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Idealism and Rage in Proud Flesh

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Proud Flesh is the verse tragedy from which *All the King's Men* emerged. The first version, recently edited by James A. Grimshaw, Jr., and James A. Perkins, occupied Warren from 1937 to 1940.[1] It has the shape of a five-act Shakespearean tragedy but also employs many of the stylistic devices of expressionist drama, and is written in the densely coiled, bristlingly intense verse Warren employed in his roughly contemporary, *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942).[2] As poetry, *Proud Flesh* is a work of a high order. As drama, however, it proved unplayable, and after considerable reworking (rearranging the play into a more modern three acts, adding a scene, even changing the name of the protagonist from Willie Strong to Willie Talos) Warren ultimately abandoned the attempt to bring this project into final form as a play, choosing to reconceive it as a novel, although the play did have a brief run, arranged by Eric Bentley and directed by Frank Whiting, in Minneapolis in the late spring of 1947, during Warren's time at the University of Minnesota.[3]

Proud Flesh is not merely a rough draft of *All the King's Men* but an independent work, which shares many characters and situations with the novel, but which sees the action in a different way and develops some possibilities which Warren's later treatments of this story (both in the novel and in the later stage versions) foreclose. The principal difference, of course, is that we do not see the action in *Proud Flesh* through the sensibility and judgment of Jack Burden. (Indeed, all we see of the character who will develop into Jack Burden is a brief moment of childhood reminiscence he shares with Keith Amos, the play's equivalent of Adam Stanton, as the latter lurks in the lobby of the State Capitol preparing to assassinate Governor Strong.) The play lacks Jack's irony, his moral insight, and the perspective his own

developing moral drama gives on the political drama at the novel's center. But it also is not confined by Jack's blinders, and sees some of the main figures–particularly the play's equivalents of Anne Stanton and Lucy Stark–very differently from how the novel sees them.

The plot turns on the Hospital construction project which also structures the last third of *All the King's Men*. Governor Strong prevails upon the surgeon Keith Amos to head the medical staff of his hospital, and almost simultaneously begins an affair with Keith's sister Anne. For purely pragmatic reasons he agrees to allow his corrupt protegé Tiny Harper (the novel's Tiny Duffy) to give the hospital construction contract to Gummy Satterfield, a sleazy builder rather like the novel's Gummy Larson. Willie no sooner makes this deal than his son Tom is injured at a college football game (Willie has made the deal in the stands). When Tom dies, Willie, stung with remorse, backs out of the deal, breaks with Anne and with Sue Parsons, the novel's Sadie Burke, in an only partly successful attempt to reconcile with his estranged wife, and is betrayed by Harper and Sue, who, in ways familiar from the novel, spur Keith Amos to murder Willie Strong.[4]

We see Willie Strong in *Proud Flesh* only at the height of his power and in the full blaze of his cynicism; and although there is a hint of an earlier and more virtuous career in some comments by Sue Parsons, we are not given accounts of the things in the novel like the Mason City schoolhouse construction incident or the first campaign for Governor that make Willie Stark's turn to a more hard-edged style of politics more palatable. Nor is Willie driven into the hospital construction project in the play, as he is in the novel, by the desire to prove to himself that all of his corrupt exercises of power have really been aimed at serving the public good, although the play leaves open the possibility that Willie's motives in building the hospital (and in other things) are not entirely cynical ones. Indeed, the motives for actions in the play are simpler all around than they are in the novel.

It is not, for instance, the dark story about Judge Irwin (who does not appear in the play anyway), but merely Anne's persuasiveness, that convinces Dr. Amos to accept the hospital position. It is not the blackmail attempt against Willie's son, but pure pragmatism, that moves Willie to enter the bargain with Satterfield. And the characters are quite differently conceived. Clara Strong, for instance, is a much sterner and less forgiving character than Lucy Stark, her counterpart in the novel. And Anne Amos is a harder, more opportunistic, more bluntly sexual character than Anne Stanton is in the novel.[5]

The key difference, however, is in the prominent role given to Keith Amos. Adam Stanton, despite being the ultimate killer of Willie Stark, is scarcely even a fully rounded character in the novel, and although he is always wired a bit too tightly and is stern in rather scary ways, he never quite crosses the line that separates the merely scary from the frankly sinister. But Keith Amos is sinister indeed in ways that only a hero-villain can be.

