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**FROM FOX TO HEDGEHOG: WARREN'S ALL THE KING'S MEN  
AS A GLOSS ON TOLSTOY'S VIEW OF HISTORY**

POLLY DETELS

[Fut.] I should have been that I am, had the maidenl'est star in the  
firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.—Edmund in *King Lear*<sup>1</sup>

Novels with a significant historiographic component, that is, novels that implicitly or explicitly foreground philosophies or problems of history writing, frequently call into question or parody modern scientific method. For many of these novels the ambiance is nevertheless experimental. In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera has remarked that “the novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence” and, further, that “a character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being. An experimental self.”<sup>2</sup> Kundera’s observations provide a foundation for the following approach to the historiographic novel: an illumination of Leo Tolstoy’s experimental epilogue to *War and Peace* via the experimental devices of a second author, Robert Penn Warren, in the 1946 novel *All the King’s Men*.

Isaiah Berlin concluded his analysis of the second epilogue to *War and Peace* with the observation that Tolstoy had ended his life as “the most tragic of the great writers, a desperate old man, beyond human aid, wandering self-blinded at Colonus.” Berlin suggests thereby the fate of any thinker who finds himself divided between two views of the world, “between the universal and all-important but delusive experience of free will, the feeling of responsibility, the values of private life generally, on the one hand; and on the other, the reality of inexorable historical determinism.”<sup>3</sup>

The greater part of Tolstoy’s epilogue is given to dismissal of historical theories that reject the will of a deity as a force in history, but which proceed nonetheless according to the same basic assumptions: “Modern history has rejected the faiths of the ancients, without putting any new conviction in their place; and the logic of the position has forced the historians, leaving behind them the rejected, divine right of kings and fate of the ancients, to come back by a different path to the same point again: to the recognition, that is (1) that peoples are led by individual persons; and (2) that there is a certain goal towards which humanity and the peoples constituting it are moving.”<sup>4</sup> Tolstoy developed this paradox and in so doing devastated the assumptions of biographical, intellectual, and cultural historians. Even while noting Tolstoy’s critical lucidity, Berlin allows “the immense superiority of Tolstoy’s offensive over his defensive weapons:” Tolstoy “longed for a universal explanatory principle; that is the perception of resemblances or common origins, or single purpose, or unity in the apparent variety of the mutually exclusive bits and pieces which composed the furniture of the world. . . . all

his life he looked for some edifice strong enough to resist his engines of destruction and his mines and battering rams; he wished to be stopped by an immovable obstacle, he wished his violent projectiles to be resisted by impregnable fortifications.”<sup>5</sup> The fundamental empiricism and the complex and provisional nature of Tolstoy’s own attempts to formulate reality—and therein a philosophy of history—left him “wandering self-blinded.” Like the targets of his critique, Tolstoy was a victim of his own inability successfully to integrate theoretical determinism with an experience of free will.

By virtue of its thematic correspondences with Tolstoy’s second epilogue, *All the King’s Men* provides an historiographic laboratory in which to test Tolstoy’s paradox. The novel’s protagonist Jack Burden is a failed historian who eventually recovers his profession by making an authentic accommodation to the past, a process that painfully reconciles historical technique with historical meaning. Many readers have identified the politician Willie Stark as the principal character of the novel, a fact that offers another correspondence with Tolstoy’s discussion of power, the masses, and individual will. Yet the historian Jack Burden maintains that “This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story, too. For I have a story. It is the story of a man who lived in the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and very different way.”<sup>6</sup> With the claim that he tells his own story, the historian Jack Burden brings historiography to the foreground of the novel.

To determine how *All the King’s Men*—Jack’s story and Willie’s—glosses Tolstoy’s second epilogue to *War and Peace* is to cast Tolstoy’s epilogue as a story itself: the insufficiency of modern history and its paradigms as played out by characters—historians and their heroes. Having at the outset exposed the fundamental problem of modern history—that it dismisses God but preserves unreflectively, inexplicably, the concept of unseen agency—Tolstoy defines the science of history by its objective, “the self-knowledge of nations and of humanity” (1102). Human beings observe events, writes Tolstoy (for instance, “millions of Christians, professing the law of love, murder one another”), but more important, we inquire—and we do so involuntarily—why the events happen and what they mean. One question of history is whether to frame the human past in terms of free or unfree action. This question leads to speculation on the nature of power: “If another force is put in the place of the divine power, then it should be explained what that force consists of, since it is precisely in that force that the whole interest of history lies” (1102, 1104). This is the very question begged by the bastard Edmund in *King Lear*, who scoffed at the stars but still felt himself determined and unfree.

