

## **“We Have Always Gone West:”**

### **Automobiles, Innocence, and *All the King's Men***

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From the opening of *All the King's Men*, when Jack Burden describes driving up the slab to Mason City with the Boss, the automobile remains one of the dominant images in the novel. In that first paragraph, Burden imagines the driver who becomes hypnotized by the straight white line of the highway, lets the wheels slip off the road, and only regains consciousness of the world around him in time try to ward off the now inevitable crash. In some ways, that imagined crash is an image of Jack's development, except that by the end of the novel something more is left of Jack than a skull-and-crossbones highway sign with love-vine climbing on it. For in the course of *All the King's Men* the automobile becomes the sign of the isolated individual free from real involvement with the world around him—and that is Jack when the novel begins. And in the wreck of his friends Jack is wrenched out of his self-involvement and forced to accept a place the world around him—a place as something more than a detached and cynical observer.

The automobile is a fitting image of the autonomous self, of the self free from all constraints. As long as the traffic does not break the illusion, many of us feel most free and in control of ourselves when behind the wheel of a car. We also feel least involved with the larger society. It is in our car that we are most likely to sing, mostly likely to swear at strangers, most likely to flout the law. The freedom and isolation of the automobile is certainly something Jack feels:

There is nothing more alone than being in a car at night in the rain. I was in the car. And I was glad of it. Between one point on the map and another point on the map, there was the being alone in the car in the rain. They say you are not you except in terms of relation to other people. If there weren't any other people there wouldn't be any you because what you do, which is what you are, only has meaning in relation to other people. That is a very comforting thought when you are in the car in the rain at night alone, for then you aren't you, and not being you or anything, you can really lie back and get some rest. It is a vacation from being you. There is only the flow of the motor under your foot spinning that frail thread of sound out of its metal gut like a spider, that filament, that nexus, which isn't really there, between the you which you have just left in one place and the you which you will be when you get to the other place. (Warren 128)

Of course Jack has to go on and explain why he is in the car: because the self constructed by years of history has prepared a certain destination for him. But in the driver's seat he feels alone and free from self.

The automobile is an image of an even more powerful sort of freedom in the American mind. Our automobiles are an extension of the frontier. 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 so often be named for wild animals (Mustangs, Cougars), or for our first explorers (La Salles, De Sotos, Cadillacs), or for the explorers' goal (El Dorados)? And the idea of the frontier promises that there is always a fresh start, that it is possible to escape from any situation that constrains your freedom, and, most importantly for Jack Burden, that the burden of the past may be left behind. In our frontier myth, the isolated moving hero can escape from both his own past and the pasts of his family and society by moving on—usually by moving west. In this century, with the frontier long

vanished, the same tradition of movement continues in the aimless travel of a man in a car.

Movement has always been characteristic of the figure in American literature that R.W.B. Lewis calls the American Adam. The hero that the classic American novels either celebrate or satirize is the man who is free from all connections to any other being. He has no significant past and creates his own identity. (He names himself rather than bearing a name given to him by a parent.) His “initial habitat,” as Lewis put it is “his space as spaciousness, as the unbounded, the area of total possibility” (Lewis 91). The space he literally travels through is usually, of course, the western frontier of woods and prairies. He begins outside of society, and his triumph is to stay outside any relationship that might impair his freedom. He is an emblem of innocence. Outside society, he is not party to the inevitable crimes and compromises that communal life demands. Acknowledging no parent, he inherits no guilt from an earlier generation. And avoiding marriage and “domesticating women” he passes no burden on to impair the innocence of another generation. He is, in Lewis’s words

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. (Lewis 5)

This is the role Jack Burden tries to play in his long drive west—and, as the “self-propelling” in Lewis’s description suggests, an auto-mobile is an appropriate vehicle for this figure in a technological age.

