

# The Stark Regime and American Democracy: A Political Interpretation of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*

JOSEPH H. LANE, JR. *Emory and Henry College*

**R**obert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* is a political novel that deserves the serious study of political scientists interested in understanding the formative effects of American democracy. A careful reading of the novel that is informed by the classical approach to the analysis of regimes reveals the close connection between the politics of Willie Stark and the politics of modern American democracy. Furthermore, by viewing Stark's actions through the eyes of Jack Burden, a perceptive narrator who is moving toward self-knowledge, we can gain insight into both why modern democracies encourage the formation of a debilitating nihilism among their citizens and the prospects for countering these effects.

**R**obert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* is widely held to be the greatest American political novel (e.g., Blotner 1966, 221, 225–6; Davidson 1967, 411; Whalen-Bridge 1998, 172, 175). Nevertheless, it has not been the focus of sustained explication in the political science literature.<sup>1</sup> The book has received a great deal of critical examination, but the literary interpretations may explain why political scientists have not looked to the novel for political insight. In short, literary scholars tend to discount the political character of *All the King's Men* as being either too simple or perhaps too insidious to yield significant political insight, in spite of ample evidence that the novel may have a political teaching. In fact, John Burt (1988) persuasively argues that all of Warren's work indicates great interest in political problems arising out of America's struggles to realize the promise of democracy. In this essay, I take issue with the weak analysis of the political character of *All the King's Men* and show why it should be studied carefully by political scientists who wish to understand American democracy.

Several recent studies argue that literary works are particularly well suited to explore the effects of the American regime (in the broad sense) on our political and private lives.<sup>2</sup> The classical approach characterizes political regimes by the people who hold power, their

methods of using that power, and the ends for which power is exercised. Plato, Aristotle, and other classical thinkers tried to demonstrate how the shape of particular regimes has a decisive effect on the character of citizens (see Cantor 1995, 192–5; Zuckert 1981, 684, 700–2). In many respects, this type of analysis may appear congruent with the modern approach to literature advocated by the New Historicists, but there is a significant difference. The classical political thinkers insisted that some people could free themselves from the prejudices of the political society around them and write self-consciously about both its good and bad features (Cantor 1995, 192–3). Zuckert (1981, 706) argues that this rare insight may be best communicated through literary presentations that provide “the means of relating . . . characters and character development to political reality.” I will show that Warren's novel is best understood as an illustration of how a particular type of democratic regime (closer to our own than we would like to admit) shapes certain human beings. Insofar as our political activity shapes our character and to the extent this shaping may be explained and understood, however limited our ability to gain objectivity, we must consider the formative consequences of our political actions.

When we examine *All the King's Men* from the broad perspective of the classical approach to the study of the character of the regime, all the disparate parts of Warren's novel can be explained as part of a consistent whole that is both a thoroughly political story and a great work of American political thought. I argue that the purpose of the novel is twofold: to illustrate a set of political dangers inherent in certain commonly held views about the character of American democracy and to show how these dangers are manifested both in the practice of our politics and in the character of our citizens. Warren presents his unnamed southern state as a particular democratic regime, and a careful analysis of his presentation shows how that regime is related to our own political situation broadly understood.

I begin by explaining how this approach to the novel may answer some of the outstanding questions in the scholarly literature on the work. I then analyze Willie Stark's speeches to reveal the character of his politics and the circumstances that appear to make necessary his turn toward morally problematic political methods.

Joseph H. Lane, Jr., is Assistant Professor of Political Science, Emory and Henry College, Emory, VA 24237 (jhlane@ehc.edu).

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1999 APSA annual meeting in Atlanta and shared the prize for Best Paper in Politics and Literature. I thank Roger Barrus, Steven Ealy, Robert Faulkner, Paul Franco, Christine Henderson, Jim Pontuso, and the others who read earlier versions of this essay and whose comments proved most helpful. I particularly wish to thank Ada Finifter; the anonymous referees; Julia Wilson, who was particularly helpful in editing the final version; and Marc Hetherington, who urged me to submit this work to the *APSR*.

<sup>1</sup> A JSTOR search of political science journal articles for mention of “Robert Penn Warren” or “*All the King's Men*” reveals only fourteen references, and none contain any sustained discussion of the novel. In her broad introductory work on American novels as American political thought, Catherine Zuckert (1981, 685) mentions *All the King's Men* only briefly: “Neither work [*Advise and Consent* and *The Last Hurrah!*] leads the reader to reflect on the passionate and popular origins as well as the ambiguously moral effects of American politics, however, the way Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* does through the musings of the narrator, Jack Burden.”

<sup>2</sup> On the reading of literature as a guide to understanding political life broadly interpreted, see Blotner 1966; Brown 1977; Dannhauser 1995; Howe 1957; Whalen-Bridge 1998; and Zuckert 1990, 1995.

Next, I demonstrate how Stark's conversation with Adam Stanton reveals the connection between his political theory and the view of the human condition on which his political activity is based. I then discuss the specific influence of Stark's politics on the character of the narrator, Jack Burden, whose moral and intellectual crises permeate the work. Finally, I lay out the broad consequences of this connection between Stark's politics and Burden's intellectual and moral transformation.

### IS ALL THE KING'S MEN A POLITICAL NOVEL?

*All the King's Men* is generally thought to be about "the corrupting nature of power" and how power's inevitable effects transform "a well-intentioned, idealistic back-country lawyer unable to resist the greed for power and lust for politics" into "an American demagogue."<sup>3</sup> The idealistic lawyer whose rise and fall is said to illustrate the awful truth of Lord Acton's celebrated axiom is Willie Stark, the governor of an unnamed southern state. According to this view, the key action of the novel is the terrible corruption that destroys the character of Stark. The novel must be understood as political in the sense that it argues against the idea that moral decency can ever coexist with political power; therefore, the practice of politics and the pursuit of powerful positions are inherently corrupting activities that ought to be avoided by moral persons. Ealy's (1999, 6) interpretation is consistent with this view: "[Stark] began his political career by claiming that a hick must depend on himself and no one else, and offered himself as the hick spokesman for the rest of the hicks. Along the way he forgot about his political roots, and became engaged in political infighting to promote his own power, not to fulfill a hick political agenda."<sup>4</sup> There are good reasons to think that this is not the decisive political teaching of the novel.

Two features of the novel undermine any attempt to read it as a simple morality tale about the evils of corrupting power. First, Warren's portrayal of Stark is far from consistently admonitory. Many characters in the book speak favorably of Stark even after his turn to a form of demagogic tyranny, which has led some commentators to suggest that Warren is an apologist for the kind of authoritarianism attributed to Huey Long (1893–1935), the inflammatory governor and senator from Louisiana. It is argued that Burden, who makes many of the most startling arguments in favor of a sympathetic view of Stark, should be understood as a "thinly disguised authorial spokesman" (Baumbach

[1965] 1987, 20). If Burden is Warren and approves of Stark, then Warren must approve of Stark. Moreover, if Stark is Long and Burden/Warren approves of Stark/Long, then Warren must approve of Long. *Quod erat demonstratum*.

Reactions to this reading of the novel range from mild scolding to the branding of Warren as a neofascist who advocates an American type of democratic Hitlerism (Baumbach [1965] 1987, 20; Heilman [1947] 1977, 22–4; Wilson 2000). Warren was so sensitive to these charges that he repeatedly insisted Stark was not Long and his view of Stark was not wholly favorable. He even went so far as to explain how the vicissitudes of the academic job market forced him to accept a position at Louisiana State University in 1936, as though to have done so by choice would have constituted a de facto love of Long, who was the university's patron (Warren [1964] 1965, 75–9; [1953] 1977, 97). The idea that the novel is Warren's literary apologia for Long also appeared in the political science literature around the time of the novel's release (see Dauer 1948, 334 n. 30; Irish 1952, 133).<sup>5</sup>

Second, we must consider why the grand and terrifying political tale that occupies the foreground of the text is presented through the eyes of Burden, a thoughtful narrator whose reflections on and reaction to Stark's career appear to be central to the novel's purpose. We see through Burden's eyes the historical trajectory that brought Stark to power and eventually his end, but we are inundated with the story of Burden's past, including a chapter on his research of his doctoral dissertation and another on the unhappy story of his first love affair. In these chapters, Stark and his political activity are pushed into the background, and Burden's own struggles with self-knowledge take center stage. These seeming digressions from the story of Stark's corruption by power puzzle many interpreters. Some of them wish Burden away as a nuisance who dilutes the political message, distracts us from Stark's true character, or deprives the novel of its consistency (Heilman [1947] 1977, 19–20, 24).

A sophisticated interpretation along these lines is advanced by Richard King ([1980] 1987), who depicts the entire book as moving away from a compelling story about politics and into an incoherent tale of personal psychology. He contends that what begins as Burden telling of "a poor boy who rises to power, his attempts to break the 'interests,' and the personal, political, and moral costs involved" would have made "a fine and rather unique southern (and American) novel," but the oedipal story of Burden's search for his father confuses any real consideration of Stark's activ-

<sup>3</sup> The quotations are from the back cover of the Harvest paperback edition of *All the King's Men* (Warren [1946] 1974). All page references to the novel correspond to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> For other expressions of this common interpretation, see Cleopatra 1985, esp. 108–9; Kaplan [1965] 1987, esp. 10; Whalen-Bridge 1998, 174–5. For a comprehensive survey of reviews when the novel was released, almost all of which took this view, see Heilman [1947] 1977. This interpretation appears to have informed the 1949 Oscar-winning movie, which completely transformed Stark into a demagogue obsessed with gaining power for its own sake.

<sup>5</sup> For discussions about how closely Stark is modeled on Long, see Graham 1970, 205; Gray [1972] 1987, 94–8; Johnson 1980; Payne 1968. Warren's comments on the subject can be found in "*All the King's Men: The Matrix of Experience*" ([1964] 1965) and in his preface to the 1953 edition ([1953] 1977). Note the key statement: "Certainly, it was the career of Long and the atmosphere in Louisiana that suggested the play that was to become the novel. But suggestion does not mean identity" (Warren [1953] 1977, 97). Some early reviewers thought the congruity should have been perfect and lamented that the novel was "not *biographically* accurate" (Heilman [1947] 1977, 21, emphasis in original).

ity. King argues that “the two stories are only tenuously connected” by a linking device that “is not entirely convincing.” He concludes: “Thus what promised to be a profound political novel ends by being swallowed up by a private quest for identity” as “Warren seems to lose interest in the political issue altogether” (pp. 153–4). Critics who concur with King find the work internally inconsistent and poorly suited for teaching us anything about politics (e.g., Baumbach [1965] 1987).