Consider the brilliant opening scene, in which Keith is stopped by a motorcycle policeman as he rushes to his first meeting with Governor Strong, who will ask him to head up the grand new hospital he is planning. When the trooper realizes who they are (and that, as Keith's snide and oily passenger Dr. Skipworth, reminds him, ticketing them will lose the trooper his job), his swagger evaporates, and he is reduced to begging to be allowed to do the two doctors favors—fixing their nearly flat tire—to save his neck. Keith will have none of it: He never lets the trooper off the hook, demanding that the trooper do his duty and give him the ticket, and he promises the trooper nothing. Perhaps Keith sees this as playing by the rules. But he also takes a bit too much pleasure in making the trooper writhe, who is finally described not as a thuggish Myrmidon of the police state but as "a big clumsy boy confused almost to tears." Nothing in the novel shows so clearly that close kinship in Keith's nature between rigid devotion to principle and naked sadism that makes him ultimately such a fright-

ening alternative to Willie.

Keith is already in a rage when he is stopped, and it is only partly a rage against having to meet with the Governor, whose corruption (alleged corruption—we never see him doing anything that is corrupt in the sense Keith means) offends his nostrils. Keith thinks he is enraged about political corruption. But what he is really enraged about is having a human body, subject to desire and to decay, a porous bag of foul-smelling fluids:

> A stink, and on a man's fingers,
> Whatever he lays hand to, it's there,
> And the stink climbs the multitudinous sweetness of air,
> Lovingly lingers, a kiss upon the tongue,
> And fouls the nostril's secret stair—
> Smell it, it's there
> On your fingers, and mine—
> Whatever you touch,
> The cup lifted familiarly, morningly, to the lips,
> The friend's hand—that delicate
> Film of moisture slick upon the palm
> There, there it will live, proliferate,
> Swelling like algae spored upon a pond—
> The flower you pluck, and the door-knob
> Kind to your fingers, accustomed, the door
> Which opens to the innermost room where love lies.

This is not just priggishness; there is something sexually charged, even positively kinky, about Keith's disgust here. These are not the accents of a rejector of sexual life but of a sexual sadist, whose rejection of sexuality is a kind of erotic cruelty. He has a natural cousin in the Thomas Jefferson of Warren's *Brother to Dragons* (1953), whose speeches likewise often drip with sexually charged disgust; and he has a natural ancestor in Angelo of *Measure for Measure*, perhaps the original of all of those characters who link Puritanism and sadism. His later tirade in which he compares the male genitalia to "a sly purse of pleasure" sounds like Angelo at his most revolted and mesmerized. It is not for nothing that it is Keith's sister Anne's sexual involvement with Willie, rather than anything political, that drives him over the edge. Something of this view of Adam is plausible even in the novel, but we do not focus on it there in the way we do here, because there it is obscured by Jack's own moral drama and by his inability, so strange in a narrator proud of his toughness, to see his friends with perfect clarity.

Keith's disgust is not merely disgust with the political machine. Skipworth offers the suggestion that however rough Strong's methods are, the medical center he offers is unquestionably a good thing. Keith's response starts out in the cynical mode of Jack Burden:

> All right, we get the medical center. All right. We patch up a few more bodies. A healthier people. Better babies. Apple week. Jesus Christ.

But Keith's argument takes a different turn—a turn never taken by Adam Stanton—when he wonders whether fixing up broken bodies really is on the whole a good thing. Pain he argues is "an evil," which is to say a disagreeable but ethically neutral thing, rather than "evil," which is to say something ethically bad the abatement of which would be ethically good. Now Adam Stanton makes this same distinction between "evil" and "an evil" in *All the King's Men*, but there it seems to be something of a debater's trick. Keith develops the distinction in an altogether darker direction, arguing that nothing that affects bodies, their pain, their mortality, their misery, is actually finally of any moral account. Although this view rather makes mincemeat of Keith's own vocation as a surgeon, it does set him further from Willie's views than Adam Stanton ever is, since after all tending to human disease and pain is in the same category as tending to poverty and misery. For Keith, tending to disease, like tending to poverty, is merely attending to the order of nature, and to do that estranges one from the order of meaning and right. He demands of Skipworth, "[D]id you ever ask yourself when you put your hand on

some poor bastard's belly and sewed him back together—did you ever ask yourself what was in him?" "I'll tell you," he says, breaking into verse,