Tolstoy condemns as “contradictory and random” the formulations of biographical and national, universal, and cultural history concerning the nature and operations of power. For biographical and national historians, power is found in the will of individuals. The universal historian, on the other hand, foregoes the framing of individual agency and “seeks the cause of the event, not in the power of one person, but in the mutual action on one another of many persons connected with the event. . . . Now the historical personage is the product of his time, and his power is only the product of various forces” (1104, 1105). According to the latter view, power is “a self-sufficient force” and may be the consequence or the cause of events. A third category of historians studies ideas: “Out of all the immense number of tokens that accompany every living phenomenon, these historians select the symptom of intellectual activity, and assert that

this symptom is the cause” (1105, 1106). All three types of historian fail adequately to address a central question of history, namely, what is the true connection between power and activity? Historians’ various answers are approached metaphorically: “A STEAM-ENGINE moves. The question is asked, How is it moved? A peasant answers, It is the devil moving it. Another man says, The steam-engine moves because the wheels are going round. A third maintains that the cause of the motion is to be found in the smoke floated from it by the wind” (1108). In all three types of history, Tolstoy argues, this failure expresses itself (by default in the cases of universal and cultural history) as a connection of events to the power residing within individual wills. The problem with this understanding of history is that “the only conception which can explain the movement of the steamer is the conception of a force equal to the movement that is seen” (1108). To understand the movement of many as an expression of the will of one is to force the query “By what force did Napoleon do that?” and, by extension, “What is power?” (1109). One driven to “change the current paper for the pure gold of a true conception,” writes Tolstoy, must ask and answer these questions. According to “the science of law,” power lies “outside the person—in those relations in which the person possessing the power stands to the masses” (1109, 1110). For all types of history these relations theoretically necessitate the delegation of power by masses to an individual. In the three historical models, delegation may occur absolutely or conditionally, and the conditions under which the delegation of power is accomplished may or may not be apparent.

Pointing out logical inconsistencies and the many exceptions they necessitate, Tolstoy critiques the three models of delegation of power to an individual. The chief epistemological problem is that “without admitting divine intervention in the affairs of humanity, we cannot accept power as a cause of events.” The difficulty with causal explanations rooted in the concept of power as will arises from the fact that, unlike God, a human being “acts in time and himself takes part in the event” (1116, 1117). The degree of participation in events, moreover, is in inverse proportion to the level of command. Historians produce explanations for an event by sifting the wash of commands preceding it and estimating which of these is most likely to have caused the event. This is wrong, says Tolstoy. The opposite is true; in reality, “historical characters and their commands are dependent on the events” (1121). The events trigger the search for explanations. However, the falsely conceived justifications do serve a purpose:

They remove moral responsibility from those men who produce the events. . . . Apart from those justifications, no solution could be found for the most obvious question that occurs to one at once on examining any historical event; that is, How did millions of men come to combine to commit crimes, murders, wars, and so on? . . . every event that occurs inevitably coincides with some expressed desire, and receiving justification, is regarded as the result of the will of one or more persons. (1120)

The epistemological flaws in the justification of an event as an expression of will return Tolstoy to the troubling question of power and historical agency. Ultimately, “the conception of cause is not applicable” to an historical law he formulates as a result: “the movement of peoples is not produced by the exercise of power; nor by intellectual activity, nor even by a combination of the two, as historians have supposed; but by the activity of *all* the men taking part in the event” (1121).

The mention of law raises another fundamental concern of history and historiography: the experience and possibility of free will. “To conceive a man having no freedom,” says Tolstoy, “is impossible except as a man deprived of life” (1124). The idea of free will as a sense of choice between “two different courses of action under precisely the same circumstances” is the concomitant of consciousness, “the essence of freedom,” without which a human being “would be not only unable to understand life, but could not live for a single instant” (1123, 1124). And yet reason, experience, and science suggest immutable laws to which will is subject. Even one of these laws is destructive of the possibility, although not the consciousness, of free will. On the other hand, Tolstoy notes that “if every man could act as he chose, the whole of history would be a tissue of disconnected accidents” (1122). For Tolstoy the historian confronts this central problem, a problem which does not trouble other realms of inquiry. Questions of theology, jurisprudence, and ethics must all proceed from a consciousness, and an assumption, of human freedom. Natural science, on the other hand, which denies freedom, “can do no more in this question than serve to illumine one side of it” (1125). History makes its inquiries in a manner that combines the assumptions of natural science and theology, forcing the issue: “Man in connection with the general life of humanity is conceived as governed by the laws that determine that life. But the same man, apart from that connection, is conceived of as free. How is the past life of nations and of humanity to be regarded—as the product of the free or not free action of men? That is the question of history” (1124). As this formulation suggests, history differs from other areas of inquiry in that it deals not only with the nature of human will but with the mode of its representation in historiography. Tolstoy goes on to say “the proportion of freedom to necessity is decreased or increased, according to the point of view from which the act is regarded; but there always remains an inverse ratio between them” (1126). The greater the knowledge of the situation in which an action is taken and the greater the distance from the time of the action, the more necessity will appear to govern it. In fact, to conceive an act as utterly free would require that it be taken outside of space and time, and in the “absolute absence of cause” (1130).

In the final analysis, for Tolstoy, “free will is for history simply an expression for what remains unexplained by the laws of men’s life that we know” (1133).<sup>7</sup> This observation strikes close to the issues of twentieth-century narratological debates. Because consciousness of the idea of freedom and its actualization are two different things, the relationship between free will and necessity are a matter of historical representation or, as Hayden White would have it, “emplotment.”<sup>8</sup> That this formula is unsatisfactory to Tolstoy, beyond which he expects history to travel, can be seen in the prescriptive words of his epilogue—that it is “essential to surmount a consciousness of an unreal freedom and to recognize a dependence not perceived by our senses” (1136). Isaiah Berlin finds in Tolstoy the ghost of Oedipus, whose false consciousness of freedom drove him to transgress against fate and led him into blindness. At Colonus, Oedipus still struggles with the conflict between acquiescence in fate and acceptance of personal responsibility.

