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Stepping through the Thin, Crackly Crust of the Present: Historians, Biographers, Novelists and Jack Burden

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Stepping Through the Thin, Crackly Crust of the Present:

Historians, Biographers, Novelists, and Jack Burden

“... it is not the use or absence of metre which distinguishes poet and historian... the difference lies in the fact that the one speaks of events which have occurred, the other of the sort of events which could occur.

“It is for this reason that poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars.”

- Aristotle's *Poetics*

From the back of my copy of *All the King's Men* I learned that Willie Stark is an important part of “our collective literary consciousness,” and that he is as memorable as Holden Caulfield or Huck Finn.¹ This statement is both interesting and suspect, because Willie Stark is neither the focus of the novel nor its most compelling character. Apparently, though, charismatic politicians are infinitely more engaging than well-spoken, introspective, and witty writers – at least to some of Robert Penn Warren's peers. Despite Jack Burden's position as the protagonist in the novel, any simple plot summary of *All the King's Men* will focus upon Willie Stark's career and demise. Willie resonates with readers: he is not so specific as to preclude our memories of real politicians (particularly Huey P. Long, upon whom he is based), yet not so vague as to blend into the

¹ This statement, attributed to Joyce Carol Oates (writing for the *New York Review of Books*), appears on the back cover of the 1996 Second Harvest edition of *All the King's Men*. I will be using this edition for the duration of the paper. A full citation can be found on my Works Consulted page.

communal lull of characters we've encountered. So while Burden may be our narrator and interpreter, the focus of his attention is Willie, forcing the politician to the foreground. We follow Jack's gaze – sometimes home to his mother, sometimes back in time to his adolescence, but always toward the capital and Willie – and can only view history through him. The novel is, then, almost a fictional memoir by Huey P. Long's assistant², as it contains information about his boss, his job, and his personal life. The most compelling moments of the novel emerge when these three intersect, and when Jack attempts to interpret their implications. History is made through such attempts, and even if Jack is a fictional character, his insights ring clear in our world as well as his.

The freedom of the fiction writer to speculate on and explore the motivations, private compulsions, and implications of historical figures provides a context for history that the biographer cannot on his own. In the case of Huey P. Long and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, the novel portrays a more "real" politician than history itself can. Warren is successful in forging Willie Stark as a cohesive, visceral character while Long himself was merely a man – with the idiosyncrasies and unrealized potentials that we all suffer from. More significant even than the larger-than-life politician at the center of the novel is Jack Burden, whom Warren positions as a biographer and historian within the work. Jack's journey through history, his failure to learn from the mistakes of the past, and his eventual revelation that he has a responsibility to the world around him are the central message of the wide-ranging novel.

² Jack Burden does not, however, appear to be based on any real historical figure in Long's life, although the majority of the characters who fit in the realm of politics in the novel – Stark himself, Tiny Duffy, Harrison, etc – have parallels in history. Jack and the inhabitants of his personal life – Anne, Adam, his mother, Irwin – appear to be creations of Warren alone.

I. *Fiction v. Biography v. History*

The basic job of historical research is largely uncontroversial: it is a collecting of information about the past. Much of historical writing is focused in details, in the facts about events, people, and cultures. Pure history – that is, the historical record – ought not express judgment or preference, instead offering objective information whenever possible.³ When such knowledge is unavailable, speculation is not an adequate substitute, neither is storytelling. There is, perhaps, a minimum threshold of information needed for such work to stand upon in order to earn the title of “history.” Biography, in contrast, is concerned with organizing facts and records about individuals into stories. These works often incorporate a strong narrative voice which they share with historical fiction writers, while still abiding by the factual demands of history. Genres of fiction each have their own requirements and conventions, but novelists are still free to experiment with writing style, plot, character, setting, or the absence of any of these elements. While fiction writers arguably enjoy the most freedom to create, they are also held to different standards than historians and biographers – while the soundness of their research may not be refuted, their success relies upon strength of character, plot, and style.

All the King's Men is, above all else, a work of fiction. By the aforementioned criteria, it is a successful one, and has been recognized as such since its original publication in 1946. Because it is a novel, the accuracy of its portrayal of Huey Long does not determine its quality or success. However much Willie Stark truly resembles Huey Long, the novel is so firmly grounded in history as to be able to venture where

³ While true objectivity may be impossible, I will operate under the assumption that it is possible for information, for historical accounts, to be adequately objective: if it is not possible to detect a distinct bias on the part of the author, I will term the work “objective.”

history itself cannot: into what might have been, what ought to have been, and what nearly was. Because Warren enjoys the freedoms of a fiction writer, it is possible for him to emphasize and gloss over aspects of his source (Huey Long) which detract from the cohesiveness of his story. Warren is able to select events from Long's life which underscore the man's role as a fallen populist and manipulative tyrant. No conventions demand that Warren portray Long "fairly" – his refusal to acknowledge the similarities between Stark and Long is perhaps an attempt at dodging potential complaints on the subject. What's more, Warren can more fully explore Stark's personal ambitions and compulsions than an historian, bound by his responsibility to include all information on the subject, possibly can.

