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*Warren's Willie Talos:
Reflections on the Name*

HAROLD L. WEATHERBY

The original ideal [for *All the King's Men*] was implicit in a single word, the name Talos, my first name for Willie Stark and also the name of the groom in book five of *The Faerie Queene*. – Robert Penn Warren

Why did Warren originally name Willie Stark, Willie Talos? Warren tells us the source: “the brutal, blank-eyed ‘iron groom’ of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, the pitiless servant of the knight of justice.”¹ (Spenser’s spelling is *Talus*.) That Warren should have drawn on Spenser is somewhat surprising because Spenser exerted little influence on Warren’s generation and in his literary circle. *The Faerie Queene* does not lend itself readily to new-critical analysis, and, as a structure, it is the baggiest of baggy monsters – scarcely the kind of fiction to appeal to admirers of the “well-made novel” (of which *All the King's Men* is a good example). Possibly Warren encountered *The Faerie Queene* in a course at Vanderbilt, but would he have studied the seldom-taught fifth book? Or, if he had studied it, what would have attracted him to it – always the least popular of the six? He tells us he was “deep in Machiavelli and Dante” when he wrote the dramatic version of Willie’s story, *Proud Flesh*, and that “Machiavelli found a place in the musings of Jack Burden” (ii). Dante’s allegory may have recalled Spenser’s, and there is more than a trace of Machiavellianism in Book Five’s depiction of justice and in Talus’s enforcement of that conception. It is nevertheless remarkable that Spenser’s rather obscure figure should have made such a sufficiently strong impression as to give Warren’s hero his name and to contribute, we may thus reasonably assume, to the conception of his character.

We can, however, be reasonably certain what aspect of Talus interested Warren and what episode in Book Five he had in mind. The clue is Warren’s statement that “Talos is the kind of doom that democracy may invite upon itself” (vi). Only on one of the several occasions when

¹ Preface to *All the King's Men* (New York: Modern Library, 1953), vi. Subsequent references to the preface appear parenthetically in the text.

Spenser's Talus serves the ends of the knight of justice could he be said to be bringing down a fitting doom on democracy. In the second canto of Book Five, Artegall and Talus encounter "a mighty Gyant" with "an huge great paire of ballance in his hand."² He is a radical leveller who would weigh everything "and all things would reduce into equality" – that means redistribution of wealth and power. Spenser may have intended the giant to represent the sect of the Levellers or the radical Anabaptists, but his significance is larger than that; he embodies, allegorizes, the threat of revolution spurred on by demagoguery:

Therefore the vulgar did about him flocke,
And cluster thicke vnto his leasings vaine,
Like foolish flies about an hony crocke,
In hope by him great benefite to gaine,
And vncontrolled freedome to obtaine. (284)

After Artegall reads the giant an Aristotelian lecture on the nature of *true* justice, Talus makes short work of both the giant and the mob. The former he shoulders "off the higher ground" he has presumed to occupy and "in the sea him dround" (285). When the disappointed crowd attempts "to stirre vp ciuill faction, / For certaine losse of so great expectation" (285), Talus has at them with his flail and "like a swarme of flyes them ouerthrew" (286). Here he certainly embodies "the kind of doom that democracy may invite upon itself."

But how does this help us with *All the King's Men* where the roles appear to be reversed? Surely Willie plays the giant's part, not Talus's, the demagogue promising (and in many instances effecting) egalitarian reform. Willie can be as brutal and pitiless as Spenser's iron groom – as in his late-night visits terrorizing political enemies or "sitting in a room full of smoke ... saying 'Bring the bastard in' ... And when they had brought the bastard in [saying] 'God damn you, do you know what I can do to you?'" with Jack Burden commenting, "And he could do it too. For he had the goods."³ Willie's treatment of Judge Irwin is the most obvious case in point, but again Warren turns Spenser upside down. Though Judge Irwin ultimately proves to have feet of clay, he comes closer to playing Artegall (aristocratic, anti-egalitarian) to Willie's levelling giant than the reverse. Warren's Talos seems to be attacking the very figure whose edicts Spenser's Talus enforces.

And there is another obvious mismatch – in the hierarchical relations. Spenser's Talus is Artegall's underling, a servant; Warren's Talos is "the Boss." The former does his master's dirty work. Slaughtering "the vulgar" who flock about the giant is beneath Artegall's dignity: "[L]oth he was his noble hands t'embrew / In the base blood of such a rascall crew" (286), so he sends Talus. (There are several such instances in Book Five.) In *All the King's Men* it is Talos who dispatches his underlings; indeed Talos has several Taluses at his disposal. There is always Tiny Duffy, and we hear of Heavy Harris and Al Perkins (209). Finally there is Sugar-Boy, who is as much the tool of Willie as Talus is of Artegall, whose service to the Boss is as unquestioning as Talus's to his master. Moreover, like Talus, Sugar-Boy, until late in the novel, impresses us as an automaton, complete with the *automatic* which avenges the Boss. Furthermore, because

² Edmund Spenser. *Faerie Queene*. In the *Poetical Works*, ed. J.C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 283. Subsequent page references appear parenthetically in the text.