With Jack Burden of *All the King’s Men*, Robert Penn Warren created a fictional character—an experimental self, to use Kundera’s term—in whose story resonates the existential, and more significantly the historiographic, crisis of Isaiah Berlin’s Tolstoy/Oedipus. *All the King’s Men* preserves the Tolstoyan tension between experience

and representation. In the novel, several metaphors—idealism, image, and picture—bear the load of this tension. The novel is an epistemological allegory, a tale in which evidence (or experience) overwhelms a priori thinking. In this respect, it is much like Voltaire's *Candide*, another theodical work that dismantles the deductive approach to knowledge. Finally, *All the King's Men* is a story that reconciles the human sense of free will with unseen and unfathomable power, a reconciliation that eluded Tolstoy.

Jack Burden is a self-described student of history whose Ph.D. is incomplete because of an unfinished dissertation. He is an historian with excellent technique, but with no credentials. Most of the story focuses on Jack Burden's work as an investigator—a digger of dirt—for a populist demagogue named Willie Stark. Jack is the narrator and uses the first person (with occasional dislocating shifts to third person) to tell Willie's story as well as his own. Much of the story is presented as a series of flashbacks. These, like memory, have no respect for chronological time. In the process of living, remembering, and telling the story, Jack experiments with numerous world views that affect both memory and the conduct of life. His story is one of roles inhabited in greater or lesser degrees of frustration: historian, lover, philosopher, husband, son, journalist, sidekick, detective, cynic. Jack exists in a state of alienation from these roles even as he assumes them. His pluralistic formulations of reality and what it means to be human, and his experience of both, continually bespeak a spiritual condition that alternates among conviction, confusion, and frank bad faith.

Correspondences with several of Tolstoy's concerns readily appear. Willie Stark's story introduces the concept of individual greatness and the extent of its agency in history through what Tolstoy terms "command." Jack Burden's career as an historian manqué presents the problems of meaning and its representation in history. "World views," with their fallacies and consequences, are evident in the adventures of Jack Burden. He is an embodiment of the human condition. *All the King's Men* illustrates numerous additional historiographic issues, as an analytical synopsis of the plot will suggest.

The first page of the story launches an extended metaphor, an automobile ride in which Willie Stark and part of his entourage hurtle in the direction of Willie's hometown of Mason City:

You look up the highway and it is straight for miles, coming at you, with the black line down the center coming at and at you, black and slick and tarry-shining against the white of the slab, and the heat dazzles up from the white slab so that only the black line is clear, coming at you with the whine of the tires, and if you don't quit staring at that line and don't take a few deep breaths and slap yourself hard on the back of the neck you'll hypnotize yourself and you'll come to just at the moment when the right front wheel hooks over into the black dirt shoulder off the slab....

Jack Burden is a passenger. The chauffeur is a man known as Sugar-Boy. And even if the automobile is, as some critics have suggested, "a metaphor that embodies the philosophy of mechanistic determinism," it is also an evocation of consciousness, which may form a defense against necessity.<sup>9</sup> In this summer of 1936 Jack and Willie are on their way to mount a publicity stunt, the nostalgic trip to the politician's childhood home: a visit to the old drugstore and reunions with an aging dog and kin. The stunt is cut short by an event that will focus the plot. Willie learns that the latest threat to his political ascendancy

comes from Judge Montague Irwin, long a Burden family friend and neighbor. He orders Jack to get dirt on the Judge to use as political leverage.

Thus the opening scene of the book reveals Willie as a ruthless and cynical politician. Jack's subsequent flashbacks reveal another Willie, the Willie of innocent if ambitious idealism. At their first meeting (1922) Willie refuses to drink spirits. Willie's youthful tenure as Mason County Treasurer marks him as an honest and uncompromising man in the midst of corruption. He unwittingly becomes a "sap" when "the Harrison outfit" runs him for governor to split the vote of Harrison's opponent. The sap turns politician when Sadie Burke (later a member of Willie's entourage) reveals unintentionally that he is not a genuine candidate. Sadie's revelation inaugurates the second stage of Willie's political life, in which his original desire to do good is qualified by a new view of the world: "there ain't a thing but dirt on this green God's globe except what's under water, and that's dirt too. It's dirt makes the grass grow" (45). This view, which is both the point of departure and the justification for all of the Boss's post-sap activities, does not collide with Jack's scattered and cavalier philosophies about knowledge and reality until Jack's past is pulled into Willie's politics with "The Case of the Upright Judge." To borrow Isaiah Berlin's well-known distinctions, in the formulation of principles Willie Stark appears a hedgehog, whose one principle is "It all depends on what you do with the dirt" (Warren, 45). Jack is a fox, a knower of many things. But Jack inverts the fox principle, in reserving the right to reject the many things he knows. He describes himself as "a brass-bound Idealist," a pseudo-philosophical posture that confers the ability to deny the reality of anything he refuses to recognize: "I heard somebody open and shut the gate to the barn lot, but I didn't look around. If I didn't look around it would not be true that somebody had opened the gate with the creaky hinges, and that is a wonderful principle for a man to get hold of. I had got hold of the principle out of a book when I was in college, and I had hung on to it for grim death. I owed my success in life to that principle. It had put me where I was. What you don't know don't hurt you, for it ain't real" (30). Rejection of painful realities is, of course, predicated upon consciousness of them. Thus the fox proves a poor "brass-bound Idealist." Moreover, Jack takes the Aristotelian position in another of his digressive apostrophes that whatever its consequences knowledge is irresistible. In this digression, an unopened telegram functions as a metaphor for knowledge. A great eye watches to see whether the telegram is opened:

The eye knows what's in the envelope, and it is watching you to see you when you open it and know, too. But the clammy, sad little foetus which is you way down in the dark which is you too lifts up its sad little face and its eyes are blind, and it shivers cold inside you for it doesn't want to know what is in that envelope. It wants to lie in the dark and not know, and be warm in its not-knowing. The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing he can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him. He will be killed, all right, but he can't know whether he is killed because of the knowledge which he has got or because of the knowledge which he hasn't got and which if he had it, would save him. There's the cold in your stomach, but you open the envelope, you have to open the envelope, for the end of man is to know. (9)

Jack's digressions on the human condition—as well as others on time, history, reality, and truth—are numerous, but the above passages indicate the fundamental divisions that characterize and impoverish his emotional life. They also suggest the extent to which his inadequacies as an historian are rooted in alienation. He comprehends the need to know but elects nevertheless to avoid knowledge because it can hurt or kill. To the extent that he apprehends it at all, the world is “simply an accumulation of items, odds and ends of things like the broken and misused and dust-shrouded things gathered in a garret. Or it was a flux of things before his eyes (or behind his eyes) and one thing had nothing to do, in the end, with anything else” (189).

Jack's philosophical and emotional detachment attracts Willie, although its roots are more obscure than the dramatic events that cause Willie's spiritual and political conversion from idealist-sap to dirt-dealing politician. That Jack himself does not comprehend the reasons for his alienation does not deter a growing affinity between the two men. Moreover, Jack's interest in Willie does not rest on Willie's cynicism or political sophistication. It starts at their first meeting at Slade's bar even before Willie's days as a sap. In the course of this first meeting, Willie inexplicably winks at Jack. Jack later reflects on the meeting: “It was not the Boss. Not to the crude eye of the *homme sensuel*. Metaphysically it was the Boss, but how was I to know? Fate comes walking through the door. . . . It comes in just like that, and how are you to know?” (13-14). The process of pondering what separates Willie from other men, and by extension what distinguishes the great man from the ordinary and inconsequential man, leads to expression of the complex determinism that also informs Jack's thinking: “it is possible that fellows like Willie Stark are born outside of luck, good or bad, and luck, which is what about makes you and me what we are, doesn't have anything to do with them, for they are what they are from the time they first kick in the womb until the end. And if that is the case, then their life history is a process of discovering what they really are, and not, as for you and me, sons of luck, a process of becoming what luck makes us” (63). When Willie is elected governor, he rescues Jack from a failed career as a journalist and from an intermittent syndrome Jack has entitled “The Great Sleep,” which is essentially an exacerbation of “brass-bound Idealism.”

At this point in the chronologically twisted narrative, and against a more recent screen of Willie's near impeachment, the narrative turns to Jack Burden's family, his genteel roots, and his youth. Whenever he goes home to Burden's Landing as an adult, Jack must face a troubled relationship with his mother, trouble connected, in some way that Jack does not grasp, to his mother's marriages. Jack has dubbed the latest of her four husbands The Young Executive. The first husband, The Scholarly Attorney, had been Jack's father. The Scholarly Attorney had left suddenly and for no apparent reason when Jack was six years old. Thereafter, The Scholarly Attorney lives in urban poverty, rendering aid to “unfortunates.” Jack maintains limited contact with The Scholarly Attorney. The relationship is defined by a series of arguments about God between sophistic Jack and his father, an ash-can theologian who writes religious tracts. Through accounts of these arguments, the reader is exposed to more of Jack's views. Now informed by the cynicism of the Boss, many of them concern history and epistemology. One example should suffice: “Life is a fire burning along a piece of string . . . and the trail of ash, which if a gust of wind does not come, keeps the structure of the string, is History, man's Knowledge . . . and when the fire has burned up all the string, then man's



Knowledge will be equal to God's Knowledge and there won't be any fire, which is Life." The Scholarly Attorney dismisses this Hegelian metaphor with the ironic accusation that Jack is thinking "in Finite terms." Jack objects, "'I'm not thinking at all, I'm just drawing a picture'" (151). As an oblique reference to the notion that reality is constructed, Jack's drawing of "pictures" is incompatible with "brass-bound idealism." But Jack is a divided man, as he repeatedly reveals.