> The stink.
> If the stink's all, why bother?
> Think?
> But we don't, you and I,
> Blind fingers, rag-pickers,
> Mumblers and patchers of remnants.
> For what?
> To get the wind out of a worn-out gut?
> We don't know.
> Know!
> The caterpillar knows its leaf, the mole
> Its hummock, the fox the fetid hole,
> The cat the cushion, the hog the sty
> And the swill-trough, who
> Has known his heart?
> Who? Not I,
> And Bill, not you.

Indeed, in Keith's description of Willie as a tumor, which follows immediately upon this, the body and its diseases are not merely the vehicle for the political tenor of the metaphor (in which Willie is a tumor in the body politic). The vehicle overwhelms its tenor: the body is the real subject, and Willie is disgusting chiefly because he leads Keith to the thought of the body.[6]

> We touch only the surface, and our fingers
> Stink. Whiff only the breath breathed out,
> *(He shifts his attention more and more from his friend, as the light begins to fade, except on him.)*
> And it stinks.
> But he lies inside.
> He is deep inside.
> He is growing,
> A cancerous growth which now grows proud in the dark,
> Iridescent in darkness, the flesh's final pride
> Thriving on flesh; and the sluggish blood now sways

> And swags to his mass, like sway of the sea's tide.
> He burns, is peacocked in flame, hut utters no light.
> *(The light fades rapidly now.)*
> Eastern and mogul, his mass savagely drowses,
> His coils stir. Our name in him is essential,
> O nomenclature swollen now! O splendid
> And inward that apple, that fat fruit which gleams
> *(By this time, the light is entirely gone, and there is only the voice in the darkness.)*
> On the bough of our darkness, till dark itself is rescinded,
> Till the night is ended
> Till the dark
> He is in the dark.

It is Anne's persuasion that moves Keith to change his mind about accepting the hospital position, and she does it not exactly by outlining the nobility of the healer's position but by pointing out that Keith's profession arises from an animal urgency, like lust or hunger, that cannot be gainsaid, a lust towards becoming that never fully transcends natural process but cannot be reduced to it either. Keith points out, in his most vivid lines, the magnetic emptiness of the body:

> I have held a heart, alive, in my own hand,
> *(He leans as though to confide a secret.)*
> Beating, a tremulous blood-blob—it did
> Not speak, it did not say a word, it said
> Nothing.

Anne remembers evocative and lyrical scenes from their childhood—waiting for a fox among ferns and moss, lying on warm sand, drifting in warm sea water—some of them lyrical memories given to Jack Burden in the novel, and one a lyrical scene Warren would himself return to much later in his poetic career, in "Debate: Question, Quarry, Dream." But unlike Jack, for whom these memories remain a somewhat sentimental refuge from acknowledging his later self, Anne repudiates the memories, remarking that

No matter what Strong is, the good
Is fact, no matter what
The world is, even if it's not the world
We thought—no lying on beaches now, and the light,
Wings lost in that light, I remember, I
Remember, it was once—but still it's a world
To do what you can in.

Anne notes that Keith's revulsion against what he calls Governor Strong's vanity is another and darker form of vanity, for Strong's vanity (in Anne's view) is merely the vanity of the body, Keith's the vanity of a fierce spirit that spurns the body but cannot be free of it. Her argument here is very like the argument that Lucy Jefferson uses when she seeks to persuade Thomas Jefferson to take the hand of the murderer Lilburne Lewis in *Brother to Dragons*. (Taking the hand of a repellent person is a repeated figure in *Proud Flesh* as well.) Her final, and successful move, however, is to turn Keith's key word, "nothing," the nothing that the "tremulous blood-blob of the heart" says, against him. For this nothing is an urgency beyond words, an urgency which works through Keith's hands but is ultimately an urgency of the body, not of the spirit. Of Keith's hands she says,

They are not yours, I'll tell you what they belong to:
The swollen abdomen and the gray lips,
The mouth which shapes like an O but utters no breath
When the pain strikes, the running sore and the sore
With the tentacled fingers which beckon, and beckon you,
The eyes which turn slow in the head and find
Nothing, have demanded nothing.
AMOS: *(Slowly.)* Nothing.
ANNE: Nothing,
And in the eyes there's nothing, and the nothingness
Devours, devours you, gray gullet, enormous, void—
And effortless that ingurgitation, and you
Defenseless. The fact. The act. You've seen it.