The American Adam is, of course, an embodiment of a theological idea. In his innocence and freshness, he represents a denial of original sin and human depravity. When, in the first half of the nineteenth century, he

made his first appearance in American literature, the liveliest intellectual movements were the Unitarians and Transcendentalists, who rejected any idea of inherited guilt. In the merged image of the frontiersman and of Adam before the fall, they discovered an image of original innocence. The frontier seemed to provide the completely fresh beginnings that the doctrine of original sin denied. It was also as if the westward movement of the American nation had erased the Fall and the expulsion of humankind from paradise to the lands east of Eden. In figures like Natty Bumppo, American novelists created not just visions of freedom, but of innocence, of innocence even from the stain of original sin. And the ever-moving figures in later American literature often represent the same idea, though that vision of innocence is often ironically undercut.

The idea of original sin dominates *All the King's Men*. "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something" (Warren 49). 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 the Gulf of Mexico 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. (Warren 309)

The frontier lives on in the drive down the highway. But even the echoes of the frontier recall a burden of history larger than Jack's dreadful involvement in the stories of Anne Stanton and Willie Stark. It recalls—as does the history of Cass Mastern, which Jack is not yet ready to

understand—the inherited guilt that is every white American’s, whose society is built on theft from the Indian and the enslavement of the African. The journey west finally leads nowhere.

Like the journeys of many earlier Americans, who lit out for the territory, Jack’s drive does not have a goal. Its 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.

For example. But I cannot give you an example. It was not so much any one example, any one event, which I recollected which was important, but the flow, the texture of the events, for meaning is never in the event but in the motion through event. Otherwise we could isolate an instant in the event and say that this is the event itself. The meaning. But we cannot do that. 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. (Warren 271)

The motion keeps the flow of time from settling down into a meaning—a meaning that would doubtless be pregnant with guilt. And once Jack 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.

Then, there came the day when that image was taken from me. I learned that Anne Stanton had become the mistress of Willie

Stark, that somehow, by an obscure and necessary logic I had handed her over to him. That fact was too horrible to face, for it robbed me of something out of the past by which, unwittingly until that moment, I had been living.

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. (Warren 311)

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, 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. (Warren 311)

This innocence may be very different from that of the nineteenth century American Adam, but, with its discovery of a dream of innocence in aimless travel westward, it is part of the same tradition. (That you are never guilty of a crime which you did not commit was just the Unitarians’ point.) 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, with its paradoxical combination of freedom and determinism, is not so very different from the doctrines Sartre was expounding in France when Warren wrote his novel.

Adam Stanton's murder of Willie Stark is the instant that shows how involved each character is in the history and guilt of all the others. And in Jack's fruitless attempts to find Adam before he does anything, there is an emblematic moment involving an automobile. Jack's first step is to go to Adam's house:

When I saw his car sitting out front I figured I had played into the blue ones. I parked my own car, noticed that the driver's door of his car was open and might get swiped off by a passing truck and was certainly letting the seat get wet. . . .(Warren 391)

Realistically, the abandoned car with the open door makes no sense: Adam might have driven to the capitol to find Stark. But it makes perfect sense symbolically. As his name suggests, Adam wants to go through life in perfect innocence. His clinical detachment, his Spartan apartment, even his passion for music—the purest of the arts—all show his refusal to be really involved in human affairs. After he receives the final blow to his idea of innocence, and believes that he is not just the son of a corrupt father, but also “pimp to his sister's whore” in the relationship between Anne and Stark, Adam abandons isolation and innocence. When he comes to his violent involvement in history, he does not drive in isolation: he abandons that emblem of innocence and walks toward his fate through rain and mud.

After the deaths of Adam Stanton and Willie Stark, Jack Burden awakes 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. For Burden—and Warren—finally see us involved in a significant history of wrong instead of a meaningless state of innocence. The sense of innocence found on the drive west is just an illusion.



Other Southern writers, Flannery O'Connor most notably, follow Warren in embodying the tradition of innocence through movement in the automobile. (It is the creed of O'Connor's Church Without Christ that "nobody with a good card needs to be justified.") And this identification has remained appropriate. American popular culture—in its presentations of both the individual and the nation—still clings to an image of innocence. And, as movies, ads, and popular songs show, it still presents that idea of innocence through image of a fast moving car.

## Works Cited

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