This hardly constitutes an exhaustive survey of the scholarly literature on *All the King's Men*, but it shows that questions about the role of Burden's character, Burden's praise of Stark, and the connection between Burden's intellectual and moral crises and Stark's political activity lie at the root of the confusion about the political character of the novel. When we recognize why the story of Burden, as Burden himself insists (pp. 157, 435), is inseparable from the story of Stark's political career, we can see that Warren illustrates how certain elements of our particular political regime are “formative,” which is to say that they “shape the way of life of citizens living under them” (Cantor 1995, 192; also see Zuckert 1981, 702). I will argue that the work demonstrates how Burden's time with and study of Stark shapes his view of the world and why this particular shaping is symptomatic of a shaping that occurs in more subtle ways throughout American political culture. In order to accomplish this, I will next explain the nature of Stark's politics before turning to a discussion of Burden's transformation.

## THE RHETORIC AND SUBSTANCE OF WILLIE STARK'S POLITICS

The first step in establishing the political teaching of the novel is to understand the true character of Stark's politics. We must distinguish between what is admirable in Stark's politics and what is not, and we must understand why these elements are necessarily combined. The common view of Stark as a demagogue overlooks the obvious fact that his administration is preceded and followed by ones that are equally corrupt and clearly less interested in the public good. Stark's political goals—an equitable tax plan, streamlined government, good roads, good schools, better health care, and a free public hospital—all appear to be laudable. The only people who oppose them are the wealthy, who do not wish to pay for them for narrow self-interested reasons, or members of the corrupt political machines that Stark displaced (pp. 78, 123–5, 233, 392–4). If there is a political order that can better address the problems facing the state, it is only hinted at in the novel (p. 436; discussion below).

*All the King's Men* is a line from the old nursery rhyme “Humpty, Dumpty.” If Stark is the “King” in the title, then it may be interesting to note that the rhyme does not treat the king as a tyrant.<sup>6</sup> It never suggests that the king's goal of rescuing the fallen egg-man is

anything but laudable, although he is unable to accomplish it.<sup>7</sup> All the military might of a kingdom is deployed to save one creature, but Humpty-Dumpty is doomed. The rhyme suggests that there are limits to what political power can accomplish. I believe the novel's message is consistent with that of the rhyme. This is ultimately a story about what Stark cannot do. Paradoxically, the common reading of the novel holds that Stark accumulates too much power, but my interpretation suggests that he has too little. He fails to accomplish much that he had hoped to do, and his character, as well as the character of the people around him, is monstrously transformed by his attempts to overcome this weakness.

It cannot be denied that the common characterization of Stark as a demagogue has a kernel of truth. He employs passionate oratory, at least in part, to secure his own political power. But a careful analysis of the evolution of his political rhetoric and its culmination in his most revealing speech, on the night after the legislature fails to impeach him, reveals what separates him from the most usual type of demagogue. Given the common opinion that Stark is demagogue, it is surprising that no commentator has undertaken a systematic reading of his speeches. Some critics assume that Stark has no other “true voice” save his ranting cries for hammers and meat-axes (e.g., Baumbach [1965] 1987, 26–7), but a careful study of his rhetoric shows that too much attention to the violent imagery of some of his speeches leads critics to overlook the consistent message that underlies all his speeches and that informs all his political actions.

Warren reports only four of Stark's speeches explicitly: at the courthouse in Mason City (pp. 9–11), his surprising political transformation at Upton (pp. 90–4), just before the impeachment crisis (pp. 145–7), and the night after the legislature fails to impeach him (pp. 147–155, 261–2). Each is a masterpiece of the orator's art and is designed to work upon the hopes and fears of the audience, an audience that may have more in common with ourselves than we may care to admit. Each is anchored by a special connection between the speaker and the people that is based on empathy and fellow feeling. Each uses the sanctity of the common man's feelings and needs to justify savage political tactics as the necessary means to bring the people's wishes to fruition.

### The Origins of Stark's Politics

We cannot, however, really understand the speeches that Warren shows us except in the light of the oration he only reports secondhand, Stark's stump speech from his first and unsuccessful run for governor. In 1926, Joe Harrison, the leader of one of the two major factions in the state, arranges to have Stark run for governor. The purpose is to split the so-called hick vote so that

<sup>6</sup> It seems obvious that Stark is the “king,” because the novel chronicles the lives and actions of “his men” (Jack Burden, Sugar Boy, Sadie Burke, et al.). Contrast Ruoff [1957] 1977, esp. 86.

<sup>7</sup> There may be some ambiguity about who has “had a great fall” in this formulation of the title, but I assert that the “egg” is the state, which is loosely based on Louisiana but never explicitly named. See Warren [1957] 1965, 75–81. Contrast Ruoff [1957] 1977, esp. 85.

Harrison's urban constituency will carry him to victory in a three-way race. Stark is not aware that he is being set up and launches a statewide tour to deliver his stock speech. It is "awful" (pp. 71, 75), packed full of figures and statistics that bore and confuse his audiences (p. 71), and completely lacking in humor or popular appeal (p. 73). Stark practices this speech for hours and tries to refine each line into a "Gettysburg Address" (p. 70). Like Lincoln's famous oration, it appears to have been a remarkably high-minded speech that turned on the connection between grand principles and particular policies. Stark hopes to persuade the people to adopt the policies, and the candidate who promotes them, by an appeal to their belief in and commitment to those grand principles. It is a complete and utter failure.

This first speech, with all its defects, contains most of the platform that will characterize Willie's later successes. Stark advocates a new and more progressive tax system, a higher rate of return to the state on oil leases, a better road system, and improved schools (pp. 69, 70–1, 78, 90, 136). All Stark's goals, except the plan for the great hospital, are present at this early stage in his career. Even the core idea that leads to the hospital—medical needs should be met regardless of ability to pay—is suggested by the mention of a public health bill that was passed before Stark ever promised to build the hospital (pp. 136, 139). The difference between the unsuccessful "Cousin Willie" and the all-powerful "Boss" is all about means; Stark's ends never change.<sup>8</sup>

When Stark expresses incredulity that people pay no attention to his explanation of issues that affect them personally, Burden tries to give Stark advice on the character of his audience and what type of speech might be effective:

Hell, make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em think you're their weak erring pal, or make 'em think you're God almighty. Or make 'em mad. Even mad at you. Just stir 'em up, it doesn't matter how or why, and they'll love you and come back for more. Pinch 'em in the soft place. They aren't alive, most of 'em, and haven't been alive in twenty years . . . so it's up to you to give 'em something to stir 'em up and make 'em feel alive again. . . . But for Sweet Jesus' sake don't try to improve their minds (p. 72).

As Burden explains it, the problem is not in Stark's figures or arguments but in his failure to set his speech at the level of his audience. Burden argues that the people are not interested in "improving their minds" and can only be moved to act by appeals to their passions. Our contemporary political campaigns are plagued by the inability of candidates to attract voters' attention with their most balanced or well-reasoned arguments. We may lament the fact, but there is no escaping the reality that complex policies, like Stark's tax plan, appear to be most successfully advocated when they are condensed into something like Burden's advice to "tell 'em you're gonna soak the fat boys, and forget the rest of the tax stuff."

Burden later explains that Stark "flattered human

nature. He assumed that other people were as bemused by the grandeur and as blinded by the light of the post to which he aspired, and that they would only listen to argument that was grand and bright" (p. 69). Stark wants to give speeches worthy of a governor and to prove his own worthiness by displaying his mastery of the policies that he will implement and his devotion to the highest principles of democratic self-governance. Burden ascribes Willie's failure to move the people to the gulf between his dignity and their complete disregard for dignity. So long as the people do not have any sense of their own dignity, they will be incapable of acting nobly. An appeal to principle has no traction among people who are disillusioned about principles and unwilling to sacrifice for them. At Gettysburg, Lincoln succeeded in the difficult task of ennobling his audience and raising them to the level of the speech that he wished to give, but Stark never succeeds at elevating his audience. In order to speak to them on their level, his view of human nature has to be lowered. It is lowered at Upton.<sup>9</sup>

At this point, Stark thinks that higher offices call for a higher dignity (p. 69). Therefore, he has to be shown that the politics of governors and legislatures are as corrupt as the machine politics in his home county. Before Sadie Burke inadvertently reveals that his candidacy is a decoy, Stark is about to drop out of the race, convinced that he is simply incapable of making the people recognize what they need within the means appropriate for seeking an elevated office such as governor (pp. 80–1). When Sadie lets the truth slip, she lays bare the nature of gubernatorial politics. Stark infers that all means are appropriate in a race for governor and rejects the idea, which he had found in textbooks, that the great story of American political history is a story of political titans speaking and acting purely before a decent and responsible people (pp. 67–9). Later, Stark states confidently that there is no way for a governor to do anything if he insists on keeping his dignity (p. 38). His rejection of the idea that human beings can be moved by dignity marks a key transition in his approach to politics. It also marks a key turn in Stark's private morals: He rejects any concern for his own dignity and indulges the desire to drown his sorrows after discovering he has been used. Previously distinguished by his complete abstinence from alcohol (pp. 16–8), Stark gets drunk, and the next day he must get drunk again in order to make his speaking engagement.

Stark begins his speech at Upton by utterly dismissing the details about tax reform, poverty relief, or road construction that had characterized his earlier speech. He proclaims to the assembled mass of country folk that "you are the state" and "you know what you need" (p. 90). In Stark's new politics, it is not necessary to go into policy details; it is simply necessary to assure the people that the policies will serve their needs. Willie establishes this by telling them the story of how he was

<sup>8</sup> "The most engaging thing about Willie is his candor about the immorality of his means. The most difficult thing about him is the sincerity of his devotion to his ends" (Burt 1988, 142).

<sup>9</sup> My argument that Upton is a crucial turning point ought to be contrasted with the view that Stark's speeches reveal a slow but steady change in his view of the world (e.g., Ealy 1999, 2).

persuaded to run for governor and Harrison's plan to split the country vote. His fundamental message is that he shares their background and knows their struggles: "I am a hick and a red-neck just like you" (pp. 91, 94–5). He uses the fact that he has been used to establish his credentials as being just like the people to whom he speaks, and he assures them that their problems are attributable to the fact that they also are being misused and oppressed by the political machines, the city people, and the rich.

The new speech is delivered without a script, and the passions to which it appeals are those of fear and indignation. Stark explains that he will not run for governor this time, but he sets out to destroy Harrison by alerting all "fellow rednecks" to the disgraceful way that the machine has treated them. Stark also puts MacMurfee "on notice" that unless things get better for the poor country folks, he will be held responsible at the next election (p. 93). The special connection with the people that Willie establishes in the Upton speech remains the *bona fides* of his trustworthiness throughout his successful political career. The "not a speech" oration in Mason City is entirely about his common life with the poor people (pp. 9–11), the staged pictures of the governor with his family are meant to establish this connection (pp. 155–6, 327–8), and his rhetorical defense against his impeachment is built on it (pp. 145–7).