Anne sees Keith's vocation as an urgency of the body, as electric

but as blind and silent as the sexual drive, driven by an almost preternatural insistence it cannot explain, evade, or understand the meaning of, driven towards an end it cannot conceive. Keith's attempts to describe this urgency have a desperate ring, and Anne interrupts Keith's speech only to ridicule its intention:

AMOS: Yourself,
What man can name it, what he is, can name
The flame which at center does not bend, the essence unending?
Who has named it?
ANNE: *(Almost scornfully.)* Only children try.
AMOS: O Anne,
There's a tooth which gnaws, and gnaws our definitions,
A current in things, we look and their shapes alter
And falter, we falter, doors bang, bang open
On dark and the wet: cold gust at the ankle, the flame
Jerks from the wick, the wick stinks in the darkness.

This vision of an inarticulate imperative which seeks, beneath the intelligence and perhaps without its will or awareness, to instantiate itself in acts even as it cannot be rendered in concepts, is shared by all of the play's various choruses (each act opens with an ode by a chorus of masked people–motorcycle policemen, masked ladies, surgeons, and so on), and by Willie himself. The opening chorus captures the spirit of unfathomable drivenness:

What hand flings the white road before us?
What hand over hills and the damplands,
Over the highlands and swamplands,
Gulley and bayou? And flings us
Fast as the slug from the gun-mouth—
Us nameless, and yet he has named us,
And aimless, and yet he has aimed us
And flung us, and flings us, a handful
Of knives hurled, edged errand—O errand
Blind with the glittering blindness of light!

Clara Strong, arguing with Willie over the fate of their son,

describes this insatiable but inscrutable driving force as the sign of a kind of emptiness, as the irresistible pull of a vacuum:

> It is the last delusion, the gut-gnaw
> Of those born empty, of the insatiate
> Hollowness of heart, who have no inward answer,
> Who would devour the world, drowse listening
> In what aridity of the deep dark
> To their own gut's rumble, rapt and lulled, alone
> In darkness, the shudder in solitude.

Clara might well be giving here the author's view of Willie, who hungers for power because of the essential emptiness of his character. But I think this might be to underread what Willie is about, to see him and those who follow him as suffering under a merely psychological debility. For the fact is that to labor under an insatiable and inscrutable urgency which can neither be fathomed nor mastered is the fate of all of the characters in the play, no matter what their views. Since whatever might fulfill this kind of spiritual craving is unknown to Warren early and late, it is a mistake to think of this kind of craving as a symptom of a weakness; it is in fact finally the source of the bleak sublimity of Warren's late poetry, which, too, is driven by a dark insistence upon serving a more than human but also inhuman meaning that escapes poetry's comprehension and demands its life.

The alternative to bleak sublimity is a mute and animal life. Willie makes this clear in his reply to Clara:

> Listen:
> It was a house set on the bare ground,
> House bare, bony, set on the chunks of stone.
> Shutterless, night's blind eye pressed to the pane.
> The boy lay, tick-straw harsh to the bare side, heard
> The oaks utter under the wind's long drag.
> Under the unremitting percussion the timber,
> Cold-taut, groaned, and I saw how across the Dakotas,
> The icy and pearl-blind plain, the Ozarks, the wind
> Came, and did not stop, and I did not know

> The name of what was big in me, but knew
> It. And once, sun hot on neck, I lay
> On the broom grass, and felt beneath my palm
> The enormous curvature of earth; and wept.
> It has no name but the act, no being in the bland
> Intermission of blood, between the stroke and stroke,
> But its heat fuses all the mind to clarity,
> As the whistling-white blast of the furnace, sand to glass,
> For the world fulfills itself, for the perched stone
> Throbs for the depth, and the dynamite atoms strain,
> In their structures creak like a ship's metals in travail,
> Groan; and I knew it. Who knows it and would deny it
> Turns the knife on himself, the cut boar grunting for slop,
> Fat dog in the sun. Which you, no doubt, admire
> As exemplifying some superior principle
> Lacking to me, and to, thank God, my son.

