Robert Penn Warren

5 · All the King's Men:
The Matrix of Experience

WHEN I AM ASKED how much *All the King's Men* owes to the actual politics of Louisiana in the '30's, I can only be sure that if I had never gone to live in Louisiana and if Huey Long had not existed, the novel would never have been written. But this is far from saying that my "state" in *All the King's Men* is Louisiana (or any of the other forty-nine stars in our flag), or that my Willie Stark is the late Senator. What Louisiana and Senator Long gave me was a line of thinking and feeling that did eventuate in the novel.

In the summer of 1934 I was offered a job—a much-needed job—as assistant professor at the Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge. It was "Huey Long's University," and definitely on the make—with a sensational football team and with money to spend even for assistant professors at a time when assistant professors were being fired, not hired—as I knew all too well. It was Huey's University, but he, I was assured, would never mess with my classroom. That was to prove true; he was far too adept in the arts of power to care what an assistant professor might have to say. The only time that his presence was ever felt in my classroom was when, in my Shakespeare course, I gave my little annual lecture on the political background of *Julius Caesar;* and then, for the two weeks we spent on the play, backs grew straighter, eyes grew brighter, notes were taken, and the girls stopped knitting in class, or repairing their faces.

In September, 1934, I left Tennessee, where I had been living on a farm near Nashville, drove down across Mississippi,

crossed the river by ferry (where I can't be sure—was it at Greenville?) and was in North Louisiana. Along the way I picked up a hitchhiker—a country man, the kind you call a red-neck or a wool-hat, aging, aimless, nondescript, beat up by life and hard times and bad luck, clearly tooth-broke and probably gut-shot, standing beside the road in an attitude that spoke of infinite patience and considerable fortitude, holding a parcel in his hand, wrapped in old newspaper and tied with binder twine, waiting for some car to come along. He was, though at the moment I did not sense it, a mythological figure.

He was the god on the battlement, dimly perceived above the darkling tumult and the steaming carnage of the political struggle. He was a voice, a portent, and a natural force like the Mississippi River getting set to bust a levee. Long before the Fascist March on Rome, Norman Douglas, meditating on Naples, had predicted that the fetid slums of Europe would make possible the "inspired idiot." His predictive diagnosis of the origins of fascism—and of communism—may be incomplete, but it is certain that the rutted back roads and slab-side shacks that had spawned my nameless old hitchhiker, with the twine-tied paper parcel in his hand, had, by that fall of 1934, made possible the rise of "Huey." My nameless hitchhiker was, mythologically speaking, Long's *sine qua non.*

So it was appropriate that he should tell me the first episode of the many I had to hear of the myth that was "Huey." The roads, he said, was shore better now. A man could git to market, he said. A man could jist git up and git, if'n a notion come on him. Did'n have to pay no toll at no toll bridge neither. Fer Huey was a free-bridge man. So he went on and told me how, standing on the river bank by a toll bridge (by what river and what bridge was never clear), Huey had made the president of the company that owned the bridge a good, fair cash offer, and the man laughed at him. But, the old hitchhiker said, Huey did'n do nothing but lean over and pick him up a chunk of rock and throwed it off a-ways, and asked did that president-feller see whar the rock hit. The feller said yeah, he seen. Wal, Huey said, the next thing you see is gonna be a big new free bridge right whar that rock hit, and you, you son-of-a-bitch, are goen bankrupt a-ready and doan even know it.

There were a thousand tales, over the years, and some of them were, no doubt, literally and factually true. But they were all true in the world of "Huey"—that world of myth, folklore, poetry, deprivation, rancor, and dimly envisaged hopes. That world had a strange, shifting, often ironical and sometimes irrelevant relation to the factual world of Senator Huey P. Long and his cold manipulation of the calculus of power. The two worlds, we may hazard, merged only at the moment when in September, 1935, in the corridor of the Capitol, the little .32 slug bit meanly into the senatorial vitals.

There was another world—this a factual world—made possible by the factual Long, though not inhabited by him. It was a world that I, as an assistant professor, was to catch fleeting glimpses of, and ponder. It was the world of the parasites of power, a world that Long was, apparently, contemptuous of, but knew how to use, as he knew how to use other things of which he was, perhaps, contemptuous. This was a world of a sick yearning for elegance and the sight of one's name on the society page of a New Orleans paper; it was the world of the electric moon devised, it was alleged, to cast a romantic glow over the garden when the president of the university and his wife entertained their politicos and pseudosocialites; it was a world of pretentiousness, of bloodcurdling struggles for academic preferment, of drool-jawed grab and arrogant criminality. It was a world all too suggestive, in its small-bore, provincial way, of the airs and aspirations that the newspapers attributed to that ex-champagne salesman Von Ribbentrop and to the inner circle of Edda Ciano's friends.

