of absolute ends” precisely because he “has no relation whatsoever to the knowledge of tragedy with which all action, but especially political action, is truly interwoven” (117). An “ethic of responsibility” demands that “one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one’s actions” (120) and, as well as accepting that means can deform and discredit ends, equally acknowledge the fact that “it is *not* true that good can only follow from

good and evil only from evil...often the opposite is true” (123). As the political ethic par excellence the “ethic of responsibility” not only rejects those revolutionary absolutisms that deny *any* degree of inter-relatedness between means and ends but also repudiates absolutist Christianity-inspired notions of virtue that reject the idea that they can be detached from each other at all.

The Sermon on the Mount, the lodestone of traditional Christian morality is seen as representative by Weber in this context (119). It is interesting therefore that Skeffington and Stark are positioned respectively between earlier periods where religious understandings of charisma and Christian notions of virtue prevailed and later periods, when political charisma came to take less intimate, more mediated forms, that is, when voters looked to the federal government rather than the local party machine for welfare and patronage. The gradual slippage from the religious to the secular moral domain is most profoundly captured in *All The King's Men*, when Jack Burden, out on a “muckraking” expedition in connection with a political adversary, is once more required to defend his employer. Replying to an old Stark associate who, having turned to Christianity, has come to repudiate the moral “foulness” of his former boss, Burden replies:

If you meant to imply...that politics, including that of your erstwhile pals, is not exactly like Easter Week in a nunnery, you are right. But I will beat you to the metaphysical draw this time. Politics is action and all action is but a flaw in the perfection in inaction, which is peace, just as being is but a flaw in the perfection of nonbeing. Which is God. For if God is perfection and the only perfection is in nonbeing, then God is nonbeing. Then God is nothing. Nothing can give no basis for the criticism of Thing in its thingness. Then when do you get anything to say? Then when do you get off? (303)

Burden here presses the limits of political philosophy as far in the direction of theodicy as he believes they will go; in the process what emerges is something akin to

a political ontology. Political action, by this definition, requires not only thought but sufficient passion to disturb the “peace” implicit in the idea of “non-action” (and the implied “perfection” of God as “non-being”). Charisma is conventionally the passion-arousing entity in both religious and secular realms, from the Passion of Christ—the “passion narratives” contained in the four apostles’ canonical gospels—to the passions excited by the commanding political oratory of James Michael Curley or Huey Long. The need to reconcile the passion required to attain and maintain political power and the dispassionate qualities required to intelligently wield it is the “tragic” predicament faced by the ambitious politician such as Stark or Skeffington.

Numerous examples are provided in both novels of Skeffington and Stark’s capacity to charismatically unleash the passion of the electorate in the face of entrenched power. *All The King’s Men* establishes the importance of this idea in its opening pages when Stark returns to his own rural origins to energize his political base. Stark’s skill in moving between different vocal registers and using his physicality for purposes of emphasis are carefully tracked. Stark begins by disclaiming his intent to make a speech on what is merely a visit home to pick up some sausage from his father’s smokehouse. Burden notes: “That’s what he was saying, but the voice was different, going up in his nose and coming out flat with that little break they’ve got in the red hills, saying ‘Pappy, now what about—’”(14). Stark then returns to his “old voice, his own voice. Or was that his voice? Which was his true voice, which one of all the voices, you would wonder” (15). The narrative continues in this vein, displaying all of Stark’s political dexterity: the crowd laugh; individuals respond (responses to which Stark himself cheerfully and effortlessly negotiates); the crowd finally falls silent as a result of a series of astutely timed and executed rhetorical steps.

What is most striking both here and in O'Connor's novel, however, is the way in which the political charisma of the era is shown to be premised on almost personal levels of contact between these politicians and their constituents. On finishing his speech, Stark's final gestures provide some indication of this: "He looked down, grinning, and his head turned as his eyes went down in the crowd, and seemed to stop on a face there, and then go on to stop on another face" (17). This is "publicity" in its most fundamental sense—relating to the act of appearing in public in a direct, unmediated fashion to both appeal to (and speak on behalf of) a constituency. To be able to successfully undertake such activity requires character of the type demonstrated by figures such as Skeffington and Stark—people with a potent understanding both of how the political status quo reinforced the plights faced by their poor constituents and of the political obstacles that stood before them, as elected officials, in attempting to overturn that status quo. That they ultimately fail to fully achieve this is, of course, as O'Connor and Warren's novels attest in abundance, due to personal shortcomings and the corrupting nature of power. It is also nonetheless, they equally suggest, a story that is at least part tragedy—one rooted in changing understandings of political charisma in the modern era.

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¹ *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (1948), eds. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (London: Routledge, 1991), 246. For a strongly dissenting view of Weber's take on "charisma" see Philip Rieff's *Charisma: The Gift of Grace and How It Has Been Taken Away From Us* (New York, Pantheon, 2007). For Rieff, despite his stress on "inner restraint" Weber demonstrated a fatal ambivalence towards the "inwardness" of charisma as a quality associated with religious leadership. By associating charisma in greater part with external recognition rather than initiative and self-discipline, Weber, in Rieff's view, laid the foundations for the even greater degradation of the concept that occurred later in the twentieth

century. In this late modern context, “spray-on” forms of charisma provide political leaders with public approbation, a phenomenon to which Rieff mordantly responds: “Moses chose the Jews, not the Jews Moses. Without this initiative, charismatic authority ceases to exist. Initiative cannot be an epiphenomenon of recognition.” Rieff, 3, 126.

² Ibid., 250.

³ Joshua Derman, “Max Weber and Charisma: A Transatlantic Affair”, *New German Critique* 113, Vol. 38, No. 2, Summer 2011, 75.