By tapping into the power of the people through passionate rhetoric based on an intimate understanding of the people's deepest hopes and fears, Stark opens a new avenue to political power in the state. Previous approaches to politics had hinged on personal connections among elites. We dimly see in the allusions to the old government of Governor Stanton and Judge Irwin that there was a period in which the state was dominated by a certain alliance of gentlemen (pp. 124–5). That alliance ceased to hold power sometime around World War I and was replaced by political machines in which personal connections were built on graft and mutual self-interest rather than any shared sense of honor (pp. 65–6). Like Sadie Burke's first sponsor, Senator Sen-Sen Puckett, each high-ranking member of these machines cut his own deal and dictated the terms of his continued cooperation (pp. 73–4).

Stark effectively dismantles the Harrison outfit in 1926, but he does not simply seize control of one of the machines in the wake of Harrison's fall. His political methods after Upton change the state's politics in fundamental ways. Burden describes the landslide election of 1930: "And there wasn't any Democratic party. There was just Willie" (p. 97). Stark has his close subordinates—Sadie Burke, Hugh Miller, Sugar Boy, and Jack Burden—but the heart of the organization is Stark himself. His control is maintained by a combination of terror, regulated and limited graft, and a file of signed but undated resignation letters (pp. 132–3). Willie introduces personal politics and replaces the old politics of party or of faction with the politics of individual leadership. The main qualification appears to be the command of a powerful and passionate

oratory that is capable of moving the people and is based on his ability to claim a special kinship or connection to them. The connection between Stark and the people is the one that matters, rather than connections among different elites, and we will see that the terms of this connection have some unsettling consequences.

### Stark's Public Philosophy and Its Political Consequences

This revolution in the politics of the state cannot be accomplished without resistance. After Harrison is destroyed, the MacMurfee machine still exercises some power (pp. 97, 136, 148, 152). Although it is confused by Stark and uncertain about how to handle him, its leaders are still active in politics and anxious to thwart the new rival. Furthermore, even though Stark wins the governorship in 1930, his political operation leaves in place much of the institutional power of his opponents. Because Stark's power is intimately attached to his person, Willie does not have a natural set of allies to run for the legislature, and MacMurfee's friends continue to dominate that branch of government until at least 1934.

Progressive political leaders in the United States, going back to Woodrow Wilson, have recognized that personal rhetorical politics are constantly thwarted by the separation of powers. Wilson's attempts to make the president "in fact, and not just in name, the head of government" as well as Franklin Roosevelt's infamous court-packing scheme were reactions to the vetoes that conservatives could exercise against progressive reforms. Similarly, Stark discovers that his power is limited by his ability to control the other branches of government. He packs the state's high court with judges inclined to agree with his expansive reading of executive powers (pp. 124, 136). He simply does things and tries to use the precedent of having done them to make them appear constitutional (pp. 136–7), and he is continually struggling with the problems raised by MacMurfee's power in the legislature. He repeatedly speaks of the legislature as something that needs to be "busted" (pp. 7, 10, *inter alia*). The ultimate test of Willie's ability to control the legislature by these means occurs in the attempt to impeach him near the end of his first term as governor.

One of the most peculiar aspects of the atemporal and periodic narrative structure of the novel is that the account of the 1934 "impeachment speech" is broken up into two places within the book (pp. 147–55 and 261–3). In the first account, the content of the speech is treated as irrelevant. Burden, who claims to be like God looking in on History, knows that the speech will appear to be relevant because the outside observer will think that the crowd gathered around the capitol influenced the legislature and that the crowd was moved by the speech. Burden, however, claims to know that the speech and the crowd were not the cause for acquittal; a secret campaign of political blackmail against individual legislators has already ensured that Stark will remain in office (pp. 148–50). At this point,

we see the crowd and hear it roar, but we do not hear the speech.

The second account is related by Burden only after he reports a private conversation between Stark and Adam Stanton on the “nature of Goodness” that takes place in 1937. Burden carefully and explicitly connects the impeachment speech with this conversation because only then does he realize that the speech is the key to understanding all of Stark’s political actions. In it Willie’s principles appear more starkly than in any other place. In fact, in this speech we discover that his plans are truly grounded in a certain commonly held vision of American democracy. I will explain what is revealed in the speech and its political import and then will discuss the conversation with Stanton, which points to less obvious implications of Stark’s regime.

The speech is presented as a dialogue between Stark, standing at the top of the capitol steps, and the crowd, spread out across the lawn in front of him. This dialogue seems remarkably one-sided because the crowd has only two lines. Before Stark begins, the crowd chants “Willie—Willie—we want Willie.” After he starts to speak, the crowd answers his assertions with loud roars of approval. Stark opens by declaring the ruin of his enemies, and the crowd roars. He then asks if they like what he has done, and they roar again. Each roar is controlled by Stark, who silences the crowd by the motion of his hand. He announces: “I tell you what I am going to do. I am going to build a hospital. The biggest and finest that money can buy. . . . To heal sickness. To ease pain. Free. Not as a charity. But as a right. It is your right. Do you hear? It is your right” (p. 261)! He proceeds to call for rights to education, food, good roads, fair and progressive taxation, and “that you shall not be deprived of hope” (p. 261). We can only understand Stark in terms of these promises and his justification for them. To begin with the nature of the promises, he claims that people have a right to have all human efforts expended in making their lives better and more comfortable. By treating each of these promises as rights, Stark establishes an obligation on the part of the government to the people. The government must provide the policies that will ensure these rights. They are not optional.

Stark then launches into a graphic description of the violence he will inflict against the man who stands in his way. The roar of the crowd intensifies as Stark describes the blows he will strike against his foes, culminating in his characteristic call for a “meat-ax.” He does not hide his intention to destroy his foes. The individual acts of bribery and extortion that Burden describes in the earlier account (pp. 145–7) may take place out of sight, but even if they were public, we may presume, Stark’s supporters would stand with him. As his language becomes more violent, the crowd’s roars become louder. The crowd’s excitement must be explained in light of the last two sentences of the speech, both of which are delivered in a more level and controlled voice.

In the penultimate sentence, Stark declares: “Your will is my strength” (p. 262). He claims that his power comes from the people. He does the people’s will, and

that is what makes him powerful. All his political power would evaporate if he could not animate popular support for his positions. His blackmail and bribery are effective only because they are backed by the people’s desire to stand by what Willie Stark says and to punish any legislator or other politician who stands against him. Stark screams for the meat-ax and swears to destroy the man who stands in his way, but he identifies himself as the arm of the people, delivering the blows that they would deliver on their own behalf if only they could.

In this speech, Stark appears as the agent of the people, advocating for their rights and destroying anyone who stands in the way of the realization of those rights. Although American government has always treated the securing of rights for the people as the purpose of government, this represents a new way of looking at both the rights themselves and the role of political leaders in securing them. Rights are, according to the political philosophy that Stark enunciates in this speech, changing things. Different rights are recognized at different times. Stark portrays himself as the man who interprets rights and determines which rights are worthy of protection at a given moment, and the people’s request for the protection of their rights is expressed by the call of “We want Willie!” Stark is both the interpreter who determines which rights are to be protected and the guarantor of those rights.

Thus far, Stark’s principles (as opposed to his means of achieving them) are entirely consistent with those of Franklin Roosevelt and other progressives who sought to increase the role of government by redefining the purposes for which governments are instituted. They accepted the assertion in the Declaration of Independence that governments exist to protect rights, but they redefined the rights that were to be protected and thus authorized a great expansion in the powers of government to define and secure those rights. In his famous Commonwealth Club Address, Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed:

The Declaration of Independence discusses the problem of government in terms of a contract. . . . Under such a contract rulers were accorded power, and the people consented to that power on consideration that they be accorded certain rights. The task of statesmanship has always been the redefinition of these rights in terms of a changing and growing social order. New conditions impose new requirements on government (Roosevelt 1938, 753).

Stark accepts, or shares, this reasoning and casts himself as a statesman of the type that Roosevelt discusses. No previous administration would have recognized the rights to health care, education, food, or progressive taxation that Stark enunciates (p. 124). His reconfiguration of the meaning of rights, which parallels Roosevelt’s, clearly creates a sense of entitlement, but we cannot assume, as does Adam Stanton when he calls Stark’s discussion of rights his “bribe” (p. 261), that this is simply rhetorical fluff to garner popular support. As Burden points out, Stark is going to be acquitted regardless of the content of the speech. Stark may gain popular support by enunciating these views, but he does not need that support at this particular

moment. Furthermore, Stark's entire political career suggests that he truly believes what he says here.

If rights do change over time, we must identify the standard by which rights are measured and their changes are marked. For Stark, that standard lies in the needs of the people. He concludes with the simple but crucial sentence: "Your need is my justice." The standard by which Stark judges his political ends is consistently based on the principle that the needs of the people constitute the essence of justice. He began the oration at Upton by saying: "I have a speech here. It is a speech about what this state needs. But there's no use telling you what this state needs. You are the state. You know what you need" (p. 90). Even before he recognizes the need for this transformative speech, he objects to Burden's critique of his "Gettysburg Address" speech by saying: "You see what this state needs" (p. 72). Stark's standard is consistent throughout the work. His understanding of this standard is loaded with crucial implications, and we need to investigate it carefully in the specific context in which Warren places it in the novel.

### THE BROAD IMPLICATIONS OF STARK'S POLITICS: HIS ACCOUNT OF THE GOOD

Stark discusses the nature of "Goodness" with Adam Stanton. This conversation reveals the underlying assumptions about human nature and the purposes of political society that are implicit in Stark's politics. As noted above, Burden only reports the content of the impeachment speech in flashback at this point in the narrative. He demonstrates his interest in this subject by questioning Stark about what he said on each occasion. Burden, by his own admission, rarely asks Willie why he does what he does, so we must infer that he finds these statements especially perplexing and especially important. By connecting what Stark says to Stanton with what he said earlier in the impeachment speech, Burden shows how Stark's standard of justice is based on a certain view of the human condition. This view, in turn, is crucial to explaining the connection between Stark's politics and Burden's intellectual and moral travails.

Stanton is a puritan of sorts. He is emphatically interested in seeing that the right things are done (pp. 236–7, 248). When Hubert Coffey tries to bribe him, Stanton strikes the would-be briber (pp. 320–1). This sudden act of violent revulsion and anger against a man whose actions implicate Stanton in wrong-doing is the first glimpse of the impulse that animates his assassination of Stark. Like all puritans, Stanton takes a proprietary interest in virtue and takes offense at those whom he thinks misuse virtue for the wrong ends or misappropriate the name of virtue for less than virtuous acts. When he hears Stark's impeachment speech, he sneers and snarls: "Justice! He used that word" (p. 262). Stanton does not consider the crucial definition that Stark gave the word because, in his mind, even the mention of justice by a political strongman who uses bribery, extortion, and the threat of force is an affront. Stanton wants to keep his virtue unsullied, and

this obviously creates a significant obstacle to Stark's plan to make Stanton the director of his hospital.