For in Louisiana, in the 1930's, you felt somehow that you were living in the great world, or at least in a microcosm with all the forces and fatalities faithfully, if sometimes comically, drawn to scale. And the little Baton Rouge world of campus and governor's mansion and capitol and the gold bathroom fixtures reported to be in the house of the university contractor was, once the weight of Long's contempt and political savvy had been removed by the bullet of the young Brutus in the Capitol, to plunge idiotically rampant to an end almost as dramatic as the scenes in the last bunkers of Berlin or at the filling station on the outskirts of Milan. The headlines advertised the suicides,

and the population of penitentiaries, both federal and state, received some distinguished additions.

But this is getting ahead of the story. Meanwhile, there was, besides the lurid worlds, the world of ordinary life to look at. There were the people who ran stores or sold insurance or had a farm and tried to survive and pay their debts. There were —visible even from the new concrete speedway that Huey had slashed through the cypress swamps toward New Orleans—the palmetto-leaf and sheet-iron hovels of the moss pickers, rising like some fungoid growth from a hummock under the great cypress knees, surrounded by scum-green water that never felt sunlight, back in that Freudianly contorted cypress gloom of cottonmouth moccasins big as the biceps of a prizefighter, and owl calls, and the murderous metallic grind of insect life, and the smudge fire at the hovel door, that door being nothing but a hole in a hovel wall, with a piece of croker sack hung over it. There were, a few miles off at the university, your colleagues, some as torpid as a gorged alligator in the cold mud of January and some avid to lick the spit of an indifferent or corrupt administration, but many able and gifted and fired by a will to create, out of the seething stew and heaving magma, a distinguished university.

And there were, of course, the students, like students anywhere in the country in the big state universities, except for the extraordinary number of pretty girls and the preternatural blankness of the gladiators who were housed beneath the stadium to have their reflexes honed, their diet supervised, and—through the efforts of tutors—their heads crammed with just enough of whatever mash was required (I never found out) to get them past their minimal examinations. Among the students there sometimes appeared, too, that awkward boy from the depth of the 'Cajun country or from some scrabblefarm in North Louisiana, with burning ambition and frightening energy and a thirst for learning; and his presence there, you reminded yourself, with whatever complication of irony seemed necessary at the moment, was due to Huey, and to Huey alone. For the "better element" had done next to nothing in fifty years to get that boy out of the grim despair of his ignorance.

Yes, there was the world of the "good families," most of

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whom hated Huey Long—except, of course, for that percentage who, for one reason or another, had reached an accommodation. They hated him sometimes for good reasons and sometimes for bad, and sometimes for no reason at all, as a mere revulsion of taste; but they never seemed to reflect on what I took to be the obvious fact that if the government of the state had not previously been marked by various combinations of sloth, complacency, incompetence, corruption, and a profound lack of political imagination, there would never have been a Senator Huey P. Long, and my old hitchhiker by the roadside would, in September, 1934, have had no tale to tell me.

Conversation in Louisiana always came back to the tales, to the myth, to politics; and to talk politics is to talk about power. So conversation turned, by implication at least, on the question of power and ethics, of power and justification, of means and ends, of "historical costs." The big words were not often used, certainly not by the tellers of tales, but the concepts lurked even behind the most ungrammatical folktale. The tales were shot through with philosophy.

The tales were shot through, too, with folk humor, and the ethical ambiguity of folk humor. And the tales, like the political conversations, were shot through, too, with violence—or rather, with hints of the possibility of violence. There was a hint of revolutionary desperation—often synthetically induced. In Louisiana, in '34 and '35, it took nothing to start a rumor of violence. There had been, you might hear, a "battle" at the airport of Baton Rouge. A young filling station operator would proudly display his sawed-off automatic shotgun—I forget which "side" he was on, but I remember his fingers caressing the polished walnut of the stock. Or you might hear that there was going to be a "march" on the Capitol—but not hear by whom or for what.