So how much history must an author draw upon for his work to qualify not merely as fiction, but also as historical fiction? Merely utilizing a location or era borrowed from history is not enough to place a novel in the genre of historical fiction – a level of fact-based detail, of attention to real events is necessary for this categorization. While *All the King's Men* is fictional and Warren is a novelist rather than an historian, he is still obligated to abide by a certain level of rigor in writing.⁴ He sculpts a work bounded by history rather than pure imagination, and thus one which effectively interprets the past. This act of processing and passing judgment on history, of representing it is the primary strength of historical fiction – the historical novelist's strength

⁴ The exact degree of this rigor is admittedly ambiguous – if setting and time are not enough, does the inclusion of a historical figure count? If so, is it the only factor that really matters? Does using the name of an historical figure – with absolutely no resemblance to the person's actual experience, deeds, or personality – still qualify as historical fiction? While I am not comfortable giving yes-or-no answers to these questions, the appendix at the end of the paper details why these distinctions are not important in assessing the success or failure of a work.

lies in his ability to use shared memory as a means of commenting on the present and future.

Warren's decision to include a character within the novel who could not only participate in the action, but also report it as an historian and pass judgment on it – as Warren does from outside the work – is a fascinating one. Jack Burden has a distinctive voice, and it is only through him that the reader can see Willie Stark. Jack is as much an observer as a participant in the work, and Warren's ability as a fiction writer to create a character who can interact with the historical one as well as tell the writer about the other man provides for a more cohesive statement than a work solely about Long/Stark would. Stark is not, after all, the protagonist in *All the King's Men*. While he may be the main character in Burden's life, Burden is the novel's primary focus. Further, Jack's insights about history are perhaps more effective than theory and fact – that his reflections are personal and based in first-hand experience (even though he is fictional) makes them both emotionally and intellectually stimulating. Warren effectively uses historical fiction to demonstrate, interpret, comment upon, and contextualize events from the past.

Jack's dual role as historian and actor is based in his ambiguous relationship with Willie. He has no job title, and is not consciously aware of why he would want to work for the man. That Jack has no official position relative to Willie – he is not the governor's assistant, campaign manager, secretary – makes his inclusion on the Boss's staff suspicious. Burden stands to gain nothing through his service to Willie besides perhaps a way of distinguishing himself from the gentry he grew up with. When Jack shows resistance to the idea of researching the Judge, Willie offers him a raise, but Jack announces, "If I wanted money, I could think of easier ways to make it than the way I

make it with you,” to which Willie replies, “So you work for me because you love me” (Warren 287). The interchange is typical of the two and draws attention to the ambiguity of their relationship. It has sexual connotations, implies the kind of involuntary affection that one might see in a paternal or fraternal pairing, and highlights Jack’s ambivalence. Jack is unsure of why he works for Willie, but the governor claims to know: “you work for me because I’m the way I am and you’re the way you are. It is an arrangement founded on the nature of things” (Warren 288). While Jack feels that this answer is incomplete, he leaves the subject, ending the conversation by asking Willie, “Aren’t you coming to bed,” drawing attention once again to the sexual overtones of their bond (Warren 288). Jack is entirely too close to his material to provide biographical context to Willie’s life, but Warren’s deliberate inclusion of a flawed character asks us as readers to interpret Willie through Jack’s eyes.

As Jack Burden reminds us, the historical researcher has no obligation to consider the repercussions of his discoveries. In reference to his own studies, Burden says, “A student of history does not care what he digs out of the ash pile, the midden, the sublunary dung heap, which is the human past” (Warren 235). In contrast, the historical novelist’s concern is primarily with these implications – what history has taught us, how it has shaped us, and how isolated incidents fit into a larger framework of human experience. This process of sorting, of distilling raw history into a focused statement is shared also by the biographer. It is the biographer who takes an historical figure’s disparate personality traits and experiences and forges a “character,” who organizes this information into a story. This character is comprised of all available information on an historical figure, tied together according to the biographer’s discretion.

In his acclaimed *Huey Long*, T. Harry Williams engages in a kind of narrative weaving that perhaps tiptoes along the border between history and fiction, sorting through and sewing together the facts of Long's life. While his information is – one must assume – true, his means of conveying it is personal in nature. He fills in small, missing details in order to more fully capture the material.⁵ In his description of Long's brother, Julius, Williams fails to offer any citation as he writes that “Julius had almost a paternal feeling for Huey. The much older brother, who, with his large, domed head, looked like the intellectual that he was, regarded himself as the guardian of all the younger members of the family” (71). In a particularly melodramatic piece of writing from his chapter “Blood on the Moon” (a reference to a journalist's review of one of Long's speeches) Williams claims that “[Long had] said what he stood for... and if he decided to denounce in his own style the things he had said he was against, blood might indeed appear on the moon” (199). These passages are characteristic of his writing, and emphasize his interest in tying together information in a creative fashion.

