

Driving Away From Depravity: Automobiles and the Myth of Innocence

Whenever I wanted to escape my work in college, I would get into a beat-up '67 Valiant, and drive. I would start down Indian Hill Blvd. toward the decaying city of Pomona, turn right at Indian Hill Village, a half-abandoned shopping center, and head West, past used car lots, Freak's Head Shop, Big Momma's Bail Bonds, and the Central Baptist Church. I never felt freer than when making that drive for a midnight hamburger. I was in the driver's seat. I might be traveling through dangerous territory, but I could always keep the car moving and the windows rolled up. I was not entangled in any complicated human relationships while I was in the car. I was anonymous. Behind the tinted windows I could sing or scream or talk as I pleased. I could turn up the radio and drown the world out. I was free.

It was, of course, an illusion. The freedom for sale at the used car lots was as temporary as the liberation offered at Freak's and Big Momma's. And I was not really my own master even behind the wheel. The state had me tagged front and back. The red lights stopped me even on the empty streets. The car itself—the possession of my father's that I used most regularly after his death—tied me to the past. And the Valiant might have betrayed me on one of those midnight drives instead of waiting for a 90° afternoon halfway up route 101. But while I moved through the empty streets, I felt no constraints.

Those drives were my small participation in the old American dream of freedom and escape. The classics of our literature—and the songs I heard on the Valiant's AM radio—tell of many men who light out for nowhere in particular and escape all that ties them down. Like a frontiersman or an outlaw trucker, I was escaping all restrictions. I was enjoying, for a few minutes, a dream of freedom that I recognized, even then, as attractive, powerful, and profoundly false.

When advertisers sell cars, they often sell the myth of freedom: A commercial for the Mercury Cougar that was shown on television a few years ago included all the elements of the myth, with only an alteration in the gender of the protagonist to show that times have changed.

A woman in a business suit appears at her boss's desk and drops a pile of papers. Then she leaves her press card or security pass on the desk and leaves. A Tina Turner sound-alike begins singing "Proud Mary"—"Left a good job in the city, working for the Man every night and day, but I never lost minute of sleeping worrying about the way things might have been." The woman gets in her Cougar, and drives out of town. Shots of the car moving through the streets and out onto the highways are intercut with shots of the woman at the wheel, undoing her dress-for-success tie. She arrives at the beach—and the afternoon sun shows that she, like all pioneers, has been heading west. Freed from her yuppie jacket, she assumes a pose of liberation, and then enters a cabin, sits at a typewriter, and taps out, "Chapter One." The car becomes, not a mode of transportation, but the embodiment of the rejection of the past and chance for a fresh start. (We can only hope she paid cash for the Cougar: the payment book most of us associate with our cars doesn't fit this vision.)

Popular songs, perhaps more insistently than any other element in popular culture, have celebrated the automobile and driving—NPR's *Car Talk* finds a new one every week. A good example is Bruce Springsteen, whose songs I listened to during those drives in my '67 Valiant. In "Thunder Road" he even makes movement a substitute for salvation in a religious sense: "All the redemption I can offer, girl,/Is beneath this dirty hood." This connection between redemption and driving fast may seem strange, but it is unusual. Flannery O'Connor's Hazel Motes shows even more faith in his car as a savior when he says that "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified."¹ The 80's punk group Gang of Four turned that declaration into a song: "A man with a car needs no justification/Fate is in my hands and in the transmission."

It is interesting to compare the associations that have grown up around the automobile with those that have grown up around the train in popular culture. Trains are much more often linked, not just to helplessness and hopelessness, but to guilt, than cars are. If the automobile is associated with freedom, with being in control of your destiny, with being free of your past sins, trains are associated with being helpless or fated, with destinies that cannot be changed, with bearing the burden of your sins. The train's whistle is a lonesome one—and the train may not

run right.² The train goes where its tracks take it, not where you would like it to, and it lends itself to images of being powerless to change things. Trains are invoked when a speaker feels fated, not able to alter his course of action. In “The House of the Rising Sun,” the speaker says, “I’ve got one foot on the platform, the other’s on the train/ I’m goin’ back to New Orleans, to wear that ball and chain.” She cannot change things; she cannot even decide not to return to “spend her life in sin and misery.” Even today, when trains are not such a common part of the life of most people as they once were, they reappear when the image is of a fate that cannot be resisted. Springsteen, for example, chooses the image of a “Downbound Train,” rather than a car, when his story is of a life that is inexorably falling apart.³ His choice of images is perfectly fitting. On a train we often feel helpless: it goes where it goes and if something goes wrong we do not know why and can do nothing about it. The associations that have grown up around both the car and the train reflect the social—even the technical—reality of the two forms of transportation.