Melodrama was the breath of life. There had been melodrama in the life I had known in Tennessee, but with a difference: in Tennessee the melodrama seemed to be different from the stuff of life, something superimposed upon life, but in Louisiana people lived melodrama, seemed to live, in fact, for it, for this strange combination of philosophy, humor, and violence. Life was a tale that you happened to be living—and that "Huey"

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happened to be living before your eyes. And all the while I was reading Elizabethan tragedy, Machiavelli, William James, and American history—and all that I was reading seemed to come alive, in shadowy distortions and sudden clarities, in what I saw around me.

How directly did I try to transpose into fiction Huey P. Long and the tone of that world? The question answers itself in a single fact. The first version of my story was a verse drama; and the actual writing began, in 1938, in the shade of an olive tree by a wheat field near Perugia. In other words, if you are sitting under an olive tree in Umbria and are writing a verse drama, the chances are that you are concerned more with the myth than with the fact, more with the symbolic than with the actual. And so it was. It could not, after all, have been otherwise, for in the strict, literal sense, I had no idea what the now deceased Huey P. Long had been. What I knew was the "Huey" of the myth, and that was what I had taken with me to Mussolini's Italy, where the bully boys wore black shirts and gave a funny salute.

I had no way of knowing what went on in the privacy of the heart of Senator Long. Now I could only hope, ambitiously, to know something of the heart of the Governor Talos of my play *Proud Flesh*. For Talos was the first avatar of my Willie Stark, and the fact that I drew that name from the "iron groom" who, in murderous blankness, serves Justice in Spenser's *Faerie Queen* should indicate something of the line of thought and feeling that led up to that version and persisted, with modulations, into the novel.

Talos was to become Stark, and *Proud Flesh* was to become *All the King's Men*. Many things, some merely technical, led to this transformation, but one may have some bearing on the question of the ratio of fact and fiction. In 1942 I left Louisiana for good, and when in 1943 I began the version that is more realistic, discursive, and documentary in method (though not in spirit) than the play, I was doing so after I had definitely left Louisiana and the world in which the story had its roots. By now the literal, factual world was only a memory, and therefore was ready to be absorbed freely into the act of imagination. Even the old man by the roadside—the hitchhiker

I had picked up on the way down to take my job—was ready to enter the story: he became, it would seem, the old hitchhiker whom Jack Burden picks up returning from Long Beach, California, the old man with the twitch in the face that gives Jack the idea for the Great Twitch. But my old hitchhiker had had no twitch in his face. Nor had I been Jack Burden.

I had not been Jack Burden except insofar as you have to try to "be" whatever you are trying to create. And in that sense I was also Adam Stanton, and Willie Stark, and Sadie Burke, and Sugar Boy, and all the rest. And this brings me to my last notion. However important for my novel was the protracted dialectic between "Huey" on the one side, and me on the other, it was far less important, in the end, than that deeper and darker dialectic for which the images and actions of a novel are the only language. And however important was my acquaintance with Louisiana, that was far less important than my acquaintance with another country: for any novel, good or bad, must report, willy-nilly, the history, sociology, and politics of a country even more fantastic than was Louisiana under the consulship of Huey.

Robert B. Heilman

6 · Melpomene as Wallflower; or, the Reading of Tragedy

EVERYBODY KNOWS that the eighteenth century marked, in English literature, the disappearance of tragedy and the rise of the novel. As neoclassicism set in, something happened to the tragic sense, a something which included the growth of the scientific attitude and the subtle adulteration of the Christian view of experience—in, for instance, the pressure of prudential upon transcendental values. There is a weakening of the grasp of man's inner contradictions and complexities upon which tragedy, and for that matter the highest comedy, depends. In its direction the novel was social, even sociological; its concern was less the troubled man than troubles between men—if it rose to a consideration of troubles at all—and between men who were whole and easily catalogued: Joneses, Allworthys, Brambles, Evelinas, Elizabeth Bennetts, Micawbers, Beckys, Grantleys, Patternes. For literature, the content of experience became stabilized at that level, and on that level some men of letters are still content to remain. But tragic experience, however much enlightenment we have, keeps stabbing at our imaginations: the novel, irregularly, tentatively, and yet with a kind of determination, has kept probing and thrusting toward the tragic awareness of life which drama has never recovered: half the history of English fiction is the quest for tragedy. George Eliot, overly condescended to now, begins to cut back into the inner man; the older Hardy goes further; James, Conrad, and Joyce lay hold of inner obscurities, parts that do not match; Faulkner seizes upon disruptive urgencies and intensities. Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* adds a chapter to the history of the recovery of tragedy.