Williams, despite his talent for making history into a compelling story, is bound by the rigors of his field: he must seek the most accurate information he can find in order to paint a complete, “objective” picture of his subject. While these demands may seem confining compared with the total freedom of selection that the novelist possesses, the historian or biographer is not criticized for inconsistencies in his story or inadequate character development. The biographer does not have to tighten his story until it is believable and engaging – his subject is already believable, for it is real. These writers do

⁵ For the purpose of this paper, I will assume that Williams is within the acceptable scope of his field when he applies narrative and speculative writing in *Huey Long*. This decision is based on the book's Pulitzer Prize in Biography and National Book Award in History and Biography – if Williams' research or methods were suspect, I am confident that the book would not have been so widely and enthusiastically lauded.

not need to struggle with concerns over personal taste and creative talent. While fluency and eloquence are as valued in biographies as in novels, the biographer does not need to concern himself with symbolism or leitmotifs. In fact, the biographer has no need of any literary conventions or styles – the writing is often subordinate to the information and the interpretation which the biographer wishes to convey.

Williams' scrupulous attention to detail fleshes out Long as a historical figure in a way that makes the politician both sympathetic and compelling. In fact, Williams' biography has been criticized for being too friendly to Long: one review from 1970 claims that "Williams seems at times to have substituted [for the traditional depiction of Long as bumbling] an intellectual superman," and fails to show exactly why accusations that Long was a budding fascist are incorrect (Patterson 202). Williams himself describes his quest, in writing *Huey Long*, in his preface. He recounts his receipt of a letter from Long's son (a senator), which leads Williams to "be impressed by [Huey Long's son's] appreciation of the scholarly approach to biography," continuing that "the time had come when an *objective life of his father should be written*" (Williams viii, emphasis added).⁶ In Williams' mind, then, a biography ought to be primarily a "scholarly" work, and "objective" in tone. His own work, however, does not meet these criteria. If his writing betrays a personal preference or attitude, is it still a "scholarly" work, still a legitimate biography? Has Williams done his duty to provide all of the information on Long? Is his slant appropriate and fitting to his field? If the biographer is welcome to guide his

⁶ Interestingly, Williams – shortly after another declaration of objectivity – announces that he fundamentally agrees with the "thesis of Robert Penn Warren in *All the King's Men*" (x), which bears very little resemblance to my own interpretation of the novel. In Williams' eyes, the message is "that the politician who wishes to do good may have to do some evil to achieve his goal," and Williams announces that Willie is the "hero of Warren's novel" (x). Interestingly, no mention is made of Jack – as I suggested in my introduction, basic descriptions of the novel tend to focus entirely on Willie.

readers toward a specific conclusion, to paint history as he chooses, what is the appreciable difference between a liberal biography and a carefully researched historical novel about a real figure?

Whether or not true objectivity is possible – and who would be the arbiter of neutrality? – there are clearly different levels of persuasion and degrees of authorial liberty. Looking at three accounts of Long's impeachment shows that the progress from historical text book to biography to fiction is clear. I have chosen the impeachment because it is a defining moment in Long's career: having enraged his state senate, he faced dozens of charges ranging from bribery to incompetence to using vulgar language, but the impeachment proceedings were halted early on and the charges abandoned. This event is easy to find in a variety of texts dealing with Huey Long, so it serves as an easy point for comparison.

Joe Gray Taylor's *Louisiana: a Bicentennial History* (1976) is a part of the popular history series *States and the Nation* (published by W. W. Norton). It offers a brief account of the Louisiana House of Representative's session in which articles of impeachment were drawn up and then dropped. The text states that a vote was taken, its closeness indicated that impeachment could perhaps be successful, that fifteen senators refused to participate, and that the charges were summarily dropped (Taylor 162-163). Taylor goes on to describe the effects of the impeachment on Long's career – he claims that the governor became more aggressive and maintained his control over the state even when he left to be a U.S. senator. While this suggestion of causation cannot truly be proven, Taylor's inference seems reasonable and can be easily supported through fact.

The author's focus is largely upon Long's influence in Louisiana and the chapter of the state's history which he played a role in.

Williams' biography reads almost like pop fiction in comparison: Long rants, raves, suffers, triumphs. But underneath the speculation and tense story-weaving is a wealth of information, verifiable quotes from participants, and faithful reporting. His chapter "Bloody Monday – and Impeachment" is a prime example of the biographer's job. Williams' draws upon interviews, Long's autobiography, the memoirs of Long's contemporaries, newspaper and journal articles from the time, and others' research on the topic to tell a compelling story. While his work is carefully investigated and cited, Williams often uses his own words rather than specific quotes from his primary sources, thus allowing him to create a distinct and consistent tone of narration throughout the book. When Williams ventures into speculation, however, the biography begins to seem oddly novel-like. In describing Long's reaction to a fight between one of his brothers and an impeachment supporter, Williams writes that "he jumped from his chair with an expectant expression" (385), and does not provide a direct source for this information. Filling in details such as facial expressions may be harmless – would it change our impression of Long to know that he might have frowned, or remained impassive? – but this gesture towards the narrative and towards the interests of the reader demonstrates the decided step towards fiction that biography often takes.