Willie's language here is strangely like Adam's. They are not opposites after all, for they share the same kind of Gnostic insistence, the same kind of fascinated and obsessed revulsion from the physical and from the body. And both can deal only in and with the body, although in revulsion.

At least as startling as Adam Amos in *Proud Flesh*, particularly if we come to the play from *All the King's Men*, is Anne Amos, the play's equivalent of Anne Stanton. Perhaps the chief reason she seems so strange to us is that we see Anne Amos, as we never see Anne Stanton, outside of the veil of Jack Burden's idealization of her; we see Anne Amos as someone with motives of her own rather than merely as the person who suffers the consequences of Jack's moral and sexual failures of nerve. Lucy Ferriss, in *Sleeping with the Boss*, her study of Warren's female characters, argues that the novelist has a grittier vision of Anne Stanton than the *narrator* does, because Jack Burden sees Anne only in terms of his story, not in terms of her own. Ferriss's views are richly borne out by Anne Amos, who is a firmer and more frankly sexual character.

When we first see her—Keith Amos, leaving his first meeting

with Willie, bumps into her on her own way in to see him—she is a woman of the world who knows what you have to do to get something done and is not shy about doing it. In *All the King's Men* as well, Anne has her brisk side, but when Anne Stanton is brisk in the novel we see it not as an indication of her worldliness but as a sign that, like her brother, she is rather tightly wound: there is something slightly frenetic about everything she does, and that frenetic quality extends even to her somewhat overdone imitation of a woman of the world. Indeed, rather like her brother, Anne Stanton always bristles with the electricity of sexual feelings that are not only unacknowledged but actively disowned. She also, rather like her brother, does everything she does with a kind of urgency that betrays an unacknowledged or evaded crisis of vocation as well. Just as Adam does his doctoring a little too hard, and plays the piano a little too intensely, so Anne throws herself into good works a little too passionately, as if to persuade herself that she is doing what she is really intended to do. (An unacknowledged crisis of vocation and a disowned or disordered sexual life seem in the novel to be versions of the same thing, perhaps because Jack Burden himself sees them in his own case to be versions of the same thing. But Anne Stanton sees things the same way: she keeps disguising her erotic disillusionment with Jack as impatience with his inability to settle upon a career.) Anne Amos's briskness is quite different from Anne Stanton's, having nothing trembly or vulnerable or evasive about it. Anne Stanton never seems to know herself very well; Anne Amos is never in any doubt about herself, and there is something frank about her, both politically and sexually, that we never see in Anne Stanton, whose sexual attractiveness, indeed, has something to do with her inability to see herself in a sexual way.

This is not to say that Anne Stanton is an asexual creature, only that her sexual feelings are, relative to what we see in Anne Amos, indirect ones. Even in *All the King's Men* Anne Stanton sees Willie as someone who is able to cut through illusion and inhibition in the service of justice; his roughness, relative to the priggish and self-serving Good Government types who complain about Willie back in Burden's Landing, is a sign to her of his deeper knowledge of the world and his more intense commitment to do good in it, and a sign also of a stern and morally heroic manliness. She is visibly struggling with sexual attraction for Willie as early as the impeachment rally scene, when she asks Jack whether Willie really means what he says at the rally. We see in this scene that the charisma of a prophetic if transgressive political calling is also a sexual charisma, although Jack doesn't seem to understand it at that moment and Anne herself does not seem clear about the meaning of her own feelings. Anne's moral and political passion in *All the King's Men* has an unmistakable sexual edge, sharpened both by the sexual thrill of Willie's dark power and by the sexual thrill of her own class transgression: we know that in some sense to Anne Willie is the demon outlaw lover from the wrong side of town, but we do not know whether Anne knows this herself. Even Jack is obliquely willing to concede that Anne somehow, if not with full self-consciousness, sees Willie as more of a man than Jack is, and that the origin of Willie's erotic magnetism is not only his prophetic willingness to break the rules in order to serve justice, and not only his power, but also the self-assurance with which he sets himself up as a transgressor, his lack of inhibitions, second thoughts, and qualms.