"Recovery" is probably the right word, for Elizabethan, and

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possibly Greek, tragedy has made a mark on *All the King's Men*. Shakespeare won the pit, and this novel is a best seller, which is to say that there is a level of dramatic tension more widely accessible than one expects in the philosophic novel. The plot involves public figures, but the record is finally of the private agony (as with Macbeth and Oedipus). The author begins with history and politics, but the real subject is the nature of them: Warren is no more discussing American politics than *Hamlet* is discussing Danish politics. Then there are the chronic intra-family confrontations and injuries, the repercussions of generation upon generation, as with Hamlet and Orestes—a type of situation which, it may be observed in passing, Aristotle praises. As with the older tragedy, all this can look like steaming melodrama if one wants to stop at the deed as deed and simply forget about meanings. But as in the older poetic tragedy there is, beneath all the explicitnesses, a core of obscure conflicts, of motives partly clouded, of calculations beset by the uncalculated, of moral impasses in which both action and inaction may damn, and Oresteian duty be Oresteian guilt.

All the King's Men is the tragedy of incomplete personalities whose interrelationship is rooted, in part, in the impulse to completeness—in the "agony of will." Anne Stanton cannot find it in the uncertain, unfocused young Jack Burden, sardonic in a detachment closer to alienation than objectivity; by contrast the rude, better-directioned power of Willie Stark acts compellingly upon her. Dr. Adam Stanton, the man of idea, cut off, driving himself with ascetic, self-destructive violence, seeks, though apparently acting unwillingly, a liberating public deed which allies him with Willie Stark, the man of fact—the split between whom and himself, as symbolic modern characters, provides the explicit philosophic groundwork of the story. Jack Burden, the narrator, rootless, shrewd, speculative, but unintegrated, lacking, so to speak, a personality, gives his life an appearance of personal form by his close attachment to Willie, who has cohesion and aim and a genius for the action that organizes and excites—and that still calls up slow questions, questions which Jack, in evidence of his never quite blotted out iota of grace, always keeps asking. Everybody's needs are ironically summed up in the grotesque gunman, Sugar Boy, the stutterer

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who loves Willie because Willie "can talk so good." Willie completes the others, whose need is a centering and a commitment; but Willie cannot complete himself. In a complex of polarities that are structurally important throughout the novel, Willie also seeks completion in them—an identification with idea and tradition, and with the asker of questions in whom he senses an entryway into a realm beyond facts. For in Willie, the man of fact, there is the paradox of action; action completes and yet is incomplete; action is necessary but is never pure; action begs to be undertaken but imposes its conditions. Adam cannot sufficiently accept the conditions of action, and Willie cannot sufficiently escape them. But if Willie cannot save himself from his gift, he can, as is needful in tragedy, understand himself; the man of action becomes the self-critic in action when, in every phase of the hospital drama, he actually, if not overtly, repudiates his working half-truths.

A plurality of heroes is one symbol of a riven world. There are in Warren's novel other partial men; there is especially Jack, whose story, he says, is Willie's story: he is the riven world which produces Willie and serves him and yet always keeps a last thin aloofness from him, and which through him comes to a possibly saving understanding—the note of hope, of spiritual discovery, which completes tragedy. Jack is a scarred Ancient Mariner telling what happened and what he learned; he stubbornly tells it in a style which recreates things as they were to him, without benefit of the exceptions he might not make in his maturity.

I have stressed Mr. Warren's belonging to the tragic tradition because his book has brought into focus a very distrubing situation—our sheer incompetence to read tragedy. A large number of critics have beaten Mr. Warren around the ears and cried that he should have written a political melodrama. He woos a long-neglected Melpomene, and is told he should be doing a carmagnole with an up-to-date Clio. He tries to give his readers the universal in the unique form which is the individual work of art, and they bawl at him for not sticking to social platitudes. He gives them metaphysics, and they call pettishly for sociology. Well, he does give them some social documentation, all right, but he gives it to them the hard way:

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he pictures for them the spiritual condition—the decline of tradition, the loss of an integrating force, the kind of split—which results in Willie-as-hero; he makes it still harder for them by pointing out the kind of greatness Willie had to have to be to a society what he was. Warren says, I take it, that a universal complement has to be a little more than a melodrama villain. But they do not want understanding—because it involves the pain of self-scrutiny? They know in advance that Willie, insofar as he is Humpty, is a bad egg who ought to have had a fall; we should simply and happily hoot him. And feel ever so warm a glow inside. But we can get a warm glow from liquor or likker, and some prefer chemical analysis.