³ *All the King's Men*, restored edition (New York: Harcourt, 2001), 210. Subsequent references to the novel are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

Spenser's Talus is a dehumanized creature, "made of yron mould," we think of him as mechanized, and Warren has characterized Sugar-Boy as machine-age man. We picture him always behind the wheel of the Boss's Cadillac – "near a couple of tons of expensive *mechanism*" (emphasis added). He even speaks through that machine; as Jack remarks, "Sugar-Boy couldn't talk, but he sure could express himself when he got his foot on the accelerator" (4-5). (It is interesting that Spenser's Talus, save on one occasion, is speechless.) In Sugar-Boy Warren seems to have conceived a character much closer to Spenser's iron man than the one on whom he bestows the name.

There seems, therefore, to be no simple parallel between Talus and Willie Talos, but the mechanization of man as we witness it in Sugar-Boy introduces larger thematic issues which may be attributable, accidentally, to Spenser. I say *accidentally* because when we, the modern reader (including, I assume, Warren), conceive Talus as mechanical (and therefore as reprehensible – unfeeling, dehumanized – in Warren's phrasing, "brutal," "pitiless") we are reading Spenser anachronistically. Book Five of *The Faerie Queene* (along with Four and Six) was published in 1596. The *OED*'s first citation of *mechanical* meaning "of persons, their actions, *etc.*: Resembling (inanimate) machines or their operations ... machine-like; automatic" is in 1607. I have called Talus an automaton; the first citation of *automaton* with reference to persons is 1678, and *automatic* does not appear until 1802. 1607 is close enough to Spenser that *mechanical* with reference to persons and possibly in a pejorative sense could have been within his frame of reference, but probably not. If Osgood's *Concordance* is to be trusted, neither *machine* nor *mechanical* appears anywhere in Spenser's corpus, which is somewhat surprising since both words were current with prior meanings. (Less surprising, neither *automaton* nor *automatic* appears either.) We can therefore be reasonably certain that we bring to Talus's metallic, "resistless" composition pejorative, because mechanical, associations Spenser did not intend. After all, Talus is a gift to Artegall from the goddess Astrea and an agent not of a demagogue but of the knight of justice.

But the point at issue is that the modern reader *does*, spontaneously, bring these associations to a reading of Book Five (witness the critics' almost universal distaste), and that it is very difficult for him not to understand Talus in light of them. Moreover, for a Southerner and especially a Southerner of Warren's Agrarian convictions, it would be doubly difficult. I believe it fair to say that distrust of the machine and of the mechanical in all its manifestations, especially the fear of reducing man to mechanism, is instinctive – preconscious, visceral – in the Southern psyche. It is certainly demonstrably a pervasive theme in literature of the Southern Renaissance – especially in Faulkner – with its fullest philosophical articulation, as resistance to industrialism, in *I'll Take My Stand*. It would, I believe, have been impossible, or very nearly so, for a contributor to that collection and the creator of the industrially begrimed tramp in "Blackberry Winter" to have responded to Spenser's iron man other than as a mechanical and therefore destructive force. It is in the evident presence of such a force in *All the King's Men* and not simply in Willie's surname that Talus's influence may manifest itself.

We encounter the mechanical in more characters than one, and most strikingly, pervasively, in the narrative voice. Both when we hear Jack Burden speak to others and when we hear him think, he reduces human conduct and motive to the mechanical level. One wonders whether Warren intended him to be as cold as he is, as detached as he always seems to be from normal,

human affection. His conduct toward Judge Irwin is by any measure callous. Of course he does not know that the Judge is his father, but he certainly does know that the Judge has befriended him and treated him as a son – has stood to him as a surrogate father. Notwithstanding, Jack is prepared to destroy him, and does. For all the Judge's faults – he has cuckolded his friend, taken a bribe, stolen Mortimer Littlepaugh's job and income – he is a more appealing figure than his illegitimate son. Even his suicide has something of the noble Roman way about it. Jack is too mechanical to be noble, or even moral: there is no indication that he is shocked or surprised at the Judge's reprehensible conduct, only at his vulnerability. Shock, surprise, regret would be the normal human reactions to what Jack has learned. Not even his love, if it is that, for Anne Stanton humanizes him, as Sadie Burke (one of the few fully human figures in the novel) informs him in no uncertain terms. When she confronts Jack with the discovery that Anne has become Willie's mistress, Sadie tells him exactly what he should do: “You sit there and smile that way and think you are so high-toned. If you were a man you'd get up and go in there [Willie's office] and knock hell out of him. I thought she was yours” (373). “If you were a man' – in a more radical sense than Sadie intends, Jack is not. His failure to knock hell out of Willie is fully consonant with his conclusion that “the words *Anne Stanton* were simply a name for a peculiarly complicated piece of mechanism which should mean nothing whatsoever to Jack Burden, who himself was simply another rather complicated piece of mechanism” (434).