Warren's account of the impeachment is indirect. Jack Burden recounts many of Willie's speeches in reaction to the impeachment proceedings, but the ordeal is more a setting than an event in the novel. The Willie Stark we see is defiant and fiery, but he is also cornered. Impeachment is a backdrop while the real action lies in Jack's blackmail

of Irwin, his torment over Anne, and his twisted relationship with his boss.⁷ Willie, for his part, knows that he will have to work to insure that he is not impeached and that his political machine continues running smoothly. He remains confident that these tasks are possible, drawing once again on his old base – poor rural whites (Warren 218-219). Much of Stark's opposition – like Long's – comes from the old money in New Orleans and from business interests. While these individuals may be powerful enough to cause trouble for the politician, in sheer numbers, Willie has them beat. While many of the details of the impeachment are left out of the novel, we see that Willie is guilty of many of the charges brought against Long.⁸ He demands an undated resignation from one of his officers (Warren 198), uses intimidation to silence enemies and compel support (Warren 521), and offers business contracts and money in exchange for votes (Warren 547).⁹ We see Willie Stark do what Long was accused of – part, no doubt, of Warren's commentary on Long as an historical figure, his judgment on the man's tactics, and his message for readers about the dangers of such politicians.

While the story is the same in each account of the impeachment, the minutiae of Williams' account are perhaps not as important as the thrust of Warren's. His masterful employment of narrative writing, borrowed from fiction, fills in the blanks that history

⁷ At this point, a note about plot may be helpful: Jack's relationship with Anne Stanton, dating back to a summer when he was 21 and she was 17, ends with an anticlimax when, despite her willingness, Jack refuses to have sex with Anne, interrupting what he believes to be the natural progression of their relationship. With no physical tie between them (at least in Jack's mind), they drift apart rather than marrying. Anne has an affair with Willie – despite her family's outspoken criticism of the man – and Jack finds himself doubting the past that they share.

⁸ In fact, it seems likely that Warren was aware of these charges, including them at will. The implication, then, is that a figure such as Long *would* likely commit these offenses, even if not enough information could be gathered to impeach him. Warren does not list any sources for his work, however – a convenient benefit of denying its grounding in history.

⁹ Ladell Payne, in his "Willie Stark and Huey Long: Atmosphere, Myth or Suggestion" (1968), mentions coincidences in the impeachments of Long and Stark, but his focus is on the specific charges leveled against each, rather than their actual guilt. While my analysis was not inspired by his, I acknowledge the similarities between the two.

leaves with an eye towards what will satisfy readers. Under the fictionalized specifics lies a wealth of information, but much of it seems extraneous. History, with its concerns about details, often distracts itself from the power of the past: what are we to learn from it, and why does it matter? Certainly reality can be more strange and interesting than fiction, and there is inarguably an appeal to knowing what has come before us. Would it matter, though, if we had names, exact locations, and specific quotations wrong if the actions and the implications of an historical event were correct? If the details are the important part of historical study, then historical study is the acquisition of knowledge merely for the sake of knowing. If the context of history and its consequences are the aim of historical study, historical fiction may be more capable of educating us than history itself.

II. Huey P. Long and Willie Stark: Biography v. Fiction

Although Robert Penn Warren refused to publicly acknowledge that Willie Stark was a fictionalized representation of Louisiana's Huey P. Long, the similarities between the two are undeniable. Certainly the details have changed – names, towns, years – but the core is the same: a Louisiana populist who rises from obscurity to run a smooth, ruthless political machine; an aspiring president who faces impeachment by the rich, old money men of his state; a charismatic womanizer whose assassination cut short his dreams of soaking the rich and commanding loyalty across the country. While the essence of the two is the same, the details of their lives differ.

Long often drew upon his rustic childhood as a farm boy in Louisiana to garner support from the impoverished whites of the state. Williams claims, however, that Long

grew up in an essentially middle-class family and was provided ample opportunity for education. His father owned the land they occupied, already giving the family an advantage over their neighbors in Winn parish (Williams 21). The family had an interest in reading and paid for each of their children to attend college (Williams 21-22). While the family would not have been wealthy outside their own community, the humble beginnings of Long's speeches were – in Williams' estimation – an affectation.

Willie Stark, in contrast, grew up poor. The early action of *All the King's Men* concerns itself with Willie's trip to his father's farm for publicity photos. While Willie has paid for improvements to the house, they are not visible from the road, allowing his family to retain the red-neck aesthetic that Willie strives for (Warren 34). Willie's education is conducted in his room at night as he teaches himself law over the course of several years – in contrast to the single year that Long spent at law school before passing the bar exam (Warren 42, Williams 79). The effect of these changes is that Willie's rise to power is based only in diligence and ambition while Long – using family ties and a frantic need for power – was prepared and eager for power his whole life. While Long's family was well-established in their town and his family had dabbled in politics before, Willie is just a small-town boy whose inner drive pulls him into politics. His first foray into the public arena is through a cousin – he gets the job of County Treasurer – but is massively unpopular and he does not venture into politics again until he serves as a puppet candidate for Harrison (Warren 98). Willie is every bit as naive and backwards as Long claimed to be, making his rise all the more amazing. That Warren is able to not only include a basic self-made man story but to make it believable reflects his immense skill as an author and the wisdom of his decision to do so.