Most of the daily and weekly reviewers who tell America what to read still have the simplified view of *belles lettres* deriving from the eighteenth century. Of some two score of them whose reviews of *All the King's Men* I have been able to see, precisely two have a complete grasp of the work as tragedy: Henry Rago in *Commonweal* and Brainard Cheney in the Nashville *Banner*, both of whom do brilliant analyses. Four others come close: Victor Hamm in the Milwaukee *Journal*, Paul Engle in the Chicago *Tribune*, Granville Hicks in the *American Mercury*, and Lee Casey in the *Rocky Mountain News*. Surely these publication would not come to mind as the first six most likely sources of critical light in America. But by their diversity and distribution they establish the public intelligibility of Mr. Warren's novel; it is clearly not a work for club members only. Besides these six, about fourteen—in all, a little less than half of those I have seen—recognize that the novel is of philosophic dimensions. George Mayberry of the *New Republic* and James Wood of the *Saturday Review* read the book very intelligently; but the philosophic insight of others is often neither large nor secure. Most reviews are laudatory, some of them grudgingly, and others clearly uncertain why. The *Daily Oklahoman* headlines its review, "Nothing To Do But Like This Gay Old Cuss." From such a journalistic cradle, presumably typical, it is, paradoxically, not too far to the mature journeyman critics, a dozen or so of them, who provide the real problem for discussion. They are the ones who fear that Mr. Warren fails to show the dangers of dictatorship, or who outright accuse him of defending or

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aiding fascism. If these were all journalistic hillbillies, one could shed a tear for the darkness of the underbrush and forget it; but they furnish part of the candlepower of some of the stronger fluorescent lights in Megalopolis—the New York *Times*, *PM*, the *Nation*, and the papers that subscribe to John Cournos and Sterling North. Further, Fred Marsh of the *Herald Tribune* fails so completely to understand the book that he finally hypothesizes that it may be "intended only as melodrama in modern prose."

It would be easy to compile a florilegium of critical quaintnesses. Only two reviewers, for instance, indicate awareness that the management of the religious theme at the end is more than a pious postlude. The *New Yorker* and the Chicago *Sun* both regard Jack Burden as an interloper; *PM* and Sterling North regard the Cass Mastern episode, which is of high structural importance as an intrusion. Most of the commentators on style should go to Henry Rago of *Commonweal* for a lesson on the quality and functional role of the style. Of three reviewers who use the word *slick*, only Robert Gorham Davis of the *Times* adduces evidence—two sentences, both of which, he fails to realize, are indications of the attitude of Jack Burden; the second he particularly mistreats by lifting it, without explanation, from a bitterly ironic context. But what is one to think of reviewers' sense of style in general when he can find applied to Mr. Warren's writing two such beautifully irreconcilable judgments as those of Fred Marsh in the *Herald Tribune* and Laban C. Smith in the Chicago *Sun*? The former's words: "elaborately stylized prose (since nobody ever either talks or writes like this)." Mr. Smith's comment on figures of speech: "most of them very familiar if not trite, and the full development of these figures and their repetition frequently corrupts . . . a strong and intelligent style."

But the heart of the matter is this: why can so few critics read tragedy, and what are the implications of this disability of theirs? In the muddling over *All the King's Men* we can see several main tendencies, overlapping and not always properly distinguishable; perhaps they are all facets of a central cultural phenomenon. As a group the reviewers exhibit certain habits of mind that have been familiar since the eighteenth century—

habits which appeared as tragedy began to disappear and which, as long as they are general and uncorrected, are, without necessarily intending to be so, hostile to tragedy and to the insights made possible by the tragic sense. Perhaps the presence of these habits means simply the absence of the tragic habit of mind. Then the novelist faces the hard task of creating it for himself. The habits against which he will have to contend are the Puritanical, the sentimental, the scientific, the social-topical, and the lotos-eating or slothful.