With Jack's mother at Burden's Landing are neighbors: Judge Irwin still lives there, and childhood friends Adam Stanton and his sister Anne come occasionally to spend a weekend at their ancestral home. Anne was Jack's first love and Adam is a doctor; like the Scholarly Attorney and like Jack Burden, both have moved to the city. Although no longer consciously in love with Anne, Jack holds an image of her from the old days. This image proves an anchor for an otherwise alienated existence:

We get very few of the true images in our heads of the kind I am talking about, the kind which become more and more vivid for us as if the passage of years did not obscure their reality but, year by year, drew off another veil to expose a meaning which we had only dimly surmised at first. Very probably the last veil will not be removed, for there are not enough years, but the brightness of the image increases and our conviction increases that the brightness is meaning, or the legend of meaning, and without the image our lives would be nothing except an old piece of film rolled on a spool and thrown into a desk drawer among unanswered letters. (118-119)

The image of Anne is significant for several reasons. It competes with Willie's view of reality as dirt. It also competes with Jack's view of reality as "odds and ends of things like the broken and misused and dust-shrouded things gathered in a garret," which is reminiscent of the "mutually exclusive bits and pieces which composed the furniture of the world" (189), the view that Berlin ascribes to Leo Tolstoy.<sup>10</sup> Most significant is the fact that the image, a property both of Jack's alienated consciousness and his eventual accommodation to his humanity, is both timeless and temporal. The image is not a construction like the picture Jack draws of fire along a string. Rather, it is a constant, an absolute experience of a veiled reality.

Several other past relationships offset, but also deepen, Jack's alienation. Of these, the most significant are an oblique relationship with the subject of Jack's failed dissertation, Cass Mastern, and Jack's relationship with Judge Montague Irwin. In order to set the scene for his investigation of Judge Irwin, Jack must tell of his "first excursion into the enchantments of the past," when he was a graduate student in American history, working on his Ph.D. Jack relates the story of "This Jack Burden (of whom the present Jack Burden, *Me*, is a legal, biological, and perhaps even metaphysical continuator)" in the third person (157). This adds to the effect of estrangement from his past (and thereby from himself). It also makes way for the first person account of the Civil War papers that Jack is editing for his dissertation: "A large packet of letters, eight tattered, black-bound account books tied together with faded red tape, a photograph, about five by eight inches, mounted on cardboard and stained in its lower half by water, and a plain gold ring, man-sized, with some engraving in it, on a loop of string. The past. Or that part of the past which had gone by the name of Cass Mastern" (160). The Cass Mastern story that he finds in the documents and artifacts drives Jack out of the doctoral program and into the

“Great Sleep.” It is the confession of a man who has had an affair with the wife of a dear friend. The ensuing events, which include the suicide of the friend and the selling South of an innocent slave who has knowledge of the affair, bring Cass to the understandable reflection that “all had come from my single act of sin and perfidy, as the boughs from the bole and the leaves from the bough” and, thereon, to an even more disturbing conclusion: “it was as though the vibration set up in the whole fabric of the world by my act had spread infinitely and with ever increasing power and no man could know the end” (178). Following this chilling insight, Cass’s life is a chronicle of guilt, failed reparation, and mental suffering. He is happy to die of a festering bullet wound. “I do not question the Justice of God,” he writes, “that others have suffered for my sin, for it may be that only by the suffering of the innocent does God affirm that men are brothers, and brothers in His Holy Name” (187). His view of the world as “all of one piece. . . . like an enormous spider web” is incomprehensible to Jack, who cannot accept or even countenance such a vision of unity and responsibility (188).

Ultimately, Jack abandons the Cass Mastern project: “It had not been successful because in the midst of the process I tried to discover the truth and not the facts” (157). Leaving Cass Mastern and the doctorate unfinished, Jack attempts to prop up and sustain the idea that historians look only for facts and not for meaning, claiming that “a student of history does not care what he digs out of the ash pile, the midden, the sublunary dung heap, which is the human past. He doesn’t care whether it is the dead pussy or the Kohinoor diamond” (157). This curious formulation of procedural neutrality undercut by negative metaphors for the substance of the human past is the epistemological position that Jack brings to the investigation of his old friend, Judge Irwin.

Needing to destroy the political opposition that Irwin embodies, Willie asks Jack to look into Irwin’s past for dirt: “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” (49). Jack expects to find nothing on the Judge, and proceeds to do “a perfect research job, marred in its technical perfection by only one thing: it meant something” (191). The research on the Judge sends Jack to family and to old friends. “The quick, sharp question may spear it up from the deep mud,” he theorizes, and while The Scholarly Attorney parries his questions about the past, Adam and Anne supply the information that the Judge once needed money, but that he had then married a rich woman (207). Certain that he will be able to tell Willie “No sale, Boss. He is washed in the Blood,” Jack immerses himself further in the investigation (215). He works through a series of metaphors for the past and for the experience of historical reconstruction: excavation, detective work, dreaming, and horticulture. He finds that as attorney general to Governor Stanton, Anne and Adam’s father, the Judge had taken a bribe—a job and stock in the American Electric Power Company—in exchange for favors to the Southern Belle Fuel Company. The damning connections emerge as Jack applies the “flower-in-the-crannied-wall theory”: “I plucked the flower out of its cranny and discovered an astonishing botanical fact. I discovered that its delicate little root, with many loops and kinks, ran all the way to New York City, where it tapped the lush dung heap called the Madison Corporation. The flower in the cranny was the Southern Belle Fuel Company. So I plucked another little flower called the American Electric Power Company, and discovered that its delicate little root tapped the same dung heap” (221).<sup>11</sup> Another of Jack’s discoveries is the fact that Governor Stanton knew about his old friend, and that in

trying to protect him the Governor sullied himself. Although he does not tell Willie about the Judge, Jack uses the information about Governor Stanton to finesse Adam's reluctant participation in a hospital project of Willie's. And Jack learns that Anne is Willie's mistress.