Burden, who is assigned the job of persuading Stanton to accept the position, concludes that the only way to succeed is to "change the picture of the world in his head." Burden reveals his evidence that Judge Irwin accepted a bribe while serving as attorney general and that Adam's father, Governor Stanton, helped cover up the bribe to protect his friend (p. 247). This revelation causes Stanton to curse his father, whom he had adored (pp. 253–4), but it also erases his old way of understanding the past. His utter rejection of any connection to Stark's politics was only possible if he assumed that previous politics, his father's politics, were purer than those of the present administration. With that illusion destroyed, Stanton accepts the position. Stanton, like Stark, changes only when he is convinced that possibilities he had assumed were open are foreclosed by new evidence. Both men are forced to confront facts that undermine their view of the world. Stark accepts the irrelevance of dignity and rejects any consideration of it in his political activity. Stanton accepts that there are no honorable politics and agrees to the previously unacceptable connection with Stark, but he insists that he will keep politics at arm's length.

Stark's meeting with Stanton is, in many regards, like his earlier meeting with his first attorney general, Hugh Miller, who resigned after Stark saved the state auditor from impeachment for a crime of which the man was guilty (pp. 135–40). Stark explains himself to the "puritans" with whom he works because he thinks he has more in common with them than with any others. The problem is that his political tactics convince people like Adam Stanton and Hugh Miller that they must oppose him, which deprives Willie of those whom he considers his most valuable political allies. He is compelled to explain why he thinks his positions are compatible with their puritanism, but he is never entirely successful.

Warren is very deliberate in showing us these conversations that take place in private and that need not take place at all, and he has Burden draw specific connections between them and Stark's public speeches. A political leader like Stark can get Stanton to serve as director of the medical center or get the legislature to acquit him on the impeachment charges without speaking frankly, as he does in this conversation or that speech. Nevertheless, we cannot fairly judge Willie Stark if we do not have these pieces of the puzzle (see Burt 1988, 142).

When Stark arrives at Stanton's apartment with Burden, he asks Stanton what he thinks of the hospital. Stanton replies that the hospital will "do the people of the state some good" and "get you some votes" (p. 256). Stark claims that there are "other ways to get votes." He then tells Stanton the story of Hugh Miller. Stark compares Miller to a man who wants to make bricks without getting muddy (compare to pp. 136–7) or to eat steak without having slaughterhouses (p. 256). He claims that Miller did not recognize that not only can you "not have everything" but also "you can have mighty little." Miller thought he could inherit "good-

ness" the way he inherited money and his name, but Stark insists that if there is going to be any "goodness," you have to "make" it. He then claims that "goodness" must be made out of "badness" because there is nothing else out of which to make it (p. 257). This is the essence of Stark's justification for his political tactics (p. 137). The argument that we must make the "Good" or the "Just," which are defined as meeting the needs of the people, by the use of the bad is a variant on the familiar argument that the ends justify the means. All means are appropriate and allowable if they accomplish the good. Later in the novel, Burden identifies this as the "theory of the moral neutrality of history," which holds that "process as process is neither morally good nor morally bad. We may judge results but not process" (p. 393). Burden explicitly associates the theory with Machiavelli, "the cold-faced Florentine, who is the founding father of our modern world."<sup>10</sup>

Stanton, after a silence, asks Stark: "If, as you say, there is only bad to start with, and the good must be made from the bad, then how do you ever know what the good is? How do you even recognize the good" (p. 257)? The question requires Stark to define "Good with a capital G." He answers that Good is something that men make up. Starting with a comical account of human evolution from a prepolitical state of nature, Stark argues that man is descended from the lower forms of animals who had no sense of good or evil. As they evolved, they created rules and associated those rules with goodness to protect themselves and to ensure the survival of the societies on which they came to depend. Goodness is, says Stark, created by human beings for the purpose of "doing business" (pp. 257–8). According to this reasoning, goodness is a changing value, constantly adapted to meet our current necessities. Stark insists that human beings construct definitions of goodness in order to protect and preserve society as a precondition to their physical well-being, comfort, and prosperity.

In his generally excellent treatment of the problems associated with Stark's political activity, Burt misses this crucial point. He argues that Stanton's question about how we identify the good when we make it out of bad is decisive and concludes that Stark is dodging the issue when he launches into his account of the evolution of human law and society (Burt 1988, 150–2). This account, however, is Stark's answer. History/evolution can be the source of a standard of good that is both always evolving and transcendent. According to the standard embodied in the statement that "your need is my justice," the particular needs of the people do change, but the fact of their neediness does not. Only society's needs can define justice, and when the needs of society change, the prevailing definition of justice must change to accommodate the new needs of society. There is no limit on what behaviors society can tolerate

so long as they contribute to the meeting of those needs.<sup>11</sup> This is a more important step in understanding Stark than the recognition that he agrees with Machiavelli about the ends justifying the means, because this reveals the criteria by which ends are selected. Burden will later struggle mightily with the consequences of Stark's argument that the good can be grounded in the history of human neediness.

A widely circulated picture of Stark carries the quotation: "My study is the heart of the people" (p. 6).<sup>12</sup> By discovering the needs of the people, Stark discovers the purpose for which he governs. He is truly interested in providing the people with what they need (contrast Ealy 1999, 6), but his confidence that he (and perhaps he alone) truly knows their needs makes him terribly dangerous because he is freed from all the traditional restraints on men in power. He can, with a good conscience, do whatever it takes to assure their comfort and security (see Burt 1988, 141). Stark has a cause that he is convinced is completely just. Although it has the force of a moral imperative, Stark's justice knows no rules and respects no boundaries; it does not have any fixed meaning, and Stark himself is the judge of its temporal interpretation. With such a definition of justice, Stark can explain away any rule he needs to break. He is, to cite the impeachment speech, "living in the will and the right" of the people; therefore, all his actions carry their sanction. To stand against Stark is not to stand against an ambitious man seeking his own glory or fame. It is to stand against the good of the people, their wishes and their needs.

Warren reveals what appears to be a necessary connection between passionate oratory, political Machiavellianism, and concern for the common good that may be particularly endemic to certain types of democracies. In fact, if Stark can be said to play hardball harder than the machines of MacMurfee or Harrison, we can trace his ruthlessness not to some defect in his character but to the impulse that drives him to do good for the people of the state. The old machines just wanted to maintain their power and generate some graft to line the pockets of their members. They were corrupt but not very ambitious. Stark, in contrast, feels compelled to overcome all the self-interest, personal ambition, inertia, and human conniving that stand in the way of his overhaul of the state. His plans for a greater society in which human pain is eased and human needs are met combined with the realities of democratic politics require the use of demagogic rhetoric, systematic corruption, and ruthless political extortion. Stark is not simply a reformist politician who goes bad. His transformation forces us to consider certain dangers that lurk in our modern conceptions of American democracy.

Each person tends to express his or her perceived needs as rights that must be absolutely fulfilled. By

<sup>10</sup> "The end justifies the means" is the common paraphrase of: "In the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no court to appeal to, one looks to the end. So let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable and will be praised by everyone" (Machiavelli 1998, 71).

<sup>11</sup> Compare Roger Barrus's (1994, esp. 25–6) analysis of questions asked to presidential candidates in the 1992 town hall debate.

<sup>12</sup> Warren's rendering of Stark's motto makes significant changes to that attributed to Huey Long: "I know the hearts of the people because I have not colored my own" (Bloom 1987, 4–5).



making this connection explicit in public speeches, Stark further legitimizes this view and convinces the people that their perceived needs must be met by government, regardless of the costs. If meeting the needs of the people becomes the very definition of just government, would-be governors are required to make tremendous exertions in the pursuit of the means by which they can fulfill those needs. When these needs are accorded the status of “inalienable” rights, there is no moral boundary that may not be crossed in fulfilling them.

Taken together, however, the people’s perceptions of needs are infinitely mutable and often self-contradictory, and there is no easy mechanism by which “the people” can be brought together to agree on what they need. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that human beings are generally disinclined to look for any vision of the good that lies beyond their self-interest. They always tend to confuse their good with the good. The American framers clearly recognized this problem but hoped it could be mitigated in a republic that relied on bargaining and compromise to determine the direction and goals of public policy (e.g., Madison, Hamilton, and Jay [1788] 1990, 45–6). Each citizen would act according to his or her own best interest, but the common good would be approximated by the compromises they would reach. This formula, however, is dependent upon the ability of individual representatives to make the compromises that best approximate the interests and sense of justice expressed by their constituents. When political organizations develop distinct interests, independent of those whom they represent, it becomes possible that the compromises will be dictated by the political ends of those parties rather than the good of constituents. We see such a crisis in Warren’s novel in the account of politics under the machines and the corporate domination of the state during their ascendancy.

Machine politics detached nearly all political power in the state from any connection to the needs or desires of the common people. The people in Warren’s novel are disheartened by the utter failure of representative government to approximate the good of the people, and this perception is the necessary precondition for the rise of Willie Stark (see p. 72). But Stark’s attempt to return the state to the consideration of and attention to the people’s needs is itself problematic. Stark represents a type of democracy that is not driven by a compromise of interests; it claims to accomplish the amalgamation of all the various self-interests in society, or at least all the various self-interests of those persons who can be said to constitute “the people,” into one common interest.

This unified vision of the common good of the common people is enunciated through a new and powerful political rhetoric that allows Stark to create a unity that is more apparent than real. He gives the people a vision of their common good that they all think they share.<sup>13</sup> This vision is misleading for a

number of reasons. To name only one, it is based on a fiction that the “common people” are “the state” (p. 90) and that anyone who is not one of the common people, meaning anyone who does not recognize Stark’s sense of their plight and his competence to define and pursue their interest, is by definition not a constitutive part of the state. In Stark’s democracy, “We want Willie” becomes the sole expression of the people’s will. To attain his vision of this infinitely mutable “Good,” Stark is willing to employ incredibly powerful means, granted to him as the arm of the strength of the people. He will destroy anyone who stands in his way and becomes as terrible as a tyrant in pursuit of his democratic ends.

## BURDEN’S PHILOSOPHICAL TRAVAILS

The second story in *All the King’s Men*, Jack Burden’s quest to understand the world around him, is a source of some major problems in interpreting the “political meaning” of the novel and has led some commentators to conclude that the book is not ultimately all that political (see King [1980] 1987). To demonstrate the integrity of the novel as a discussion of politics, I must explain how Burden’s narrative, including the digressions on his childhood and love life that seem utterly out of place, fits in a political novel. I argue that thinking of Stark’s politics in the broad sense, as a formative regime that shapes individual characters, may explain why Burden’s private struggles take on their particular character. I have analyzed the origins and nature of Stark’s approach to government and the view of the human condition on which his politics are based. In this section, I will discuss how Burden’s moral and intellectual crises are intimately related to the character of Stark’s politics.

Just as the title points the way toward a more complete understanding of the novel’s political teaching, so Warren provides an epigraph that aids in understanding the investigations of Burden: *Mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde*. The line is drawn from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, and the entire stanza is translated: “Despite the Church’s curse, there is no one/ so lost that the eternal love cannot/ return—as long as hope holds something green” (Alighieri 1984, pp. 133–5).<sup>14</sup> The epigraph is the last phrase and holds out the possibility of “eternal love” or redemption, which strikes a sharp contrast to the title’s political subject and pessimistic implications.