The Puritanism that one finds in the reviews of *All the King's Men* is of the pale, literal, unhand-me-sir kind that, when Troy is falling, complains of, or even rises to a certain vice-squad petulance against, naughty words on the wall. Eunice Ross Perkins grieves, in the Macon *Telegraph*, that there is "no really fine" woman in the book and that Mr. Warren has not caught sight of the really very nice things in the South. The same obtuseness appears in two ecclesiastical organs, with which *Commonweal* is in encouraging contrast: Harold C. Gardiner in *America* abuses the book as blasphemous and immoral, and Daniel Poling in the *Christian Herald* regrets that Mr. Warren "goes into the gutter." Mr. Warren is trying to tell them about Troy, and they look for The Story of the Good Little Boy. A man's search for truth is too tough substance for these sentimental hand-me-downs from a simpler day. A cousin of theirs, Ethel Dexter of the Springfield *Republican*, wonders how women can really fall in love with such a fellow as Willie. These are familiar cries for familiar pluckings of the heart-strings. Give the cries a political twist, and they become demands for praise of reigning dogmas, and caveats against inquiry into underlying truths.

The scientific mind turns from esthetic problems to the provenience of the book, the man behind the book, the book's effect on society, etc.: a perverse factuality trespasses on the domain of the imagination. Certain reviewers cannot separate Willie Stark from Huey Long; some actually fear that Mr. Warren is not *biographically* accurate. Such minds cannot distinguish fact and fiction, the point of departure and the imaginative journey; they cannot realize that a few biographical facts are merely, and can be no more than, an alterable design for a

mold into which the artist pours such dramatic body and such values as his insight permits. How can these people read Shakespeare? Some of them, self-consciously sharp, scream "special pleading"; Sterling North and Robert Davis consider the novel a personal apologia, an apologia, Davis says outright, for having edited *The Southern Review* at Louisiana State University. It may be remarked parenthetically that Mr. Davis's criterion, if applied with any sort of consistency at all, will deprive most universities of their faculties and most money-making periodicals of their reviewers. What is of critical interest, however, is not Mr. Davis's squinting detectivism, but the pseudoscientific, psychology-ridden cast of mind, with which he is obviously well satisfied, that makes it literally impossible for him to read and understand the literary evidence. He cannot tell what the story says; he simply cannot grasp the author's detachment and integrity.

This category of incompetence overlaps the next, where we find the science-and-society frame of mind. Historically, this kind of reader represents the main tradition of the English novel, which finds its tensions in social patterns, in problems of relationship in society rather than in the individual. But societies change, and with the evolutionary friction the social becomes the topical. To us, in our day, the social appears as the real, and atmospheric pressures tend to convince the writer that literature ought to be an adjunct of societal reordering. Now this concept, if taken as profoundly as possible, could accommodate high literature; Mr. Warren is concerned with society: his very subject is the split personality of an age. But the self-conscious practitioner of social consciousness does not want such radical investigations; he has already done the diagnosis, and all he wants is a literary pharmacist to make up the prescribed vitamin and sulfa pills.

The social-topical critics, bound by their inflexibly applied theory of literature, cannot read the individual work. But there are degrees of subtlety among them. Granville Hicks, as I have already said, gives so sensitive an account of *All the King's Men* that he does not belong with the table pounders at all—except for one small point: he notes Shaw's and Steffens' insistence on changing a corrupt society, and adds that Mr. Warren says

nothing of socialism. That is all; yet it suggests that Mr. Hicks wants the novel to do something which is hardly in its province. But he holds to his dogma with such tact that he is not blinded to the goodness of what has been done. It is quite a step down, therefore, to Saxe Commins, who in the Cleveland *News* pays formal tribute to Mr. Warren's various skills but goes on to express regret for Mr. Warren's indifference to Negroes and "the people who should be the concern of the state." Mr. Commins' social concern is familiar: he wants a conventional conflict developed by standardized dramatic symbols; he wants the novelist to be a one-man pressure group instead of a man of tragic vision. So, dogma-bound, he gravely warns that the novel serves to glamorize the man in the "bullet-proof limousine" and thus to "invite disaster." Diana Trilling of the *Nation* imagines that Mr. Warren is defaming Hegel's relativism and hence gets things so out of focus that she perpetrates an extraordinary series of misreadings. She calls Jack Burden's Twitch theory "embarrassingly maudlin"—and completely misses Jack's repudiation of the theory. She says that Jack's "moral awareness" is of "low quality" and that he has a fine eye but "no equivalent gift of inward vision." She utterly misses his long search for truth, his reflectiveness, his later understanding of Cass Mastern, his insight into the Adam-Willie cleavage. What must a man do to exhibit vision? Declaim the Bill of Rights? Mrs. Trilling thinks the hospital is meant to establish Willie as a benefactor and that Mr. Warren approves of Willie because Willie is Jack's "hero." Even a strong commitment to liberal dogma seems hardly sufficient to explain, in a justly distinguished professional critic of fiction, such gross oversimplification of what a book says.