The convergence of his old ties with his present employment is significant for Jack, revealing to him that the seaminess of Willie Stark's world is not confined to politicians or parvenus. Jack examines his past mistakes with Anne. Deciding that he has "handed" Anne to Willie, he drives suddenly west to California. Without realizing it, Jack is in pursuit of a new world view which will let him off this hook. On the road he finds the deterministic "Great Twitch," so named for a hitchhiker Jack meets. "I did not ask him," muses Jack, "if he had learned the truth in California."

His face had learned it anyway, and wore the final wisdom under the left eye. The face knew that the twitch was the live thing. Was all. But, having left that otherwise unremarkable man, it occurred to me, as I reflected upon the thing which made him remarkable, that if the twitch was all, what was it that could know that the twitch was all? . . .

And if I was all twitch how did the twitch which was me know that the twitch was all? (314)<sup>12</sup>

Despite these misgivings about his new insight, Jack returns home imbued with the enthusiasm of a recent convert. He contrives to witness a lobotomy that Adam is scheduled to perform:

I felt all of a sudden that I had to see it. . . . In a hanging you do not change a man's personality. You just change the length of his neck and give him a quizzical expression, and in an electrocution you just cook some bouncing meat in a wholesale lot. But this operation was going to be more radical even than what had happened to Saul on the road to Damascus." (317)

After viewing the operation, Jack ironically scolds Adam for failing to baptize the new creature "in the name of the Big Twitch, the Little Twitch, and the Holy Ghost. Who, no doubt, is a Twitch, too" (319).

Jack's temporary refuge in biological determinism does not, however, release him from the need to know the truth about Judge Irwin's bribe: "the truth is a terrible thing. You dabble your foot in it and it is nothing. But you walk a little farther and you feel it pull you like an undertow or a whirlpool" (343). At the same time, Jack's putative allegiance to the Great Twitch is liberating. Under its aegis he need not take responsibility for the outcome of his research and, later, his confrontation with the Judge. When it comes, the confrontation contains revelations both for Jack and the Judge. The Judge learns that the ancient bribe is no longer buried. He learns, too, that Governor Stanton had known about it and had not only declined to take corrective action, but had attempted to shield his friend from its consequences. Judge Irwin refuses to be pressured by Jack's threats of exposure and seems on the verge of a revelation of his own: "I could just say to you—I could just tell you something—" He stopped, then suddenly rose to his feet, spilling the papers off his knees. "But I won't" (347). The puzzling moment passes and the interview ends, but not before the Judge calls Jack back to clarify one point: "I just wanted to tell you," he said, "that I did learn something new from those interesting

documents. I learned that my old friend Governor Stanton impaired his honor to protect me. I do not know whether to be more glad or sorry, at the fact. At the knowledge of his attachment or the knowledge of the pain it cost him. He had never told me. That was the pitch of his generosity. Wasn't it? Not ever telling me" (348). What the Judge reveals to Jack with his closing comments about the Governor and what he mysteriously withholds combine to form one meaning. The meaning is revealed by the Judge's almost immediate suicide and the ensuing hysterics of Jack's mother: "You killed him. . . . Your father . . . your father and oh! you killed him" (349). The Judge had intended the decision to withhold his true relationship to Jack to be interpreted in light of his final comments about the Governor's knowledge and the Governor's silence. Seemingly, the implication that is morality resides in "the virtue of affection" and in silence (348). Withholding the truth may be a lie, but it carries its own truth.

Jack's discovery of the bribe sets in motion a series of web-like vibrations which result in several deaths: the Judge (suicide), Willie (assassination), and Adam, the "man of idea," who has many reasons to kill Willie but does so, finally, because his picture of the world has been destroyed (436). Ironically, by a measured acceptance of responsibility for this carnage, Jack leaves the universe of the Great Twitch, on the one hand, and comes to recognize, on the other, that the spider's web of responsibility envisioned by Cass Mastern must not be permitted to circumscribe the experience and exercise of freedom. Moreover, Jack's ambivalent search for truth has been supplanted, through the crucible of bloodshed, by an acceptance of the past. It permits him to tell a generous life-giving lie to his mother, to marry Anne Stanton, to withhold the truth from those who would continue the vibrations of the web, to care for the Scholarly Attorney, and to live metaphorically and virtually "in my father's house" (436).

Even at his most intellectually dishonest and morally uncertain, Jack Burden is an immensely engaging and mentally agile character. In the course of his journey, Jack formulates truth, history, and fact repeatedly, often mixing and inverting metaphors, or offering conflicting formulations in the next breath. Many, if not most, of these formulations have more than a grain of the wisdom he gains in the end by embracing "the awful responsibility of Time" (438). Part of the difficulty in articulating the content of Jack's later thinking is that it accommodates—at some level—all the formulations of reality and meaning that previously had kept him from a happy life. He concludes his research, as the novel closes, with a summary that illustrates his acceptance both of the provisionality of "pictures," or symbolizations of reality, and the Jack Burden who had formulated them.