In some ways, the myth of the frontier lives on in our automobiles. If they had no association with the dream of leaving it all and starting fresh somewhere beyond all ties and memories, why would American cars be named, not for factories, like the European Fiat or BMW, but for wild animals (Mustangs, Cougars), or for our first explorers (La Salles, De Sotos, Cadillacs), or for the explorers’ goal (El Dorados)? But the frontier is only the root of the myth of movement in our culture.

The automobile is also linked with the mythic figure that grows out of the memory of the frontier, the figure R.W.B. Lewis calls the American Adam. This archetypal American hero—or image of the American nation—is completely new and able to choose his course. “The world is all before him,” but his choices have not been limited by an earlier decision, as Milton’s Adam’s were when he and Eve “Through Eden took their solitary way.” Lewis describes him as “a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history” (Lewis 1). He is innocent because he is outside the web of old commitments and old sins, and has not yet made or committed any of his own. His potentialities always remain just that, for in realizing

them he would be likely to lose his innocence. The Adam struggles to remain always on the point of a new beginning, but never to carry the beginning on to an end. He is outside society—either far from it or an outcast—because societies are built of memories and old choices, and he has no part of that inheritance. He has little to do with women. There is no place for an American Eve. The only role for a woman in the American Adam’s story is that of Lilith, the shadowy temptress who finally did not matter much. The American Adam stands alone. He seems not even to have to face God, for he is often as not described as self-created, or self-begotten. The figure needs a God to limit his possibilities no more than a father to stain his innocence with an inherited sin. He is

an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaits him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. (5)

Not just self-reliant—self-propelling: literally, the American Adam is an auto-mobile. It is as if the voyage to America had erased all human history—and the guilt that went with it—from Adam on.

Adam, of course, is not really a very good image of the American. Perhaps the westward movement of the settlers made it seem like a reversal of the exile of the first men into the lands east of Eden. Americans up to the present have dreamed of a return to Eden—“We’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”⁴ But as the Bible presents it, the Fall is not so easily reversible. And Genesis offers a better image for the actions of the American nation on this continent than Adam. Adam found himself alone in the garden, but the first Americans did not find an empty land. As in the old story, the farmer killed his brother who did not till. It is not surprising that the tradition of the American Cain did not take root—Americans have never wanted to admit that they bear any stain or mark—but the figure of one who was at once the first farmer and the first vagabond would seem perfect for this country.

But the image of the American as Adam took its strength not from the real American experience so much as from a theological premise. Man is innocent and needs no savior. Puritanism had emphasized the effects of the Fall, and the need of each soul for the aid of Jesus. “In Adam’s Fall we sinned all,” the primer reminded New England children. Nineteenth-century writers denied that human nature bore any hereditary taint, and held up the image of Adam before his Fall. Each person began life as free and innocent as Adam did. This theological emphasis explains why so little of Adam’s story appears in the American versions of it. For the American Adam’s story ends just where the biblical Adam’s begins: he finds himself alone and innocent; perhaps, in Whitman’s version of the myth, he names the animals. Then he finds new scenes in which he can be alone and innocent, for if the story went on, there would come the woman, and the fall, and the long generations of fathers and sons—of sons implicated in their fathers’ deeds.