Dawn Powell gives the readers of *PM* little more than flippancies; but she closes with the warning that increasing regard for the strongman legend may be paving the way "for a really successful Willie Stark." Sterling North's purely literary comments are too geuinely stupid to warrent mention; what he lacks in insight he makes up in insolence and malevolence. But is he, in his political and moral judgments, really the honest barbarian he looks? Beats there a heart of gold below the red neck? Or is he the slicker in the backroom who knows what the

customers want? Are there pleasant little pills in the innocent, downturned palm?

Diana Trilling, Dawn Powell, and Sterling North—a pretty bedful. And when we find the somewhat primly schoolmasterish Robert Davis's head on the same pillow—he assures us that Warren is playing Parson Weems to Huey's Washington—the picture has a wonderfully satisfying completeness. For what do they all do but pull the covers up over their heads and refuse to listen to the real warnings about the society they are so preciously and loudly concerned about? They have taken the symptom for the disease, and they want the symptom denounced; out, out, dark pimple. When an artist takes the symptom and traces it to radical causes—and when he even shows the kind of consciousness that nourishes the causes and with a severely disciplined hopefulness shows a possibly saving alteration in that consciousness—they mistake him for a germ carrier. The artist proceeds from the region to the civilization, and from the civilization to the dangers of disintegration implicit in human life; this is tragedy; but they cannot read it, and in their confusion they are as complacent as if they were protecting Humpty down there under the covers.

Before we turn out the light and tiptoe away from this dormitory and its fantasies, we need to note that, aside from missing what is in the book, Mr. Davis prescribes a formula for contemporary fiction: that "we fight men like Long with the utmost resolution . . . to preserve . . . free, open, pluralistic societies. . . ." One may doubt whether *Macbeth* would have been improved if it had been conceived as a recipe for the curtailment of royal abuses. Mr. Davis makes the old confusion of citizen and artist; but, what is far worse, he is apparently bent on imposing upon the artist a topicality, and a predetermined point of view, which must dull and destroy his insight. It is dangerous to read badly; but it is a terribly serious matter when an élite itself—I refer to most of the critics I have quoted—when this élite, as if moved by a devastating self-distrust, calls for easy propaganda in place of the difficulties of tragedy. It is easy to hate a villain; and it is usually the groundlings who want life reduced to a manageable melodrama. What if all artists give in?

In many of these readers of *All the King's Men* there is plain slothfulness—not as a personal vice but as public habit which appears to have grown since the eighteenth century, to have been nourished upon and in turn to have insisted upon, a relatively simple, one-dimensional literature. Not that there has not been difficult, complex, poetic writing; but it has been exceptional, and, until lately, rather much neglected. It is obviously not quite fair to pick Leo Kirschbaum of *Commentary* as the sole exemplar of the well-intentioned, easygoing readerhood, for he has tried not to be careless or casual, and has indeed worked hard at his assignment. But in him the moral becomes beautifully clear: as a sharp reader of Elizabethan tragedy, and as one who understands poetic values, he is precisely the person who ought to read *All the King's Men* with especial discernment. Yet his trouble is that, as a man of the long post-1700 age of prose, he somehow approaches the novel with a totally different set of assumptions—an approach which is tantamount to an abdication of his critical powers. As a modern work, the novel is going to be explicit, straightforward, resonantly in favor of the accepted goods, adapted to intelligent upper-middle-class sentiments, not too poetic, and with the philosophy, if any, prompting pretty audibly from the wings; and if the work draws its skeletal materials from modern history, it must stick faithfully to what we all know to be the truth about those materials. Now Dr. Kirschbaum would never read Shakespeare or Sophocles like that. He would unconsciously junk all these preconceptions and start with the text. But in his modern *acedia*—and perhaps it is the literary *acedia* of any age—he starts, alas without knowing it, with something else that the text is supposed to fit into. So he misses entirely the central theme—the split in modern consciousness; in Jack's unrelenting philosophical inquiry he finds only callow, even pathological insufficiency; and the complex attitude of Jack to Willie, which involves not only his being hypnotized by the genius of action, but also his sense of guilt and his paradoxical detachment and critical distance from Willie, Kirschbaum takes to be an "amoral and mystical approval of the American fascist Willie Stark."