Willie and Huey Long's speeches reflect the same development of political personality and oratorical skill. Both men begin their careers with a dry attention to fact and figure, educating their listeners rather than riling them up; both men find success by speaking to raw emotion, rousing their audiences with fire-and-brimstone rants (Williams 199, Warren 104). Ladell Payne identifies key speeches in Long's career and their corresponding speeches in *All the King's Men*. These similarities are striking: with changes of merely a few words, Stark and Long appear to have the same oratory career (Payne 585). While these speeches bear striking similarity, Long and Stark both engage in many distinct speeches. While Payne shows six examples of Long/Stark parallels, he does not mention the vast number of unmatched statements by either. Despite this limitation, Payne's case is compelling and undoubtedly Warren had read transcripts of many of Long's speeches before writing Willie's.

Further, Glen M. Johnson hypothesizes that Warren has deliberately spaced events in Stark's life two years (or, on one apparently significant occasion, four years) behind corresponding occurrences in Long's career (Johnson 554). He suggests that this conscious decision allowed Warren to remind readers of the rise of fascism in Europe, with Stark as some sort of American Hitler or Mussolini (Johnson 554). This conclusion is difficult to support given the tone of the text and the aims of Stark (or Long) politically: while he sought power and had designs on the White House, the notion of commanding complete loyalty from every American citizen and of punishing them for refusal seems absurd. While Johnson's theory is an interesting one to entertain – for it seems unlikely that the consistent changes in year are merely an accident – it is unconvincing. A more simple explanation for the time shift is that Warren desired to

distance his novel from the subject not only by renaming characters and towns, but by changing the temporal setting as well. The additional two years does not change the era of the action, but it is a gesture at distinguishing Stark from Long. Johnson's claim does highlight an important ability of historical fiction: it is entirely possible and reasonable for an author to make subtle changes in order to provide context to his subject. Long himself might have been only one man, but placed in the larger framework of fascism and politics in the 1930s, he becomes a menacing threat. This subtle link is a technique open to the historical novelist but closed to the historian and biographer, who must abide punctiliously to the passage of time. That Johnson's point is an important one does not make it applicable to *All the King's Men*, however, and that Long has often been called a demagogue and a tyrant seems to be more a product of reactionary sensationalism than rational accuracy.

Huey P. Long's life has inspired not just Warren's famous novel, but also several award-winning biographies – clearly, his escapades appeal to writers of all disciplines. That the subject can be made compelling in history, biography, and fiction speaks to the universality of the tale. The story of the rise, corruption, and fall of a good man is familiar and does not need much embellishment to captivate readers, if the success of these books is any indication. The best-known of these numerous biographies is undoubtedly Williams' Pulitzer-winning *Huey Long*, although full-length works about Long have appeared as recently as last year. Amongst Williams' sources is Long's autobiography, *Every Man a King*. While it serves as a treasure trove for quotes and inside information about Long's career and goals, Long (like all of us) heavily censors his tales. It is here – in the disparity between how Long saw himself and how others saw

him – that the greatest insight about the man can be gained. After all, if we based our historical understanding merely upon memoirs and public statements, we would severely limit our understanding of the past, almost universally receiving glowing reviews of our ancestors. When these first-person reflections are compared to outside analysis, the intricacies of personality, temperament, and ego are laid bare.

III. Jack as a Student of History

Jack Burden's presence in the novel is commanding – his mistakes, snide comments, and philosophical musings hedge our view of Louisiana and of Willie Stark. Burden is a sometimes-historian, a journalist, and Willie's personal henchman; he is often selfish, shortsighted, and sarcastic. Following an unsuccessful stint in law school and a painful breakup with Anne Stanton, Jack becomes "a graduate student, working for his Ph.D. in American History, in the State University of his native state" (Warren 236). There, he is able to seek revenge on his parents and fight against his upper-class upbringing by pursuing an impractical degree and living "in [a] slatternly apartment among the unwashed dishes in the sink and on the table, the odor of stale tobacco smoke, the dirty shirts and underwear piled in corners" (Warren 237) – his mother, we learn, has often offered to support him financially, but he refuses. He might as well live in squalor, he figures, "for nothing ever happened to Jack Burden... he was invulnerable" (Warren 239). While important events swirl around him, he is untouched and wholly unaffected. Leaving school, marrying and divorcing, working for a newspaper, and finally taking a job with Willie does little to change Burden emotionally, as he regards the events around him with studied detachment.

Shortly after Willie asks him to inquire into Judge Irwin's past, Jack informs his readers that he has delved into history before. This first attempt – his dissertation on Cass Mastern – was a failure, he says, and dragged him into the deep depression which Jack calls the Great Sleep. While Cass Mastern's story is helpful in understanding Burden's limitations as an individual, it is also useful in detailing his feelings about history and the process of uncovering it.