By the time of his new beginning, the formulations have opened out in a way that permits him to live more authentically. One trace of this accommodation is Jack's newly abstract and inclusive understanding of the word "father." He has accepted the Judge as his natural father, and accepts appropriate, not total, responsibility for his death. He lives in his "father's house" (a metaphor, really, for all the eventual accommodations of his soul) but is prepared to leave the Irwin place. He will leave it when he at last concludes the research on Cass Mastern he has resumed. Jack shelters the Scholarly Attorney as a son would an elderly father, and they live within the ambiguity of the relationship: "Does he think I am his son? I cannot be sure. Nor can I feel that it matters, for each of us is the son of a million fathers" (436). And Jack has made his peace with God, in recognizing a possible equation between what will be the Scholarly Attorney's last tract on God's

greatness and his own theodical struggles. “It would have been a thing of trifling and contemptible ease for Perfection to create mere perfection,” says the old man: “To do so would, to speak truth, be not creation but extension. Separateness is identity and the only way for God to create, truly create, man was to make him separate from God Himself, and to be separate from God is to be sinful. The creation of evil is therefore the index of God’s glory and His power. That had to be so that the creation of good might be the index of man’s glory and power. But by God’s help. By His help and in His wisdom” (437). No longer strong enough to do his own writing, the old man has dictated the passage to Jack, demanding fiercely to know whether Jack agrees. Jack says that he does “to keep his mind untroubled, but later I was not certain,” he muses, “but that in my own way I did believe what he had said” (437). The resonance of this theodical formulation with Cass Mastern’s understanding of human suffering suggests that Jack will be able to finish his dissertation.

In much the same fashion, Jack has come to a new understanding of what constitutes a great man, following a visit to Willie’s widow Lucy. Her husband and son Tom are dead, and she is alone but for Tom’s illegitimate child, whom she has adopted and named for Willie “because Willie was a great man. . . . I have to believe that” (426-27).

“I must believe that, too,” thinks Jack. “I must believe that Willie Stark was a great man. What happened to his greatness is not the question. Perhaps he spilled it on the ground the way you spill a liquid when the bottle breaks. Perhaps he piled up his greatness and burnt it in one great blaze in the dark like a bonfire and then there wasn’t anything but dark and the embers winking. Perhaps he could not tell his greatness from ungreatness and so mixed them together that what was adulterated was lost. But he had it. I must believe that.” (427)

Perhaps the most important in the series of existential tests to which the new Jack submits himself comes during a visit to his mother at Burden’s Landing. Jack’s mother has been curiously liberated by the death of Judge Montague Irwin. Having lived falsely, never admitting her love for the Judge, she will divorce The Young Executive, leave Burden’s Landing, and begin a new life somewhere else. But she still has a question for Jack: did the confrontation between Jack and the Judge have anything to do with the Judge’s suicide?

That was it. I knew that was it. And in the midst of the dazzle and the heat shimmering off the cement, I was cold as ice and my nerves crawled cold inside me. . . .

“No,” I said, “he wasn’t in any jam. We had a little argument about politics. Nothing serious. But he talked about his health. About feeling bad. That was it. . . .

“Is that the truth?” she demanded.

“Yes,” I said. “I swear to God it is.” (431)

Jack recognizes that he has answered his mother’s gift of truth to him (“a new picture of herself, and . . . in the end, a new picture of the world”) with “a present, which was a lie:”

Well, I had given that lie to her as a going-away present.  
Or a kind of wedding present, I thought.

Then I thought how maybe I had lied just to cover up myself.  
 “Damn it,” I said out loud, savagely, “it wasn’t for me, it wasn’t.”  
 And that was true. It was really true. (432)

The historian’s commitment to truth is not what is on trial in this scene. Rather, it is the historiographic problem of interested representation. Accordingly, Jack questions the conflict between his new picture of the world, which leaves room for a generous truth-dealing lie, and his fear that he is rationalizing the lie in obedience to the old picture, according to which a brass-bound idealist may reject pain as he goes along. It is a problem of integrity. As with the slow cultivation of belief that Willie had been a great man, Jack’s assertion that his lie is more than an attempt to protect himself requires a leap of faith beyond both deterministic frames, the spider’s web and the Great Twitch. This is a perennial problem for historians.

Jack’s spiritual journey, at the end of which he is poised before “the awful responsibility of Time,” has transformed him from fox to hedgehog, to borrow Isaiah Berlin’s metaphor, or from a knower of many things to a knower of one big thing. What is the big thing that he knows? Ever the historian, Jack frames his truth in terms of “the past and its burden . . . how if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future” (435). The theory of the Great Twitch dissolves. What Jack had seen as the “doom” of Adam and Willie “to destroy each other” becomes instead life lived “in the agony of will.” Now when Jack weighs the “moral neutrality of history,” he hears the words “History is blind, but man is not” (436).