What the nineteenth century progressives found most offensive in the Calvinism that had dominated the intellectual life of New England was “the doctrine of inherited guilt; the imputation onto the living individual of the disempowering effects of a sin ‘originally’ committed by the first man” (Lewis 28). Man, they thought, is originally, not corrupt or depraved, but innocent. This conception of the nature of man was the impetus for the New England Unitarian and Transcendentalist movements in the early nineteenth century. The rejection of original sin was bound up with the denial of the Trinity, for it did away with the function of the Trinity’s second person.⁵ If each began “his spiritual career with an unsullied conscience, there was no need for expiation. . . no need. . . of a propitiation of sin” and thus “the reason for the divinity of Jesus evaporated” (Lewis 31). And a universe in which both man and nature are good hardly requires a God to look after it at all, as Emerson and his disciples discovered. The personal God who threatens punishment and offers salvation evaporates into an Oversoul almost indistinguishable from nature itself.

The image of physical motion has appealed to American writers because it expresses the idea of innocence. A man can move on and leave it all behind. By traveling on he can escape

from the past, from history, from the sins of the fathers. As the nation itself began fresh thanks to the journey across the Atlantic, and continues to offer fresh starts on the frontier, each man can start fresh. The fresh starts offered by endless movement provide an escape from the burdens of sin—for at the very least the doctrine of original sin means that no complete fresh start is possible, and that no one can be completely self-reliant. Our innocent heroes, like Natty Bumppo and Huck Finn, are always on the move. The more unrestricted the movement, the more perfect the image of innocence.

The same tradition in the twentieth century, both in fiction and non-fiction, expresses itself in the automobile. In works like Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Kerouac's *On the Road* show, the car is the perfect vehicle, in every sense, for the myth of the self-propelling man. The driver is not limited by the flow of a river or slowed to the pace of his own footsteps. He can light out instantly and go anywhere. Like the frontier myth in popular culture, the literary myth of the completely free, completely new American finds expression in the automobile. And thus it is fitting that writers who hate the idea of original innocence attack it through the image of the automobile.

The most powerful attacks on the idea of original innocence through the image of the automobile are found in Flannery O'Connor's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and *Wise Blood*. But it is also explored in other writers. The idea of original sin dominates Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. As Willie Stark says, "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something."⁶ Willie Stark means that there is always some dark part of a man's past for the blackmailer to find, but the grim phrase that is repeated through the novel means more than that. There is no innocence, and everyone shares some complicity in the evils around him. The past, for good or evil, cannot be escaped. What Jack Burden discovers is the sin of his father. He also discovers his own complicity in evils of his time. The discovery of his real father, of his father's crime, and of the way his own actions have led to the destruction of his friends, is finally liberating. Armed with the knowledge of his own guilt, Jack can right the course of his own

life—marrying Anne Stanton, finishing the biography of his ancestor, and tending his dying putative father. Jack’s story ends on a note of completion and fulfillment only because he has found and acknowledged the sins of his family and himself. There is indeed always something.

But earlier in the novel Jack Burden wants, not to acknowledge the guilt he is involved in, but to run from it. When he learns that Anne Stanton is having an affair with Stark, he suffers both because his early image of innocence is destroyed and because he realizes that he has, by bringing Anne and Stark together, brought its destruction about. He runs from guilt in a car heading west. In his long drive from Louisiana to Long Beach, California, he recapitulates the journeys of all the other Americans who have lit out for the West when they had a past they wanted to escape or a present they could not endure.

That was why I had got into my car and headed west, because when you don’t like it where you are you always go west. We have always gone west. . .

That was why I came to lie on a bed in a hotel in Long Beach, California, on the last coast amid the grandeurs of nature. For that is where you come, after you have crossed oceans and eaten stale biscuits while prisoned forty days and nights in a stormy-tossed rat-trap, after you have sweated in the greenery and heard the savage whoop, after you have built cabins and cities and bridged rivers, after you have lain with women and scattered children like millet seed in a high wind, after you have composed resonant documents, made noble speeches, and bathed your arms in blood to the elbows, after you have shaken with malaria in marshes and in the icy wind across the high plains. That is where you come, to lie alone on a bed in a hotel room in Long Beach, California. (383-384)

The frontier lives on in the drive down the highway, but it finally leads nowhere.

The journey does not have a goal. Its only purpose is escape from the past, with its memories and its guilt. And escape is what Jack finds, for a time, in his drive. As he drives West, the past unfolds in his memory. As he drives back, he is “no longer remembering the things which [he] had remembered coming out. [He says,]

For it is the motion which is important. And I was moving. I was moving West at seventy-five miles an hour, through a blur of million-dollar landscape and heroic history, and I was moving back through time into memory. . .