Jack comes into Cass's story during one of his particularly listless phases. As Anne Stanton later tells him, he wanders aimless and ambitionless through his life, stumbling upon tasks and performing them until he loses interest (Warren 454). Cass, like Jack, is prone to self-indulgence and allows conscience to take a back seat to desire (Warren 246). In Cass's case, this lack of responsibility leads him into an affair with his best friend's wife, a scenario which will be repeated later as Willie begins an affair with Jack's first love. The affair bothers Cass in a distant way, his guilt flaring up as he engages in intercourse on his friend's own bed (Warren 256), but not enough to change his actions. Even when it becomes apparent that the other man's death was a suicide, triggered by knowledge of the affair, Cass is not driven to break off his relationship (Warren 262-263).¹⁰ It is not until the lady sells her maid into sexual slavery that Cass assumes responsibility for his role in the debacle. After inviting death in the Civil War and finally receiving the wound he has been waiting for, Cass reflects on his sins and feels that he has atoned for them.

¹⁰ While Cass's relationship with Annabelle Trice breaks off shortly after her husband's death, the reason is not guilt, but rather that Annabelle is obsessed with the idea that her maid (an enslaved woman) knows of the suicide and the affair. In her attempt to assuage her guilt, Annabelle sells the woman – finally spurring Cass into action (Warren 265)

Despite his understanding of the events of Cass's life, Jack has not learned how Cass's story is anything other than a story – as an historian, he feels no need to apply the past to the present, and lacks the maturity to do so. He does not “know” Cass Mastern, and determines that “[h]e did not need to know Cass Mastern to get the degree; he only had to know the facts about Cass Mastern's world” (Warren 282). Jack, speaking from the present, reflects on his younger self, the limitations he suffered then, and determines that the difference between Cass and the younger Jack lies in perspective:

[Cass] learned that the world is all one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils around you who have touched the web and then inject the black, numbing poison under your hide. It does not matter whether or not you meant to brush the web of things. Your happy foot or your gay wing may have brushed it ever so lightly, but what happens always happens and there is the spider....
(283)

Cass's understanding leads to a feeling of karmic debt to the world around him: he has knocked into the spider web with his affair, and the reverberations from that impact kill his friend. The spider's pursuit of Cass, its hungry vengeance lead him to rescue his mistress's maid, free his own slaves, and seek death in the Confederate army. Despite Cass's attempts to atone for his sins, the final price is his life. That the older Jack can make this observation implies that he has in some way grown since his university days, that he understands the consequences of his actions. Young Jack falls into the Great

Sleep “not because he could not understand [Cass Mastern], but because he was afraid to understand for what might be understood there was a reproach to him” (284). These new insights are not easily earned, however, and Jack spends most of the novel either suffering from crippling apathy or teetering on the edge of maturity but always falling back into ignorance.

Jack’s willingness to separate the details and facts of history from its message illustrates how historical study, done without sensitivity or insight, lacks the power to enlighten. The mere ability to repeat information from memory does not imply that one has processed the content. Jack may have read Cass’s journals and letters, visited his house, and written about him, but he cannot see the significance of the man’s life (Warren 282). Cass is a symbol which Jack is unable to interpret, a message to him about his own life and about humanity at large which he refuses to receive. Jack’s is the pure, dry, uninspired study of history, while he is himself a character in a novel that attempts to give history context and purpose.

Burden makes a second foray into the past at the behest of Willie, who seeks to ruin Judge Irwin’s credibility as retaliation for endorsing one of Stark’s rivals. Jack’s assignment is logical both because his job – a poorly defined set of tasks designed to further Willie’s ends – demands it and because Irwin helped raise Jack after the young man’s father left. Further, Jack is a “student of history” (Warren 235) and has experience in the dark nether regions of human experience. Despite Irwin’s kindness and companionship throughout his youth, Jack agrees to sully the Judge’s reputation. His only shows of resistance to the command are a half-hearted announcement that “the Judge won’t scare easy” (Warren 57), and a faint hope that there may not be any sins in

Irwin's past (Warren 74). Willie's easy response: "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something" (Warren 75). This declaration of original sin and its limitations on human goodness implicates not only Irwin, but Jack and Willie as well, as Jack's promising and privileged beginnings turn to aimless wandering and Stark's noble populist goals twist into a quest for personal power. Jack's quest for information is thorough and follows the heartless philosophy which Jack outlines in his Cass study – he cares only about "truth" – facts, dates, sordid details – and not at all for its implications (Warren 235).

The search through Irwin's history begins with an assessment of the Judge's motives for a potential transgression: the only possible inducements are "ambition, love, fear, money" (Warren 289), Jack determines, and the Judge is vulnerable only through money.¹¹ Jack patiently sorts through old newspaper articles, cases which Irwin pursued as Attorney General under Governor Stanton, and old business contacts. When he asks Anne about Irwin's past, she is taken aback and scolds him, saying that he wants to "spoil" their shared childhood (Warren 311). But Jack is unperturbed – he does not care about ruining his own past, as he regards it with as little respect as he shows the rest of history. According to Jack history as no regard for implication (Warren 235), and has no desire but discovery. When he finally tracks down the evidence Willie asked for, it comes in the form of a long-hidden suicide note – a suicide that Irwin played a hand in. The scandal is well-hidden, but Jack knows that

¹¹ Jack systematically eliminates the other choices by studying Irwin's romantic past (where he finds that the Judge married twice, both wives dying after long illnesses, and no evidence of affairs on the Irwin's part) and declaring that "an ambitious man is a man who wants other people to think that he is great. The Judge knows he is great and doesn't care what other people think" (Warren 289), knocking ambition out of the running.