That is why Jack portrays his own moral qualms as sexual cowardice: making love to the gangly, sister-like, but suddenly naked and all too grown up Anne, once she undresses for him when they are alone in his room in his mother's house, really would have had a more than vaguely incestuous flavor for him, and his inability to get past that–he is indeed relieved when his mother's car inconveniently pulls into the driveway–is not merely a sign of simple sexual cowardice but also a sign that Jack lacks the sexual charisma of the unhesitant bad boy. If he had had that charisma and owned up to it,

he would also have had to own up to things about Anne that even Anne will not own. He is of course right to have qualms about making love to Anne since Anne always seemed to Jack more of a sister than a lover (when she is not bathing him with motherly baby-talk), and her chief erotic relationship early and late is a repressed one with her brother Adam. And Jack knows that that self-doubt marks him ever after as not quite a man in her book. But however unmistakable all this may seem to us, Jack never acknowledges it directly himself, nor allows Anne the insight to discover it on her own. We are never given a sense that Anne knows any of these things about herself, that she sees her own motivations or even her own feelings with much clarity, whether in relation to Willie or in relation to Jack. The sexual and moral world of Anne Stanton is if anything a more complex one than the sexual and moral world of Anne Amos, but we are allowed only the most indirect glimpses into the former, because we are only allowed to see it through Jack's eyes, who cannot face what he sees.

Indeed, Jack never really allows us to look very deeply into Anne, perhaps because he wants to lay the responsibility for everything Anne does at his own door. When Jack argues in all seriousness that his failure to make love to Anne as a young man somehow made her later affair with Willie inevitable, he seems to imagine that Anne never had any motives, acknowledged or unacknowledged, of her own. Jack is so eager to disown the darkly sexual side of Anne and of his own relationship with her, that there is something disingenuous about his avowal of sexual cowardice. Jack had at the time thought of his failure to make love to Anne as a kind of noble refusal to see the young Anne in a sexual fashion, as a refusal to exploit her vulnerability. Jack jeers at this idea by novel's end. But at the novel's end as much as at its beginning Jack sees all sexual feeling as exploitative, which is why all of his own sexual talk is so shamefaced and why his description of his sexual adventures with his first wife are so unpersuasive—it is not for nothing that Sadie Burke, turning down a jocular and completely unserious proposition by Jack, tells him she "prefers mine with vitamins" and compares him to a spilled box of spaghetti. It is not that Jack does not obliquely know that there is a dark side to Anne and to his own relationship with her, never mind Willie's relationship to her (or Adam's); it is that Jack cannot acknowledge what he knows, and he will not allow Anne to do so either. Jack's view of Anne is always a foreshortened one, stunted by his inability to bear the thought that she has sexually ambiguous feelings and a morally ambiguous life. Whatever his bedroom failure with her was, it was not merely his inability to make love to her as any normal adolescent would; it was his inability to let her be a moral adult, with all the ugliness that moral adults have to face up to.

In *All the King's Men* we never see Anne and Willie together; we do not have a sense of the quality of their relationship. But in *Proud Flesh* we see them dancing together, and we see the sexual hunger and desperate need on both sides. The scene occurs at a vulnerable moment for Willie. He has just, in the scene before, made his corrupt bargain with Satterfield, in which he will gain control of the Fourth and Fifth districts in exchange for the hospital construction contract. He makes this bargain not, as in the novel, to evade political pressure put on him by his son Tom's carryings on, and not, as in the 1955 play *Willie Stark: His Rise and Fall*, to outflank a threatened impeachment, but simply because it gives him an advantage over his entrenched opposition in those districts. At the very moment he closed the deal–Tiny Harper had sprung Satterfield on him as he was watching his son's heroics at a football game–Tom was injured on the field. So in the dancing scene with Anne that follows he has both political and familial problems in mind. Willie is uneasy about the deal he has just made, but when he explains the deal to Anne she not only is persuaded to accept it, she is even a little turned on by its Machiavellian realism:

ANNE: I know, I know—but isn't there some other way? Does it have to be like this? And the medical center contract.
STRONG: Buck up! It's no news. You know how things are.
ANNE: No. No news.—*(She faces him directly.)*—I know how things are. I'm not a child. What has to be done, has to be done. Oh, Willie—*(She hesitates, then reaches out to touch him on the lapel.)*—I love you.
STRONG: *(Apparently paying no attention to her declaration.)* I wanted you to know. Before I told you what I have to tell you. I want you to marry me.