⁴ Parsons, “Introduction” in Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (1947; repr. New York: Free Press, 1964), 85.

⁵ See Derman, 79.

⁶ Talcott Parsons, “Max Weber and the Contemporary Political Crisis”, *Review of Politics* 4 (1942), 76.

⁷ Analogies to Hitler were more common, particularly in the final year or so before Long’s death, and they originated from points across the spectrum of political discourse. In 1935 a *Daily Worker* piece described Long as “Louisiana’s Hitler”; six-time Socialist Party presidential candidate Norman Thomas compared Long to Mussolini; and right-wing columnist Westbrook Pegler referred to him as “Der Kingfish”. See Edward F. Haas, “Huey Long and the Dictators”, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Spring 2006), 134, 135.

⁸ For Long’s rejection of religious bigotry see Richard D. White Jr., *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 248. For an account of Long’s anti-communism and his view of “Share Our Wealth” as a bulwark against the global extension of Bolshevism see Haas, 142.

⁹ For a classic account that explains the Long phenomenon primarily in this sub-national context see V.O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), (repr. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), pp. 156-164.

¹⁰ Curley’s remarkable career included numerous terms of office at city, state and national levels. These included member of the House of Representatives for Massachusetts (1911-14); Mayor of Boston (1914-18; 1922-26; 1930-34; 1946-50); and Governor of Massachusetts (1935-37). This career was book-ended by two short periods in jail for political fraud in 1904 and 1947. Curley was given a full pardon on both these convictions by President Truman in 1950. The definitive biography is Jack Beatty’s *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874-1958)* (1992), (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000).

¹¹ “New York’s Tammany Hall”, Jack Beatty has observed, “was run by interchangeable Irishmen in derby hats. Roxbury’s [i.e. Curley’s Boston] Tammany Club was the den of a charismatic leader, and it had room for only one tiger.” Beatty, 96. For an account of the tensions between Curley and Al Smith, exacerbated by the former’s support for Roosevelt in the 1932 presidential primaries, see Beatty, 256-61.

¹² Descriptions of Curley’s support for Roosevelt and the subversive role he played in helping to secure the latter the nomination at the Democratic Party convention in 1932—at the last minute he managed to secure the chairmanship of the Puerto Rican delegation as “Don Jaime”(!)—see Beatty, 311-18. For Long’s early support for Roosevelt see White, 165-68.

¹³ For comparisons of this sort see Joseph F. Dinneen, “The Kingfish of Massachusetts”, *Harper’s Magazine*, Vol. 173, September 1936, 343-57 and Beatty, 352, 356, 384.

¹⁴ See Beatty, 358, 373, 383.

¹⁵ Ibid., 330, 294-95.

¹⁶ Cited in Beatty, 336.

¹⁷ Keith Perry, *The Kingfish in Fiction: Huey P. Long and the Modern American Novel*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ John Potts, *A History of Charisma*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 202-206.

¹⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "On Heroic Leadership" repr. in *The Politics of Hope*, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), 12.

²⁰ Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia*, (1957); (repr. London: Paladin, 1970), 329.

²¹ John Potts, *A History of Charisma*, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 114.

²² Napoleon, as Emerson's representative "man of the world", detailed in *Representative Men* (1850), would be the key reference point in this context. For the essay on Napoleon see Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, (New York: Library of America), 717-745.

²³ See Anthony Hutchison, *Writing the Republic: Liberalism and Morality in American Political Fiction*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), esp. 169-185.

²⁴ For details of the gestation of O'Connor's novel and verification that it was inspired by the career of Curley see Charles F. Duffy, *A Family of His Own: A Life of Edwin O'Connor*, (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 159-70.

²⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology (Vol 3)*, (1922), eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), 1132.

²⁶ For the numerous facts and episodes from Long's life and political career that found their way into Warren's creation see the exhaustive list of connections drawn by Ladell Payne in "Willie Stark and Huey Long: Atmosphere, Myth or Suggestion?", *American Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No.3 (Autumn, 1968), 580-95.

²⁷ McCluskey is clearly at least partly modelled on John F. Kennedy who succeeded James Michael Curley in the House of Representatives as the member for the 11th Congressional district in Massachusetts in 1947. By the time O'Connor began work on *The Last Hurrah* in the mid-fifties Kennedy was firmly ensconced in the Senate.

²⁸ Edwin O'Connor, *The Last Hurrah* (1956), (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1985), 298. Hereafter, all references to the novel will be made in parentheses.

²⁹ See Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order 1930-1980*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

³⁰ See, for example, Kennedy's 1962 Yale Commencement speech: "Today these old sweeping issues very largely have disappeared. The central domestic issues of our time are more subtle and less simple. They relate not to basic clashes of philosophy or ideology but to ways and means of reaching common goals." President John F. Kennedy, Yale University Commencement Speech, June 21 1962. <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/Kennedy-Library-Miscellaneous-Information/Yale-University-Commencement-Address.aspx>

³¹ The term is used by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in an introduction to an anthology of O'Connor's writings. Schlesinger and O'Connor were friends. See Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (ed.), *The Best and Last of Edwin O'Connor*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1970), 24.

³² The usage of the term also recalls the most indelible of the characters created by another Irish-American novelist, F. Scott Fitzgerald, a few decades earlier. Jay Gatsby, of course, was prone to disguising his origins (or so he believed) by referring to friends and acquaintances as "sport".

³³ Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (1946), (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 42. Hereafter, all references to the novel will be made in parentheses.

³⁴ "Politics as a Vocation" in Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (1947; repr. New York: Free Press, 1964), 103. Hereafter, all references to this essay will be made in parentheses.

³⁵ Lawrence A. Scaff, *Weber in America*, (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2011), 163.