There is always the clue, the canceled check, the smear of lipstick, the footprint in the canna bed, the condom on the park path, the twitch in the old wound, the baby shoes dipped in bronze, the taint in the bloodstream. And all times are one time, and all those dead in the past never lived before our definition gives them life, and out of the shadow their eyes implore us.

That is what all of us historical researchers believe.

And we love truth. (342)

This approach to history implies that it is the historian's job to take events and people and turn out stories and characters. If the past is inconsequential until we have dug it up and processed it, it is like an as-yet-unwritten work of fiction – part of a hazy world of the imagination, the larger collective of information. Once it has been grabbed and processed, it becomes real and has real implications. It also seems to in some way contradict Jack's earlier approach, as he is unable to make Cass's life into an effective story.

With this new understanding, Jack makes a transition into the world of the biographer – also, incidentally the world of the blackmailer. Jack's formerly dry skills at historical research are turned to a use which shows both a talent for piecing together information into a powerful whole, and a malicious ability to turn the past into a weapon. Jack's limited understanding of Cass Mastern, his inability to comprehend either the gravity of the man's sins or the implications of his repentance, limited him from seeing just how significant Cass's story is. Now that Jack is able to understand the importance of the past, he can use it against Irwin.

The Judge's crime is not one of malice or passion – it is pure desperation. Early in his career, Irwin (working as Attorney General under Governor Stanton) pursues a suit against the Southern Belle Fuel Company. Facing bankruptcy and foreclosure, Irwin accepts a bribe to drop the suit – in the form of an extremely lucrative position with the company's subsidiary the American Electric Power company (Warren 329-330). The former occupant of the job, Mortimer L. Littlepaugh, goes to the governor to explain the situation, but Stanton knowingly ignores him (Warren 338). Frantic and heartbroken, Mortimer kills himself, leaving a note to his sister that she should not publicize his cause of death so that she can enjoy his insurance money (Warren 341). Jack locates the surviving sister and secures a copy of Mortimer's suicide note. Burden is unwilling to share this information with Willie, claiming that he needs to hear Irwin's response before making the information public.

When Jack confronts him, Irwin has a difficult time understanding even what the younger man is referring to (Warren 519). The judge remarks that he had not recalled the name of the man who died as a result of his actions – but that he still thought often about what he had done (Warren 520). For the judge, the message of the past, the implications it holds for the present, are infinitely more important than the details, such as names, places, or dates. Irwin also comments that “sometimes – for a long time at a stretch – it's like it hadn't happened. Not to me. Maybe to somebody else, but not to me” (Warren 521). Even his own past has become a story to him, a terrible story. But if Jack had not dug it up, Judge Irwin's sin might have died with him. Jack's action in the spider web of the universe draws the spider's attention to Irwin, however, and his death settles the old score: Irwin understands that he has not yet atoned for causing a suicide, and that only his

blood can pay the debt. The ripples have not yet settled, however, as Jack must now atone for his own sin of finding the information and sharing it with the Judge, for Jack too has now caused a death.

To Jack's credit, he has not publicized the information, and he allows the Judge's reputation to remain unsullied. After Irwin's death, he keeps his knowledge private and refuses to share it with Willie. Burden admires the other man for keeping his own ammunition private when Jack tries to blackmail the Judge. Irwin says, shortly before Jack leaves his house, "I could stop you," continuing, "I could just say to you – I could just tell you something.... But I won't" (Warren 523), which Jack later identifies as the information about his paternity. That Irwin is his father relieves Jack, who is now able to revise his own history and his understanding of himself. Burden "has always felt some curse of [the Scholarly Attorney's] weakness upon [me]," and is now freed of it (Warren 532). The Scholarly Attorney was so wholly good, so loyal and pious, that Jack felt no connection to him. Because he cannot keep up with the Attorney's wholesomeness, he rejects the man entirely and feels no obligation to further the man's legacy. With the Judge as his father, though, Burden begins to understand that even good people can err, and that someone who has sinned can still make positive contributions (Warren 532). This new knowledge includes the promise of redemption, which Jack needs by the novel's end.

When Jack learns that Anne has begun an affair with Willie, he chooses to flee to California, offering no notice of his departure or news of when he will return. Tormented by the idea that Anne – his childhood love, a pinnacle of old-money nobility – would enter a sexual relationship with his boss (whom Jack has his own issues surrounding

devotion, love, and loyalty) drives him West, where, he claims, all those who wish to run away have gone. Jack “[lies] in the motionless ooze of History, naked on a hotel bed in Long Beach, California” (Warren 408) with a bottle of bourbon, and he seems poised on the edge of discovery: her affair is in part Jack’s fault, and he is finally suffering as a result of his apathy. But just when it seems that he is ready to accept his role in at least this one situation, he heads back to Louisiana and develops the Great Twitch, a theory of the universe which wholly negates personal liability.