It may be in keeping with the subtitle’s reference to the possibility of “eternal love returning” that Burden’s story begins and ends with a love affair. As a young

not the rumors of the streets, but a new principle for a new age. A man in whose ears the voices of the nation do not sound like the accidental and discordant voices that come from the voice of a mob, but concurrent and concordant like the united voices of a chorus, whose many meanings, spoken by melodious tongues, unite in his understanding in a single meaning and reveal to him a single vision, so that he can speak what no man else knows, the common meaning of the common voice.” Quoted in Ceasar et al. 1994, 250.

<sup>14</sup> Curiously, Burden refers to Dante by name once in the text, p. 236. The subject is pride, envy, and flattery, and the comment is directed toward Adam Stanton.

<sup>13</sup> Woodrow Wilson expresses the aspiration for such an orator and such a rhetoric in this way: “A nation is led by a man who . . . speaks

man, Burden fell in love with Adam Stanton's sister, Anne, and they planned to marry. One of the two major issues that Burden associates with their separation is his seeming lack of ambition. He thought that Anne wanted him to go to law school. When he complained of his dislike of the law, she insisted that he did not need to study law and that she would "eat beans with him" (p. 301). Burden intentionally failed himself out of law school and got into a rather scandalous mess (pp. 302–3). The couple split up. Burden later thinks that she only spoke of law school or work because she needed to see some sign that he was going to do something with his life (pp. 310–1). Neither Burden nor Anne Stanton fared well in love affairs afterward: He had a failed marriage and many meaningless liaisons, and she had a number of failed engagements.

Anne did not know what she wanted Burden to do, but she needed some indication that he intended to do something, that he wanted to participate actively in the world. Burden, however, seemed unable to commit to any endeavor. Other than graduate school, he never worked at anything with even a little conviction until his job with Willie Stark. Burden was unable to force himself to achieve success in the ways the society around him measured it, and he resisted the opportunity to gain well-paying and high-profile positions at several points in his life (e.g., pp. 118–20, 126–7, 305–6). He actively avoided being accused of doing anything for money (pp. 191–2).

Burden does spend a good deal of his life trying to understand things. He conceives of the purpose of man as knowledge (p. 9). He explicitly adopts several different answers to fundamental human questions: What is the nature of history? What are good and evil? What is the best way of life for a human being? Throughout his story, Burden attempts to act in a manner consistent with his latest thoughts on these thorny questions. He seems interested in living an examined and consistent life and claims he always has envied those who seem to have a "secret knowledge" (pp. 312–3). Burden's philosophical wanderings are his effort to gain the most important secret knowledge, the truth about the world and the people in it.

Burden describes himself as a "brass-bound Idealist" (p. 30). He claims that he "owed his success in life to that principle" and that "if you are an Idealist, it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it isn't real anyway" (p. 30). His idealism, which he says he learned in college, is first and foremost a view of the world that insulates him from the events and people around him. This idealism, like that view of the "Ideas" that is often attributed to Plato, relies upon a fundamental division of all existence into the high and important things that are not seen or appreciated by most people and the lower and unimportant things that occupy the attention of most people but do not truly matter in any enduring sense. While an idealist, Burden views the "flux of things" that constitutes the activity of the world as something divorced from the fundamental underlying reality and treats the world with a disdain that makes it inconceivable he could invest himself in it (p. 189). The world

and its events are to him "simply an accumulation of items, odds and ends of things like the broken and misused and dust-shrouded things gathered in a garret" (p. 189).<sup>15</sup> Given his indifference to the activity of the world, it is easy to see why Burden does not take much interest in practical career goals or training to be a lawyer. He cannot do anything as long as he is convinced that nothing matters.

The defect of Burden's idealism is first revealed in his research for his doctoral dissertation. Working from a collection of old letters and journals, Burden tries to write about the life and times of his grand-uncle, Cass Mastern. A young man reared in poverty in the antebellum South, Mastern was saved by his prosperous older brother, who sent him to Transylvania College in Kentucky. While there, he became involved with the wife of his friend, Duncan Trice. Trice committed suicide, and the series of personal tragedies that followed from his death dictated the rest of Cass Mastern's life. Until his death in a field hospital during the Civil War, Mastern tried to expiate his crimes. He freed all his slaves, practiced law, and defended blacks, and although he marched in the confederate ranks did not fire a shot.

Burden never completed his dissertation. Although he learned the "facts of Cass Mastern's world," he could not understand the man or his decisions. Burden did not even have to demonstrate such knowledge to earn the Ph.D. His advisors thought the work was perfectly acceptable (p. 100), but Burden did not think he really grasped the facts if he could not explain the character of the man (p. 188). Eventually, he abandoned the project. His understanding of "History" and "Idealism" could not account for Cass Mastern, whose very existence hinged on the idea of human responsibility. His every move from the death of Trice until his own death was an act of penance for his actions, but Burden could not understand this sense of culpability. Stymied, Burden sank into a period of prolonged inactivity that he named "the Great Sleep" (p. 190).

During his three "Great Sleeps," Burden approaches complete inactivity. He only gets up in the morning so he can go back to bed at night (pp. 105, 107, 189, 306–7). During these periods, he considers the possibility that all human life, all human desire, is part of a meaningless game with no grounding in objective reality (p. 99). This fascination with sleep, inactivity, and mistrust of the objective nature of facts marks a worldview consistent with Burden's idealism and his corresponding notion of perfection as the complete absence of motion, life, and vitality (p. 99). Paradoxically, however, each period of "Great Sleep" is a prelude to action. The first immediately precedes his decision to abandon graduate work and his virtually finished dissertation (p. 189), the second leads to leaving the comfortable life he had with his wife Lois (pp. 306–7), and the third, in fall and winter 1930–31,

<sup>15</sup> Burden's "garret" may be intentionally similar to Socrates' account of the vision of the philosopher upon returning to the cave (*Republic*, 516e, ff).

follows his departure from the *Chronicle* and ends when he goes to work for Willie Stark.

Stark appeared to be a political stooge who could change nothing in the state, but when he gave his speech at Upton, he raised new possibilities in Burden's mind. Warren includes a brief but telling anecdote from later that evening. When Burden makes a complex reference to some liquor, Sadie Burke, a blunt woman who does not speak in metaphors, responds: "I forgot, you're the fellow who went to college." Burden notes: "Yes, I was the fellow who had gone so grammatically to college, where I had not learned, I decided, all there was to know" (p. 94). His idealism cannot explain everything, and Stark represents something Burden does not understand. Before Upton, Burden's detachment from the irrelevant epiphenomena of the world makes it perfectly reasonable to drink his way along, writing insincere political columns for the *Chronicle*, but he cannot maintain that way of life after Stark emerges as a political force and a philosophical possibility. He quits the *Chronicle* when he cannot persuade himself to accept the company line on the gubernatorial election of 1930 (pp. 98–9) and, after the last "Great Sleep," is called to the governor's office and hired as a sort of special assistant.

The dissonance between the "perfect" idealism of Burden's reflections during "the Great Sleep" and his critique of inactivity as antithetical to life becomes most apparent in his work for Stark (pp. 99–100, 202). He begins a curious double life of action and thought. He characterizes his job as an extension of his work as a "historical researcher" and specializes in finding out the information Stark needs to deal with his various political adversaries. He is, by all accounts, very good at it (pp. 157, 191, 228). Burden is the one character in the novel who is most torn by the conflict between "the man of ideas," most fully embodied in Adam Stanton, and "the man of action," most fully embodied in Willie Stark, which he characterizes as "the terrible division of their age" (p. 436; see Baumbach [1965] 1987, 20–1). Burden not only has elements of both but also radicalizes each principle, thinking most abstractly about mankind's insignificance and performing the most purposeful actions to further Stark's political ends. In going to work with Stark and doing what he does, even believing in what he does, Burden becomes a man of action in a way that seems inconsistent with the idealism he claims to espouse.

Burden openly claims that he does not work for the money but seems incapable of explaining why he continues to work for Stark, even when assigned the most difficult or morally dubious duties (pp. 126, 191–2). He is not a sycophant who wants to be near the powerful, as does Tiny Duffy; he is not sexually attracted to Stark, as are the numerous women; and he is not easily bemused by great speech-making, as is Sugar-Boy (compare pp. 9 and 421). Burden is genuinely interested in Stark's political projects and enthralled by his ability to accomplish previously unthinkable political projects. As Willie's most trusted political assistant, Burden is genuinely intent on getting something done, even though his avowed philosophy pre-

cludes the ability of men to change anything of importance. Almost all of Burden's explicit praises of Stark are tied to his fascination with the ability to accomplish things, and we should attribute them not to some "thinly disguised" praise of Huey Long by Warren but to Burden's intense desire to participate meaningfully in the action of the world (pp. 124–6, 202, 208, 393–4).

The dissonance between idealism and political activity comes to a head when Burden discovers that Anne Stanton and Willie Stark are having an affair (pp. 267–9). Burden's reaction reveals the connection between his personal crises and the view of human nature that informs Stark's politics. Following the impeachment speech and Burden's defense of Stark's methods as the necessary means to fulfill the people's needs, Anne approaches Willie for help with a children's center and falls in love with him. She admits being attracted to him as a man who can get things done, which must be understood as a rebuke to Burden, whom she all but accused of being incapable of any action (pp. 324–6). Upon discovering the affair, Burden promptly leaves town and drives to California, replaying his life in his mind. He compares this driving and reliving to "drowning" in "the West" and sinking "to the very bottom of the West to lie in the motionless ooze of History" (pp. 271–2).

As Burden reviews his life, he realizes that he has not been the idealist he had thought, immune from the world and detached from its workings. He struggles with the realization that he was once in love with a woman and that love, and his failure at it, has governed his decisions in life. He realizes that his political activity and his defense of Stark as a man of action has delivered the woman he loved into the hands of his employer. In trying to discover how to live with these failures, he has what he calls "a dream."

I fled west from the fact [of Stark's affair with Anne], and in the West, at the end of History, the Last Man on that Last Coast, on my hotel bed, I had discovered the dream. That dream was the dream that all life is but the dark heave of blood and the twitch of the nerve . . . which is the dream of our age. At first, it is always a nightmare and horrible, but in the end it may be, in a special way, rather bracing and tonic (311).<sup>16</sup>

This "dream" is the dream of science that sees human beings as physical entities with no spiritual component, no special role in the universe, and no moral responsibility. In Burden's previous thought, he was certain that ideas were all that mattered, and physical events were utterly meaningless relics. In his new approach to the world, there are no higher ideas, and the physical

<sup>16</sup> Burden's description of his dream is full of images from Nietzsche; see Nietzsche [1874, 1947] 1957, 5, and also [1885] 1954, 129–30 and 231–3. In thinking about Burden as a historical researcher and his participation in Stark's political activity, consider Nietzsche's ([1874, 1947] 1957, 49) statement: "The historical sense makes its servants passive and retrospective. Only in moments of forgetfulness, when that sense is dormant, does the man who is sick of the historical fever ever act; though he only analyzes his deed again after it is over (which prevents it from having any future consequences), and finally puts it on the dissecting table for the purposes of history." Jack Burden's political activity, indeed, his entire life, is finally considered and dissected on the trip to California.

events are the only events. Burden passes from radical idealism to radical materialism.