Jack’s story is thus an imaginative expression of Tolstoy’s struggles in the second epilogue to *War and Peace*. Like Tolstoy, the character Jack Burden is a philosopher of history whose analyses of the assumptions behind historical points of view are much more incisive than his ability to form a unified vision that comprehends all the empirical data, the facts. Jack’s historiographic laboratory is his life. Unlike Tolstoy, who exposes the logical fallacies in historical points of view and their founding assumptions, Jack tests experientially the private and public consequences of a series of world views. He finds them insufficient, coming to the conclusion that life cannot be conducted according to such formulas. According to Isaiah Berlin, Tolstoy believed otherwise: “Tolstoy’s central thesis . . . is that there is a natural law whereby the lives of human beings no less than those of nature are determined; but that men, unable to face this inexorable process, seek to represent it as a succession of free choices, to fix responsibility for what occurs upon persons endowed by them with heroic virtues or heroic vices, and called by them ‘great men.’”<sup>13</sup> According to this interpretation, the affirmation and representation of free will is the central issue for Tolstoy, just as it is for the fictional character Jack Burden.

Jack Burden escapes the fate of Oedipus at Colonus and of Berlin’s Tolstoy. Berlin makes a paradoxical observation concerning the fictional experiments of Tolstoy. “All of Tolstoy’s heroes attain to at least intermittent glimpses” of what Berlin terms an “inexpressible sense of cosmic orientation . . . ‘the knowledge’ of how to live.”<sup>14</sup> Berlin does not explain how it is that Tolstoy’s inventions are privileged to see what Tolstoy cannot, but suggests that

Tolstoy, himself, too, knows that the truth is there and not ‘here’ – not in the regions susceptible to observation, discrimination, constructive imagination, not in the power of microscopic perception and analysis of which he is so much the greatest master of our time; but he has not, himself,

seen it face to face; for he has not, do what he might, a vision of the whole; he is not, he is remote from being, a hedgehog; and what he sees is not the one, but, always with an ever growing minuteness, in all its teeming individuality, with an obsessive, inescapable, incorruptible, all penetrating lucidity which maddens him, the many.<sup>15</sup>

Jack Burden is endowed through experience, suffering, and reflection with a vision of the whole. His vision is limited by the limits on human vision, a conundrum captured in the true image from which “the last veil will not be removed, for there are not enough years.” A hedgehog at last, Jack has secured his humanity not by detached and deductive philosophizing but by empirical experience, in the course of which “he had seen too many people live and die” (436).

Jack Burden is an historian, driven to organize the past. Thus the mimetic urge to draw pictures of reality has not left him. “The awful responsibility of Time,” with which he suspends his story, is an authentic yet uncertain picture of how humans confront the past and the future. Unlike Tennyson’s flower in the crannied wall, the picture metaphorically confers a way to accept, rather than fully to comprehend, “what God and man is.”<sup>16</sup> Jack Burden has moved past his conflicting desires to know everything and, simultaneously, to know nothing. That is an historiographic breakthrough that eluded Leo Tolstoy.

## [Convert endnotes to footnotes on appropriate pages. –Eds.]

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<sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 1260 [Lii.459-61].

<sup>2</sup>Milan Kundera, "Dialogue on the Art of the Novel," in *The Art of the Novel*, trans. Linda Asher (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 44 and 34.

<sup>3</sup>Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (1953; reprint, New York: Simon and Schuster, Touchstone, n.d.), 82 and 29.

<sup>4</sup>Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Constance Garnett (1869; New York: Random House, Inc., Modern Library, n.d.), 1101-1102. Further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup>Berlin, 36-38.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (1946; reprint, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, Harvest HBJ, 1982), 435. Further references to this edition are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>7</sup>This view is neatly captured in a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron* about the reprobate whose final confession is so convincing and elaborate that he becomes a local saint. The story's narrator points out that the actual destination of this sinner is unknown to us ("oscura") because we can not determine whether he actually exercised his free will in the acceptance of grace at death. The implication is that sincere prayers directed through this "saint" will reach God's ears whether or not he was truly repentant in his final moments. Giovanni Boccaccio, First day first story, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 81.

<sup>8</sup>See Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, eds. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 51-52.

<sup>9</sup>Charles H. Bohner, *Robert Penn Warren* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), 88.

<sup>10</sup>Berlin, 36-38.

<sup>11</sup>The allusion is to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's well-known short poem of 1869, which addresses the flower: "if I could understand / What you are, root and all, and all in all, / I should know what God and man is." As with many of his epistemological metaphors, Jack has isolated one aspect of the metaphor in his application, thereby deforming its complexity and meaning.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. R. G. Collingwood's observation that to call oneself a machine is to admit that humans are not machines: "At the scientific or materialistic point of view, man regards himself as a machine. Now to call oneself a machine is to prove that one is not a machine, for no machine calls itself one. By saying 'I am a slave to mechanical law,' man actually lifts himself above such law. But he does so only implicitly; he does not realize that he is doing it; and because he grasps his freedom only implicitly he does not really enjoy it." Collingwood strikes close to the point Jack makes with the rhetorical question, how does the twitch know that the twitch is all? He also approaches Tolstoy's observation about the persistence of hidden agency despite human denials. R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 220.

<sup>13</sup>Berlin, 27.

<sup>14</sup>Berlin, 71 and 69.

<sup>15</sup>Berlin, 71.

<sup>16</sup>Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Flower in the Crannied Wall," in *Immortal Poems of the English Language*, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: Pocket Books, 1952), 375. See note 11 above.