The Great Twitch is Jack’s attempt at justifying his life, his lack of conscience or direction, and the work he does. In California, Jack sees a man with an unconscious facial tic, and then he comes upon an epiphany. He has “the dream that all like is but the dark heave of blood and the twitch of the nerve,” and he finds it “rather bracing and tonic” (Warren 467-468). This theory tells him that he cannot feel angry or remorseful about Anne’s affair, because people are all “simply another rather complicated piece of mechanism” (Warren 468). We are machines, an accident of the universe, and thus our actions are irrelevant. He concludes that “you cannot lose what you never had,” and “that you are never guilty of a crime which you did not commit” (Warren 468) – that is, you cannot be punished for murder if you cause a suicide; you are not an adulterer if you cause an affair. Jack is, according to his own limited and self-serving logic, an innocent man. The Great Twitch only delights Jack for a short time, however, as Irwin’s death and Willie’s assassination force him finally to confront his role in both events.

Jack’s struggle towards realization and responsibility comes to a perhaps anti-climactic close at the novel’s end, as he reveals that he has married Anne Stanton and is moving away from Burden’s Landing. While his guilt may have reached a high point

with Irwin's death – which he admits he may have been responsible for – Willie's assassination seems to clear the air like a thunderstorm. While the death of the Boss is a cause for distress, it is also a final tie which snaps, freeing Jack to act independently. His mother, the subject of so much of Jack's misplaced affection and sexual limitation, has left, his father has killed himself, his childhood best friend has killed his boss and then been shot to death in turn. Now free of his lingering obligations and paralysis, Jack chooses to marry Anne and leave both his privileged upbringing and his populist involvement behind. This gesture towards redemption may seem too clear, too easy, but to Jack, it is hard won: he has lost everything (thus paying his price to the giant spider) and what he is left with is Anne, who is as damaged as he is. Jack is reborn – perhaps baptized anew by the blood of Willie, Adam, and Irwin – and leaves his past behind him. That he has truly comprehended the gravity of his experience is unclear, but then, he has not yet been studied, been contextualized; he is still a part of the undifferentiated mass of the human past, and we as readers are free to interpret that life in order to give meaning to our own. If what we find is a reproach to us, then we should push on towards a more complete understanding of Jack and the novel which he narrates.

IV. *Implications*

If fiction is able to elaborate on the universal themes that history can only hint at, what does *All the King's Men* tell us? Does the novel serve as a warning against populism, against fascism, against placing a price on our loyalty? Or does the book instead show us glimpses of ourselves – ambitious, treacherous, apathetic, and selfish – that are meant to disturb us? Perhaps attempting to boil such a dense and multi-layered

work into a quick moral is futile – the novel may contain all of these messages and many more. Undoubtedly present in the text is an exploration of the relationship between a historian and his subject matter, a reporter and a politician, an employer and his employee, a man and his own past. Jack Burden's position at the center of the story and the many roles he plays throughout the novel allows readers to hear not only what he has observed about Willie, but also what he leaves unsaid.

Warren's masterful novel represents historical fiction at its best: it showcases not only the author's immense skill at storytelling and his artful style and tone, but also his grasp of history as a problematic field. History is fundamentally unlike other academic disciplines, because it is inextricably a part of all of us. We are, in large part, a product of our experiences and our heritage, and as a species, we are unified by common knowledge of what has passed. That a novel can not only educate us about the past, but also offer context to that time, demonstrates that fiction and history are complementary on a fundamental level. Fiction is, on its own, too ambient to educate – when it is given an anchor of reality (whether that anchor be an historical figure, an institution, or an identifiable setting), it takes on a new ability to teach us about human experience. History, left in the form of facts and records, speaks only to the event it recounts – when it includes context (donated by narrative weaving, storytelling, or fictionalized characters), it becomes a tool by which we can demonstrate the importance of memory. *All the King's Men* offers, both implicitly and explicitly, a look at how individuals come to terms with their own pasts, reconcile themselves with the legacies of their ancestors, and learn from the mistakes of those who have come before.

Months spent with the ghost of Long and the specter of Willie Stark leave me with a sudden, inexpressible need to follow history myself. Past books and journals to Louisiana, to Winnfield. To anywhere that Huey Long was, that I may know for certain that his path is not a grander version of mine, that his ambition is somehow more subversive than mine. But how is one ambition different from another, truly? Ambition itself is not what separates the tyrants from the meek – it is the conscience which holds aspirations in check that distinguishes us. The Huey Longs of history do not suffer from too much ambition, but rather from too little restriction – without an inner whisperer to tell them when they have strayed too far, they have no guide but their own want.

The true purpose of delving into the past is, perhaps, to see ourselves there, and so the study of demagogues and would-be tyrants serves as a warning to the driven that they may desire too much. They find – or, in the case of Jack's Cass Mastern study, fail to find – that they are the spiritual kin of their subjects. By making public their findings, these ambitious historians and novelists and biographers can assert that they *are different*, that they are aware of the danger inherent to their drive. They can demonstrate to themselves, and to readers like them, that we can still learn from our collective past – we needn't repeat the mistakes of our forbearers.

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