The dream of radical materialism is useful to Burden because, at that crucial moment, it allows him to explain away his love for Anne Stanton. If human life is simply the twitch of a nerve, then love is nothing but a certain biological reaction to sexual stimuli, and it has no relation to the quality of the persons involved. According to this scientific view of mankind, all persons are simple automatons and essentially identical (pp. 309–10). If we are all just “machines” of blood, chemicals, and nerves making biologically predictable responses to stimuli, then there is nothing special about anyone, nothing to make one person lovable and another detestable, nothing to make one great and another pathetic. This dream of the world is radically egalitarian.

Some commentators consider the transformation in Burden’s character to be artificial and inadequately explained. It may appear that Burden changes 180 degrees in his philosophical orientation in the course of a single trip to California and as the result of a single personal catastrophe in a life with many catastrophes (Baumbach [1965] 1987, 36; King [1980] 1987, 150ff). Warren’s account, however, actually reveals that the change has been coming for some time. We cannot lose sight of the connection between this view of the world and the peculiarly political lessons that Burden has learned in his connection to Stark.

Stark’s view of human nature holds that all men are “corrupt” in a very particular way. Human beings are corrupt because they are needy, and they blindly grope toward the things they need. They are incapable of doing otherwise and under no obligation, religious or moral, to do otherwise. Perhaps the clearest reflection on the sordid nature of human neediness comes when Willie and Jack discuss slopping hogs (pp. 30–1, also see p. 393): “‘And,’ he said, ‘by God I’m still doing it. Pouring swill.’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘swill is what they live on, isn’t it.’” Anyone who has seen pigs attack a newly filled trough will recognize how powerful an image of human neediness this is. In Stark’s political thought, politics are the tools by which needy individuals empower themselves to overcome their neediness, and justice itself is nothing but a construct that helps needy humans define those rules that they think are most conducive to meeting their physical needs. These rules, the laws, are almost always behind the current needs of society because most human beings are short-sighted, but a few far-sighted persons with the proper perspective recognize that all human institutions are historical and temporary; they can look beyond the current rules and laws to see what is needed and do what is necessary before others realize it is necessary. For those persons, any activity, no matter how heinously it may seem to offend the current rules of society, is justifiable if it meets the needs for which government is created.

Burden hears Stark explain this understanding of political life on at least two occasions (pp. 136–7, 257–8) and praises him as the “genius” who can grasp these principles and act on them (pp. 393–4). In California, Burden accepts the broader implications of

these principles, learned from Stark and endorsed by his participation in Stark’s politics. If human neediness is grounded wholly in our character as physical beings and dignity is nothing, then all our so-called higher attributes are constructs that we use to justify our pursuit of our needs and have no basis in ultimate reality. Love, like law, justice, and nobility, is only a construct used to legitimate our blind groping for material satisfaction.

Armed with this new understanding, Burden claims that he has finally found “confidence” by discovering the “secret knowledge” of the world and its workings. He claims that there is no reason not to have confidence when you have had “the dream” because you know that everything is physical, while those around you are deluded by beliefs in human character, moral responsibility, and love. In New Mexico, Burden picks up an old man who has an involuntary facial tic and dubs his new philosophical orientation the “Great Twitch” because we are all dominated and controlled by compulsory physical responses of which most of us are unaware (pp. 313–4).

Burden glories in his “mystic vision” that he is “at one with the Great Twitch” (p. 314). He looks down on those around him, whom he considers benighted because they do not know the secret of the Great Twitch and the nature of human life. He begins a new study of the world informed by his conviction that his political activity is constantly dictated by the meaningless bustle of twitches who are not aware of their own nature. The most striking illustration of his new study is his fascination with watching Adam Stanton perform a lobectomy. He characterizes the operation as the scientific answer to the experience of Saul on the road to Damascus (p. 317; see Simmons [1971] 1977). If human beings are entirely physical and the results of a peculiar combination of genes, chemistry, and reactions, then a frontal lobectomy, the rearranging of the atoms in a man’s brain to change his personality, is the new version of religious conversion based on the “deity” of physical matter. Burden insists on “baptizing” the patient, “for he is born again and not of woman. I baptize thee in the name of the Big Twitch, the Little Twitch, and the Holy Ghost. Who, no doubt, is a Twitch, too” (p. 319). Stanton does not get the joke, but Burden notes: “That summer from the height of my Olympian wisdom, I seemed to find a great many things funny which now do not appear quite as funny” (p. 319).

## THE CHARACTER OF BURDEN’S RECOVERY

After he returns from California, Burden walks amid terrible and transformative events, wrapped in the insulation of his knowledge of the Great Twitch. He witnesses the bargaining, political bribery, and corruption that dominate the process of building the hospital. As part of that process, he confronts Judge Montgomery Irwin, his childhood mentor and, as he later discovers, his true father, with the terrible secret of his past, a bribe that Irwin accepted when he was unable to

pay off his debts in the years before World War I. Irwin kills himself, and Burden is aware that he is the one who led him to do it. Stark's son, Tom, is paralyzed by a football injury. Stark reneges on his earlier deal to arrange for the building of the hospital by Gummy Larsen. Two days later, Adam Stanton, who has been told about his sister's affair with Stark, confronts and shoots the governor in the great hall of the capitol. Burden participates in and views all these events with a certain indifference because he has objectified human beings as being only physical conglomerations of blood and nerves.

The penultimate chapter concludes with Burden's last meeting with Stark, who is dying in a hospital bed from the gunshot wound. Stark tells Burden that "you got to believe" that "things could have been different" (p. 400). Burden gives a half-hearted answer, as though humoring a sick but deluded man. The theory of the Great Twitch cannot accommodate the idea that things could have been different. In order to acknowledge that events may occur in more than one way, that the direction of events may be the conscious product of moral decisions made by people, or even that one way is better than any other way, Burden would have to reject radical materialism. Such possibilities would make individuals responsible for their actions and their effect on the course of future events.

In the final chapter, which takes place entirely in the present with none of the extended flashbacks that dominate most of the novel, Burden rejects the Great Twitch by making a series of decisions based on his sense of moral responsibility. Ironically, and in keeping with the complexity of this novel that refuses to make morality easy or obvious, Burden shows that he is responsible for the outcomes of his actions by telling three lies. As a historical researcher, he insisted that he loved the truth and simply let the truth do its work in the world (pp. 127, 228). After he rejects the Great Twitch, Burden sees the need to create, or at least preserve, certain illusions (see Blair 1993).

The first lie is told to Sugar Boy, Stark's most devoted subordinate. Burden investigates a mysterious phone call that Adam Stanton reportedly received just before killing Stark. He discovers that Tiny Duffy was told by Sadie Burke about Stark's affair with Anne. Duffy then called Stanton and told him he was chosen to direct the hospital so that his sister would sleep with the governor. This call was calculated to spur Stanton to kill Stark. After putting all this together, Burden meets Sugar Boy by chance in the public library (pp. 418–23). He asks Sugar Boy what he would do if he discovered that Stanton was the pawn of another person who was truly responsible for Stark's death. Sugar Boy states, for the first time not stuttering, "I'd kill the son of a bitch" (p. 420). He continues to insist that he would find and kill the man even after Burden points out that he would hang for it.

At that moment, Burden sees Tiny Duffy in his mind, and Duffy winks at him. Duffy is a weak and amoral man whose understanding of political greatness is a poor imitation of Franklin Roosevelt's appearance in suit, jewelry, and cigarette holder (pp. 213, 412–4).

Stark considers his ability to make use of Duffy an index of his power (pp. 97–8), but the final irony is that he cannot control him. Stark makes Duffy lieutenant governor and puts him in charge of the "sweetenin'" that he considers a necessary lubricant for democratic politics (pp. 132, 393), but Duffy continually chafes under the restrictions Stark places on him and repeatedly attempts to get the hospital contract thrown to Gummy Larsen for his own enrichment (pp. 213, 231–3, 260, 319–21, 358–63, 386–7).<sup>17</sup> Duffy, who thinks Stark's treatment of him is simply arbitrary, tells Stanton about his sister in order to get Stark killed so he can become governor.

In the library, Burden realizes that to use Sugar Boy to avenge Stark would be to use him as Duffy used Stanton. Burden is haunted by the realization that, according to the theory of the Great Twitch, there can be no difference between him and Duffy since there is no difference between any human being and another (p. 417). The idea of the Great Twitch becomes less comforting as Burden sees himself as an equal to Duffy, a cowardly political hack and murderer (pp. 309–11, 420). He tells Sugar Boy that there is no other murderer after all. By lying, Burden assures himself that there is a difference between him and Duffy and also saves Sugar Boy from certain execution.

Burden also lies to Lucy Stark (p. 425–7) and to his mother (pp. 429–32). In each case, he agrees to leave in place certain illusions that make their lives more meaningful and less painful. In his mother's case, he protects her from the terrible knowledge that he was responsible for the death of Judge Irwin, his true father and the only man she ever loved. He calls the lie "her wedding present." He lets Lucy Stark continue to believe that Sibyl Frey's baby was fathered by Tom Stark, even though he knows from his investigations that Sibyl had many boyfriends. When he says that the baby "favors" Tom, he gives Lucy a sense of purpose and hope. These lies are, quite possibly, his first noble actions (contrast King [1980] 1987, 150).

Lucy tells Burden that she will name the baby after her husband "because . . . Willie was a great man" (p. 426). She acknowledges that he did some bad things, although she never brings herself to say what they were; she "has to believe" he was a great man (pp. 426–7). Burden thinks: "Yes, Lucy, you have to believe that. You have to believe that to live. I know that you must believe that. . . . For you see, Lucy I must believe that too. I must believe that Willie Stark was a great man" (p. 427). In allowing for Stark's greatness, Burden implicitly denies the truth of the Great Twitch and allows that some people are better than others and some people worse. He reenters the discussion of virtue and vice, guilt and innocence, and begins to treat people in a way that recognizes moral responsibility while denying the view of egalitarianism that rests on turning all humans into interchangeable ciphers.