It may be worth repeating, as we leave the reviewers, that

enough of them glimpse the novelist's intention to establish his power of communication. Those who miss it are, in the main, not at all dull; but by some habit of thought, some cast of mind, which seems to come from the mental sets of the civilization, they are blocked off from seeing how the novel, as tragedy, works. Mr. Warren treats them as independent minds, able to slip away from societal apron strings. In fact, he never condescends to his readers; those who would read him aright will have to work out careful patterns. It would have been easy to supply a chorus indentifying Willie's half-truths as half-truths; but Warren does it indirectly by having Willie in effect repudiate—his attitude to the hospital denies his formal relativism—his own announced positions, and by having the implicit repudiation seen through the awareness of a Jack Burden who is himself experimenting with concepts. Jack could have underlined his reservations about Willie, but we only see those reservations nibbling at the edges of an apparently whole-souled commitment. In the midst of strenuous muckraking Jack tells Willie, "I'm not one of your scum, and I'm still grinning when I please," and thus we see both the split in Jack and the withheld area of self which differentiates him from the Duffeys and Larsons. The split in Jack—that is, the split in an age—finds a symbol in half-truths, with which the difficulty is precisely that are partly true. While striving toward a whole, Jack veers from half to half. In early years he is inactive, his personality is diffuse and amorphous. There is no imperative in either tradition or work; as a lover he ends—this is one of the most delicately managed episodes—in a hesitation which is in origin an echo of an old honor, thinned out now into a wavering sentiment, and which is in effect a negation. What Anne does not find in Jack she finds in Willie; what Jack does not find in himself he finds in Willie—resolution. But, riding on another man's activeness, Jack the doer is never free of Jack the self-critic; he justifies by half-truths, but: he also accepts half-truths uttered in judgment. The photographer says, ". . . you work for Stark and you call somebody a son-of-a-bitch." He is half right, half wrong, Jack thinks, "and in the end that is what paralyzes you." Now the sense of paralysis is ironically a symbol of reorientation: Jack is trying to make his action and his idea cohere

—a private parallel to his outward act of bringing Adam and Willie together. But the still more embracing irony, the irony which is all the preachment for which anybody could wish lies in Willie's relation to his half-truth world. For his dubiety of his official philosophy is activated too late. For him the half-truth of acting according to the facts has been a whole truth; of the paralysis of others he is born; from the start he is always shown acting; and in turn all the spirit, the essence of action has somehow formed young Tom Stark. What is the end of Tom Stark? In the hospital bed he lies *paralyzed*—a fine climax to the counterpoint of kinesis and paralysis and a symbol of Willie's real failure. Willie, as Jack says, "could not tell his greatness from ungreatness and so mixed them together that what was adulterated was lost."

Who would read the book aright, we have said, must find the patterns. Jack, searching for a past, kills his father; Willie, searching for a future, may be said to kill his son. What Willie learns, there is not enough life left to define wholly; it is Lucy who seizes, in a quiet irony, the instrument of continuity into the future. Jack finds a truth, a basis for values, a faith. All this is part of a very complex theme of past-and-future, a theme which is really another way of presenting the split in the world. Here the split is defined chronologically; the separation of fact and idea is also man's separation from his roots, a separation which appeared extensively in *At Heaven's Gate* and which appears intensively here. Jack's separation from the past is so extreme that at first he cannot understand Cass Mastern's acute sense of moral responsibility; the essence of his inner development in his coming to terms with the past, knowing the reality of guilt, and learning, with Cass, that "the world is all of one piece." There is a skillfully managed irony in the ambivalence of the past: when it is no longer a nourishing tradition, it is a terrifying skeleton: *the* past is gone, and each man has only *a* past that he can be coerced with. The skeleton, the sterilizing past, is all that Willie professes to believe in (even while being drawn to the Burdens, who represent traditions, the fertilizing past): Jack digs up each man's past and discovers *the* past; from case histories he progresses to the meaning of history. He moves away from his old misvaluation of the past, of which the two