To the hum and lull of the car the past unrolled in my head like a film. (339)

And once he has driven far enough, the past is gone.

In the drive and the motion, Burden is seeking something like a return to childhood innocence. What is more, he does in some sense find that innocence in his drive west. He has kept the image of Anne as an innocent child, but that image has been taken away.

So I fled west from the fact, 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 nerve. When you flee as far as you can flee, you will always find that dream, which is the dream of our age. (386)

The drive gives him the “bracing and tonic” dream that nothing means anything, that “nothing is your fault or anybody’s fault.” And having decided that nothing is any more than the Great Twitch—a kind of Darwinian version of the Oversoul—Burden can go back:

For after the dream there is no reason why you should not go back and face the fact which you have fled from (even if the fact seems to be that you have, by digging up the truth about the past, handed over Anne Stanton to Willie Stark), for any place to which you may flee will now be like the place from which you have fled. . . . And you can go back in good spirits, for you will have learned two very great truths. First, that you cannot lose what you have never had. Second, that you are never guilty of a crime which you did not commit. So there is innocence and a new start in the West, after all.

This innocence may be very different from that of the Nineteenth-Century American Adam, but it is part of the same tradition. And innocence through nothingness certainly was the dream of the age in 1946, when *All the King’s Men* first appeared. The argument for Man’s freedom from guilt that Jack intuits on his hotel bed in Long Beach is not so different from the doctrines Sartre was expounding in France.⁷ Warren, however, has Burden awaken from the dream that all is the Great Twitch, and by the end of *All the King’s Men* Jack believes that there is always something rather than that there never is anything. Nevertheless, the car remains the image of freedom and escape.

One of the things that characterizes American culture is the dream of innocence, the dream of constant movement. It is a myth manifestly false—if we reflect at all, we know there is no fresh start and there never was such a thing as innocence—but what culture’s myths are entirely true? There are still times, when the highway is empty and the gas tank in my Honda is

full, when I can almost wish it were true that I could drive ever onward and find a fresh start.
Then I wake from that dream and take the exit that leads to campus.

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¹*Wise Blood*, p. 113. Springsteen use of religious imagery is much richer and more complex than what I have discussed here. In “Adam Raised a Cain,” he even writes a rock song about Original Sin.

²The Folk Song “900 Miles.”

³“Downbound Train,” *Born in the U.S.A.* (Columbia Records, 1984)

⁴Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock” (New York: Siquomb Music, 1969).

⁵For a statement of Unitarian beliefs that makes explicit the link between the rejection of Original Sin and the rejection of the Trinity, see William Ellery Channings's discourse of 1826, *Unitarian Christianity Most Favorable to Piety* (*The Works of William E. Channing, D.D., Seventh Complete Edition* (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1847), vol. III, p. 181:

[W]e find Trinitarianism connecting itself with a scheme of administration, exceedingly derogatory to the Divine character. It teaches, that the Infinite Father saw fit to put into the hands of our first parents the character and condition of their whole progeny; and that, through one act of disobedience, the whole race bring with them into being a corrupt nature, or are born depraved. It teaches, that the offences of a short life, though begun and spent under this disastrous influence, merit endless punishment, and that God's law threatens this infinite penalty; and that man is thus burdened with a guilt, which no sufferings of the created universe can expiate, which nothing but the sufferings of an Infinite Being can purge away. In this condition of human nature, Trinitarianism finds a sphere of action for its different persons. I am aware that some Trinitarians, on hearing this statement of their system, may reproach me with ascribing to them the errors of Calvinism, a system they abhor as much as ourselves. But none of the peculiarities of Calvinism enter into this exposition. I have given what I understand to be the leading features of Trinitarianism all the world over. . . .

Denying the thesis concerning the “condition of human nature,” Channing can find no “sphere of action” for the Son.

⁶Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981) p. 61.

⁷Burden, in the section of *All the King's Men* describing the drive west, often sounds like Hazel Motes talking about freedom and his Essex, and both are echoes of the Existentialists.