Burden rejects the Great Twitch only after a period

<sup>17</sup> Duffy's relationship to Stark illustrates Alexis de Tocqueville's ([1850] 1979, 220–1) discussion of the reciprocal corruption of the rulers and the ruled in democracies.

of assessing what he has witnessed and done. He describes himself as a man who “had seen Lucy Stark and Sugar Boy and the Scholarly Attorney and Sadie Burke and Anne Stanton live and the ways of their living had nothing to do with the Great Twitch” (p. 436). Burden rejects the Great Twitch because to believe in it requires one to assume that right, wrong, and moral responsibility do not exist, even though people act as though they do. The Great Twitch does not describe how people live or what they think and do. It is a philosophy so distant from the way that men and women live that it cannot be considered descriptive of their lives. Its “technical perfection” is hopelessly marred by its practical imprecision and horrible consequences (pp. 191, 353–4). Burden becomes convinced that belief in the Great Twitch is incompatible with life, and he rejects it as a doctrine that cannot be squared with the requirements for living (pp. 427, 435).

Nietzsche argues that humans must, by an act of will, reject the consequences of science’s materialism, which threatens to transform them into “last men.” Burden becomes a last man, but he recovers himself by discovering that human beings are not simply determined by physical causes. He rejects the enervating egalitarianism that makes the last man appear to be inevitable. In contrast to Nietzsche, Warren treats Burden’s recovery as more attributable to his progress toward knowledge than to a simple act of will (contrast Krieger [1971] 1987, 89–90). In fact, the novel shows that Stark’s politics, which attempt to overcome the defects of the world through sheer will, may encourage the view that will is all that separates arbitrary notions of good and bad. Without some referent outside the will, the problems that Burden hoped to remedy themselves appear to be chosen arbitrarily and increasingly incapable of definition. The freedom of action that Stark promises opens up the prospect of making changes for the better, but it also provides Burden with a definition of better and worse that ultimately is untenable in both theory and practice (see discussion of Warren 1975 below).

### ONE REGIME—ONE STORY

In the end, we must explain why these two stories go together. Burden insists that they are, in fact, one story (pp. 157, 435). On the one hand, Willie Stark’s politics are the embodiment, perhaps the radicalization, of a certain type of democracy. Through Stark, the people are to define government’s ends by their needs and to achieve those ends by their tremendous strength. They could never concentrate that strength without Stark as their agent. On the night of the impeachment, “the people” are unified only insofar as they can chant, “Willie, Willie, Willie.” In order to concentrate their divergent interests, the people must assume the unity of those interests and allow Stark to handle the complex particulars for them. The essence of Stark’s political claim to rule, and therefore the essence of his policies, is his knowledge of the people and concern for their needs.

On the other hand, we have Jack Burden, who is

hard to understand. He even suggests in places that he does not know why he does the things that he does (e.g., p. 192). He wanders through a sort of philosophical tour of late modernity, from a certain type of idealism, through a certain democratic Machiavellianism, to a terribly debilitating belief in material determinism that culminates in nihilism. In the end, Burden accepts responsibility for his own actions and determines to live in the “agony of the will.” How can we link these two stories in a way that makes sense of them both?

The key to the riddle lies in the moral consequences of Stark’s political action and the understanding of the world that the regime he creates gives to the people around him. We can begin with Stark’s political “education” because it brings to light much of the education he gives to others. When Willie discovers the corruption at the bottom of his first campaign for governor, he gets drunk. The removal of the political taboo against dirty politics seemingly destroys the moral taboos against drunkenness, adultery, and violence. Without the restraint supplied by his previous adherence to a model of dignity, Stark recognizes that the very basis of his government, the legitimization of the desires of the people, provides no rationale by which he should restrain his own desires.

Furthermore, so long as Stark believes that there is no other political alternative that can deliver what the people need, the first precondition of good government becomes the preservation of his own rule, and every attack upon his position threatens that precondition. Therefore, he thinks that he is compelled to use all means necessary to preserve his position when his personal indiscretions place his political standing in jeopardy (see Gray [1972] 1987, 96–97). Stark must overcome challenges from the ambitious who would contend with him for rule, the rich or self-interested who object to paying for his projects, all those who seek a public good defined in different terms than he would define it, the lovers of decency who object to his destructive methods, and the lovers of law who may share his goals but want them to be pursued through proper channels. Thus, Stark becomes obsessed with controlling men and women. He is forced into tyrannical measures in his attempt to do so, but he is still ultimately doomed to failure.

Stark’s tyrannical actions shape the character of both the people closest to him and the citizens more generally (see pp. 327–8), but Warren is most concerned with Stark’s role in the corruption of Jack Burden. Burden’s struggles with the consequences of the Great Twitch view of human nature are ultimately tied to his recognition of the deep implications of Willie’s political ideas and activity. Burden follows Stark’s combination of materialism and democracy to what appears to be a logical conclusion in nihilism and falls into the malaise of the human spirit that Nietzsche characterized as the mark of the last man. Burden is fighting a battle with that malaise long before he joins Willie, and he thinks that Stark’s energetic devotion to action will save him from the sapping emptiness in which he lives.

Instead, Burden discovers in Stark’s system of ever

malleable principles the source of all his despair. Knowledge of the emptiness of life may briefly be “tonic and bracing” because it makes the knower aware of the joke and innocent of all crimes, but it can never enable a person to live truly for the future, and a concern for decent, democratic government is inextricably tied to recognizing the future consequences of political actions and accepting responsibility for those consequences. Burden comes to these realizations only after watching the agonizing drama of his friends and close relations and recognizing that their actions are not explained by the Great Twitch. In many respects, he realizes it far too late.

If Burden is eventually able to overcome his adherence to the enervating principles that he discovers in Stark’s political rhetoric, albeit only after they exact a terrible toll, we might conclude by asking whether there is any political redemption that can accompany the personal redemption of Jack Burden. Warren’s presentation of democratic politics holds out little hope for a better arrangement of things in the state. The old politics of Governor Stanton can never provide an activist government that meets the needs of the people, but it is clearly more decent than the administrations of MacMurfee, Harrison, Duffy, or Stark.<sup>18</sup> The first three were neither decent nor effective, and Stark’s effectiveness is purchased at a terrible cost. Before Upton, however, when Stark was decent, he was wholly ineffective. If effectiveness in government, defined as the ability to improve materially the lives of the people and to ensure their comfort and security, can only be gained by means that corrupt officeholders and citizens alike, then the outlook for progressive democracy is quite bleak.

In two places near the end of the novel, Warren suggests, but only suggests, that there may be hope for a better politics. First, Stark’s last words to Jack Burden are: “It might have been all different Jack” (p. 400). To discover how it might have been different, we must begin on the night after Tom Stark’s injury. As they wait for news from Tom’s surgeon, Stark tells his estranged wife that he is going to name the hospital for Tom rather than himself. Lucy is truly apolitical and thinks all human needs can be satisfied in private life (pp. 61–3, 155–6, 334–5). Her response to the suggestion illustrates her distaste for what she takes to be the ends of all political activity:

Those things don’t matter. Oh, Willie, don’t you see? Those things don’t matter. Having somebody’s name cut on a piece of stone. Getting it in the paper. All those things. Oh, Willie, he was my baby boy, he was our baby boy, and those things don’t matter, they don’t even matter, don’t you see (p. 381)?

<sup>18</sup> Even Judge Irwin’s crime resulted from his sense of himself as one of the gentlemen. He needed to preserve the symbols of a man of honor, his plantation and his house on the Landing, and he acted dishonorably to do so. Similarly, Governor Stanton was, in his own mind, no doubt being honorable when he chose to protect his friend from the consequences of his action. The novel suggests that even the government that is too honorable to be active is occasionally compelled to act dishonorably.

She thinks Willie is in politics to gain fame. She is certain that the reason for building the hospital is to name it for himself or a loved one, and she insists that Stark ought to focus on the concerns of home and family. *It is better to have one’s children than to lose them in the pursuit of great projects that may be named for them.*

Although Stark does not answer his wife, he undergoes a great transformation after Tom’s surgery. He breaks off his affairs with Sadie Burke and Anne Stanton (pp. 391, 410–1). He cancels the corrupt deal with Gummy Larsen to build the hospital in exchange for selling out MacMurfee (pp. 386–7). Yet, he does not accept Lucy’s position that the projects he accomplishes through politics do not matter. He will build the hospital, and he is busily assuring passage of his tax reforms three days after Tom’s injury, when he is shot by Adam Stanton (pp. 394–7). He does not forswear political action for private decency. Because Stark is interested in more than fame, he cannot seriously consider withdrawing from politics. We must assume that he still finds the standard of justice in the needs of the people and that he still thinks government is necessary to overcome the neediness at the core of human existence. He does, however, appear to recover some of the concern for dignity that marked his earlier political career. His reformation, which never has a chance to succeed, must be understood as an attempt to live more decently while continuing to be politically effective.

The second suggestion of a better politics is the passing reference to Hugh Miller in the novel’s summation. Burden claims: “It looks as though High Miller will get back into politics, and when he does I’ll be along to hold his coat. I’ve had some valuable experience in that line” (p. 436). This statement appears out of place to some commentators, who consider it wholly inconsistent with the rest of the novel (e.g., King [1980] 1987, 152–3). Miller resigns from office when told that Stark is going to save State Auditor Byram White from impeachment (p. 135). Stark argues that if he allows his opponents in the legislature to dictate to him on this, they will recognize his weakness and destroy his legislative accomplishments. To preserve those accomplishments, he has to “take the damned government away from the behind guys and keep it away from ’em. Whatever way you can” (pp. 136–7). Miller never disputes this reasoning, but he insists that White must be punished for his felony. When he is not, Miller leaves the administration and remains absent until this reference at the very end of the novel.

If Miller represents the honorable man who wants decent democratic government capable of meeting the needs of the people, then the novel suggests that his chances for success are small. Warren gives no evidence that Stark’s positions are wrong or that democratic government does not require the condoning of certain dishonorable practices. Nevertheless, Miller appears unwilling to cross certain lines, even if this self-control concedes power to less scrupulous or less public-spirited adversaries. He represents an approach to democratic government that is willing to lose power

in order to remain honorable. He prefers not to accomplish certain ends, even if he genuinely believes they are worthy, rather than to accomplish them in the wrong way. This conviction must rest on some set of principles that are not grounded solely in the needs of the people, are not infinitely malleable, and therefore might not engender the nihilism that Stark's politics create in Jack Burden. There is no indication in the novel that the people will provide or enforce any standard of personal honor for their representatives or will react to dignified appeals to their reason. Furthermore, when Stark concedes that there is no dignity in democratic politics, he further legitimizes a view of human nature that makes all forms of dignity and principle suspect. Given these facts, it is not at all clear that Miller's new foray into politics will be more successful than Stark's pre-Upton campaign.

*All the King's Men* is not a very hopeful novel. We are confronted with the limitations of certain all too familiar forms of democratic government, and we are given only unsubstantiated hints that perhaps, maybe, a decent democratic statesman may emerge and be successful at fulfilling the people's legitimate needs without corrupting those he employs and serves. The novel shows that the complex and contradictory needs of the people and the harsh realities of a system based on a combination of egalitarian political theory, an economic orientation toward comfort and physical satisfaction, and a system of electoral politics can corrupt even those persons most bent on doing good. Furthermore, this corruption has an especially corrosive effect on society's most thoughtful members, who are apt to see in the realities of modern, materialist, democratic politics the sources of nihilism. The only truly hopeful lesson of the novel lies in the personal conquest of despair by Jack Burden, whose redemption requires a tremendous effort as well as the blood of his friends and of his father. There is no reason to suspect that this effort can be expected of society as a whole.