Of course, in the end, Jack revises such opinions, marries Anne, and cares for the man he had once believed to be his father. Whereas in the beginning his credo has been the desiccated “the end of man is to know” (all the facts, for instance, about Cass Mastern – or Judge Irwin), he suspects in the end that “all knowledge that is worth anything is maybe paid for by blood” (13, 597). And when he lies to his mother about the motive for Judge Irwin's suicide to preserve for her the reputation of the man she loved, he becomes in fact more like the Judge and thus more believably human (599). He “had condemned [his mother] as a woman without heart ... who lived in a strange loveless oscillation between calculation and instinct” – a not inaccurate description of Jack himself save that he has been short on instinct (601). Now Jack discovers her heart in her lasting love for Monty and, Warren implies, his own heart also. But these discoveries come very late and the novel leaves us uncertain of their significance. What Warren never gives us is any evidence on Jack's part of heartfelt contrition for what, at least in reference to Judge Irwin, one can only characterize as “loveless calculation.” He has, after all, as his mother screams, killed his father! We feel he should share her shock and grief rather than remaining, as he does, aloof.

By comparison with Jack, Willie, who bears the mechanical man's name, is strikingly human – in many ways a slave to passion (certainly sexual passion). This facet of his being may be invisible in his public encounters or even in his understanding of himself, but it shows clearly in crises – most clearly in the instance of Tom's injury. As Willie and Lucy wait during their son's surgery, we may take the measure of the Boss's capacity for feeling from this brief exchange: “‘He'll be all right,’ says Willie. ‘God grant it,’ [Lucy] replied. He was silent for two or three minutes, still looking at her. Then he said, violently [Jack says nothing violently]: ‘He will, he's got to.’ ‘God grant it,’ she said ...” (530). Willie's is not the response of an automaton. And there is another striking difference here between Willie and his namesake Talus; in this episode “the Boss” is not the boss but helpless and vulnerable, as Artegall's “iron groom” never is. Nor is this the only such occasion. When Jack visits him in the hospital shortly before his death,

Willie is not only vulnerable and passionate but – something we should not have expected – *compassionate*. Why, he asks, did Adam shoot him – genuinely puzzled but also seemingly forgiving: ““He was all right. The doc.”” And then come his touching last words to Jack: ““It might have been all different, Jack,”” and ““You got to believe that”” and finally, ““And it might even been different yet.”” At no point does Jack’s dehumanization show more clearly – in contrast to Willie’s humanity – than in his response. All he can muster is ““Yes”” and ““All right”” and ““So long Boss’ ... ‘I’ll be seeing you”” (557).

Even Sugar-Boy, to whom the overt mechanical symbolism attaches, is capable of humanizing passions which elude Jack entirely. Sugar-Boy loves the Boss, kills his killer, and “leaning above him [Willie], weeping and sputtering, trying to speak[,] [h]e finally managed to get out the words: ‘D-d-d-d-does it hur-hur-hur-hurt much, Boss – does it hur-hur-hur-hurt?’” (553). Later, when Jack in his usual, cynical fashion tempts Sugar-Boy with the possibility that the assassination was a conspiracy, that ““there was somebody behind Stanton”” and asks what Sugar-Boy would do to such a person, the response is again a measure of deep feeling: ““I’d kill the son-of-a-bitch,’ he said. And he had not stuttered at all.”” In the conversation that follows, Jack takes advantage of his puppet’s vulnerability, plays with his feelings, bringing Sugar-Boy into a feverish, twitching state, only to end with ““I was kidding”” (583-85). That is vintage Burden; our sympathy goes out to Sugar-Boy.

What conclusion then should one draw about Warren’s choice of *Talos* for Willie’s surname? That it does not fit. If the Boss was supposed to remind us of Spenser’s “brutal, blank-eyed ... pitiless servant of the knight of justice,” he does not turn out that way. It is Jack who seems to deserve the name; but because Jack as narrator gives the novel its tone and orientation, one might argue that through him Spenser’s Talus as Warren probably conceived of him proved a shaping force. Where Willie, however, is concerned, Warren’s ultimate decision to abandon *Talos* seems a wise one.

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