Burden is, in fact, the only character who overcomes the obstacles that stand in the way of such redemption without some fundamental delusion, whether provided by others or imposed on himself. Burden has to test his philosophical thoughts by directly confronting the requirements for activity in this world that are embodied in "the man of fact," Willie Stark (p. 436). It is very important to understand Stark's political activity and Burden's reflections on it because Burden's crises are those of a thoughtful man seeking to commit himself to action in the midst of our political problems. Warren identifies "the terrible division" of the man of ideas and the man of fact, "each incomplete without the other" and "doomed to destroy each other," as the crisis of our age (see Gray [1972] 1987, 92–4, 100–1; Mizener [1967] 1987, 49).

King ([1980] 1987, 154), however, characterizes Burden's "redemption" as the culmination of "a private quest for identity" and denies that the end of the novel is to be properly understood as "political" in any meaningful sense. Indeed, Warren ([1953] 1977, 97) suggests that "the book, however, was never meant to

be a book about politics."<sup>19</sup> We should be hesitant to accept this view of the matter because Burden's crisis is precipitated by his study of political action and is the result of his intermittently suppressed but genuine longings for effective democratic reform (pp. 123–5, 392–3). His return to politics with Hugh Miller is premised on his rejection of the nihilism that he confronted in his association with Stark's political activity. The novel shows that Burden's views, both political and moral, are closely tied to the view of the world that animates Stark's political action and that is communicated through Stark's speeches to the people of his state. The shape of Burden's crisis, and the insight through which he overcomes that crisis, are intricately tied to the regime in which he lives.

We might say that this work connects politics in the common sense of the word—the activities of running for office and conducting the affairs of government—to politics in a broader sense, that is, the many ways in which our understanding of the world is shaped by the underlying presuppositions of our social and political environments. Warren confirms this in the context of his comment that *All the King's Men* was not meant to be "a book about politics." In that passage, he claims that the original idea for Stark emerged from his ruminations on Talos in Spencer's *Faerie Queen*, a character Warren describes as "the pitiless servant of the knight of justice." Stark is often pitiless and ruthless in his pursuit of justice as modern democracy is all too inclined to conceive of it, namely, as the needs of the people: "Your need is my justice" (p. 262). Warren ([1953] 1977, 97) claims that "Talos is the kind of doom that democracy can bring upon itself" (see Blotner 1966, 225). This doom may be realized if democracies shape the type of persons who find their perception of their own neediness to be the only determinant of policy and the only justification for all political action.

The novel is political in a sense that both includes and transcends the immediately political narrative of Stark's career. In *Democracy and Poetry*, Warren (1975, 31) states: "Our poetry . . . has told us, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, that we are driving toward the destruction of the very assumption on which our nation is presumably founded." This assumption, according to Warren (who purports to be paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson), is that democracy can aspire to be "a society in which free men—of independent self—would exercise their franchise in the light of reason" (p. 4). This assumption requires that each citizen be both free and aware of his moral responsibility for his own private and public acts. Warren argues that this is the only type of democracy worth having and that a democracy of "mass men" (or last men) is, in fact, a farce.

*All the King's Men* shows us the torturous path by which Jack Burden becomes "an independent self" capable of rational self-appraisal and moral responsi-

<sup>19</sup> This passage is a favorite of certain interpreters of Warren, who insist that his novels are clandestine arguments for a return to a more thorough-going acceptance of a certain Christian view of the world. See Ruoff [1957] 1977 and Shepherd [1970] 1987.



bility. This difficult but necessary self-understanding is framed within a literary framing of the philosophical problem that Warren considers the greatest threat to the viability of modern democracies. He shows us the crisis of our age by revealing its specific features in our nation and our political culture. Those committed to the study of ideas about politics can hardly fail to heed such a discussion.

## CONCLUSION

From the point of view of the classical approach to the regime, *All the King's Men* is a great political novel on two levels. First, the political superstructure is a crisis in the political life of an American-style democratic government. This crisis results from the rise to power of a demagogue. Willie Stark, however, does not simply seek power for its own sake. He resorts to demagoguery as a response to his inability, and the demonstrated inability of the political system as a whole, to meet the needs of "the people." This type of popular regime creates the political problems that push Stark to demagoguery.

Second, the story of Jack Burden demonstrates how Stark's demagoguery itself transforms people around him by changing their view of the nature of the world and the requirements of good action or justice. Burden is shaped by Stark's regime, but he learns, albeit with some difficulty and at great cost, to understand himself in a way that is more true to how human beings actually think of themselves than is the material reductionism that Stark seems compelled to adopt. In doing so, Burden gains the ability to act politically in a new way that takes its bearings from outside the worldview that modern democracies tend to create. Ironically, this new orientation may be an indispensable requirement for maintaining a healthy democratic system. This reading of the novel makes sense of all its elements and how they properly belong together. It shows the work to be a fit object for careful study by political scientists who seek to understand how our politics informs and shapes our characters.

## REFERENCES

- Alighieri, Dante. 1982. *Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Bantam Books.
- Barrus, Roger. 1994. "Politics as Theater: The Presidential Debates." In *America through the Looking Glass: A Constitutionalist Critique of the 1992 Election*, ed. Roger Barrus and John Eastby. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. Pp. 11–27.
- Baumbach, Jonathan. [1965] 1987. "The Metaphysics of Demagoguery: *All the King's Men*." In *Modern Critical Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House. Pp. 19–36.
- Blair, John. 1993. "'The lie we must learn to live with': Honor and Tradition in *All the King's Men*." *Studies in the Novel* 25 (Winter): 457–73.
- Bloom, Harold. 1987. *Modern Critical Interpretations of All the King's Men*. New York: Chelsea House.
- Blotner, Joseph. 1966. *The Modern American Political Novel: 1900–1960*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Brown, Steven R. 1977. "Political Literature and the Response of the Reader: Experimental Studies of Imagery, Interpretation, and Criticism." *American Political Science Review* 71 (June): 567–84.
- Burt, John. 1988. *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Cantor, Paul. 1995. "Literature and Politics: Understanding the Regime." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28 (June): 192–5.
- Ceasar, James W., Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey K. Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette. 1994. "The Rise of the Rhetorical President." In *Readings in American Government*, ed. Mary P. Nichols and David K. Nichols. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt. Pp. 249–56.
- Cleopatra, Sister. 1985. *The Novels of Robert Penn Warren*. New Delhi: Associated Publishing House.
- Dannhauser, Werner J. 1995. "Poetry v. Philosophy." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28 (June): 190–2.
- Dauer, Manning J. 1948. "Recent Southern Political Thought." *Journal of Politics* 10 (May): 327–53.
- Davidson, James F. 1967. "Review of *The American Political Novel* by Gordon Milne." *Journal of Politics* 29 (May): 410–1.
- Ealy, Steven. 1999. "The Interplay of Corruption and Innocence in Robert Penn Warren's Fiction." Presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta.
- Graham, Hugh Davis. 1970. "The Enigma of Huey Long: An Essay Review." *Journal of Southern History* 36 (May): 205–11.
- Gray, Richard. [1972] 1987. "The American Novelist and American History." In *Modern Critical Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House. Pp. 91–102.
- Heilman, Robert B. [1947] 1977. "Melpomene as Wallflower; or, the Reading of Tragedy." In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Robert H. Chambers. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Pp. 16–28.
- Howe, Irving. 1957. *Politics and the American Novel*. New York: Vintage.
- Irish, Marian D. 1952. "Recent Political Thought in the South." *American Political Science Review* 46 (March): 121–41.
- Johnson, Glenn. 1980. "The Pastness of *All the King's Men*." *American Literature* 51 (January): 553–7.
- Kaplan, Charles. [1965] 1987. "Jack Burden: The Modern Ishmael." In *Modern Critical Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House. Pp. 9–17.
- King, Richard H. [1980] 1987. "From Politics to Psychology: Warren's *All the King's Men*." In *Modern Critical Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House. Pp. 145–54.
- Krieger, Murray. [1971] 1987. "The 'Burden' of History in *All the King's Men*." In *Modern Critical Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House. Pp. 71–90.
- Machiavelli, Niccolo. 1988. *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Madison, James, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay (Publius). [1788] 1990. *The Federalist Papers*, ed. George Carey and James McClellan. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Mizener, Arthur. [1967] 1987. "Robert Penn Warren: *All the King's Men*." In *Modern Critical Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House. Pp. 37–56.
- Nietzsche, Friederich. [1874, 1947] 1957. *The Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*, trans. Adrian Collins. New York: Macmillan.
- Nietzsche, Friederich. [1885] 1954. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. In *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin. Pp. 103–349.
- Payne, Ladell. 1968. "Willie Stark and Huey Long: Atmosphere, Myth, or Suggestion?" *American Quarterly* 20 (Autumn): 580–5.
- Ruoff, James. [1957] 1977. "Humpty Dumpty and *All the King's Men*: Warren's Teleology." In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Robert H. Chambers. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Pp. 84–92.
- Roosevelt, Franklin D. 1938. *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin Delano Roosevelt*, vol. 1. New York: Random House.
- Shepherd, Allen. [1970] 1987. "Robert Penn Warren as a Philosophical Novelist." In *Modern Critical Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House. Pp. 57–70.
- Simmons, James C. [1971] 1977. "Adam's Lobectomy Operation and the Meaning of *All the King's Men*." In *Twentieth Century Interpre-*

- tations of *All the King's Men*, ed. Robert H. Chambers. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Pp. 73–83.
- Tocqueville, Alexis. [1850] 1979. *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence and ed. J. P. Mayer. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Warren, Robert Penn. [1946] 1974. *All the King's Men*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Warren, Robert Penn. [1953] 1977. "Introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *All the King's Men*." In *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Robert H. Chambers. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Pp. 93–7.
- Warren, Robert Penn. [1964] 1965. "All the King's Men: The Matrix of Experience." In *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Lewis Longley, Jr. New York: New York University Press. Pp. 75–81.
- Warren, Robert Penn. 1975. *Democracy and Poetry*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Whalen-Bridge, John. 1998. *Political Fiction and the American Self*. Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Wilson, Deborah. 2000. "Medusa, the Movies, and the King's Men." In *The Legacy of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. David Madden. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. Pp. 70–83.
- Zuckert, Catherine. 1981. "On Reading Classic American Novelists as Political Thinkers." *Journal of Politics* 43 (September): 683–706.
- Zuckert, Catherine. 1990. *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in the Novel Form*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Zuckert, Catherine. 1995. "Why Political Scientists Want to Study Literature." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28 (June): 189–90.