This proposal turns out to be a very bad move on Willie's part: Anne seems instantly to become chilly. It is not Willie's realism here that bothers Anne—she announces, rather formidably, that she is "not biddy hearted to brood / And fluff on opportunities like eggs,"—but his self-doubt. Willie has been pondering a remark by his estranged wife Clara that he has become fragmentary and unstrung, that he has lost his way. When he wonders aloud whether Clara had it right, Anne not only gives him no help but begins to wonder whether he is man enough for her, or whether he is instead fool enough to think that love will somehow give him back his sense of a transforming moral purpose. From the novel one imagines Anne's feelings for Willie as clingy and dependent, and one thinks of her as not fully aware that her romantic feelings for Willie are sexual feelings; it is a surprise to see Anne in *Proud Flesh* as having the emotional upper hand, and as being the more forthrightly sexual of the two. Certainly Tiny Harper understands this, for when Willie is called off to the hospital, Tom having taken a surprising turn for the worst, he too presses himself upon Anne, with the air of one who knows what kind of woman she is.

Anne's turn against Willie, indeed, is startlingly cruel:

What do you expect of me? Be honest
Who have been honest with honesty of water or wind
Moving, guilelessness of glacier. Do you think love
Is a fix-it, a household cement, to patch pieces,

The putter and piddle of cupboards, will polarize
At a word the fragments, the fractures, the filings of all
The invidious iron disorder of the enormous world?

That may be a trifle over-written. But it could not be further from Anne Stanton of *All the King's Men*. Anne Amos, too, is a kind of dark gnostic. She puts it as bluntly as possible in her speech in the Choral Ode that opens Act III:

Life pays a price for life, and I know it.
For vitality, violence, for good, evil—our doom,
And only the butter-hearted deny it,
Whose praise would retch at the dunged rose's bloom.

This commonality of motivation makes one point clear that the novel might obscure. In *All the King's Men* it is tempting to describe the workings of the characters in psychological language: that Adam runs idealism and sadism together is a fact about him, not about idealism; that Willie runs the terror of emptiness together with a taste for tyranny is a fact about him, and about those who are attracted to men like him, but not a fact about all politics or all men. But the similarity of motivation in all of the characters in *Proud Flesh* argues that what we are in the presence of here are metaphysical rather than psychological facts, kinships among concepts rather than accidental predicaments of men and women. All of the characters are in the grip of a world in which they are desperate for a purpose, but no purpose declares itself, a world in which the hunger for meaning keeps exact pace with that world's perfect meaninglessness. It is a world in which characters do evil chiefly because they are driven to make an affirmation, but, as Keith remarks, "affirmation has a fist."

ENDNOTES

[1]This paper is an expanded and refocused version of the first part of my foreword to the James A.Grimshaw, Jr., and James A. Perkins's edition, *Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men": Three Stage Versions* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000); and an earlier version was delivered at the American Literature Association in May, 2000.

[2]For one thing, the verse in which the play is written is Modernist in flavor, having more of the feel of Lorca about it than of Shakespeare or for that matter Maxwell Anderson. For another thing, there are frequent dramatic tricks in the play that have an expressionist provenance, such as the moment when Willie unplugs his radio in disgust but the radio narration continues anyway, breaking into verse at the moment Willie pulls the plug, or the sinister rendition of "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby." The choral odes which open the acts, spoken by different sets of masked people each time–motorcycle policemen, surgeons, ladies at a masked ball, football players–also seem more expressionist than classical in flavor.

[3]Grimshaw and Perkins give a thorough history of the composition and production of this play, as does Joseph Blotner in his indispensable biography of Robert Penn Warren, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997). Warren himself discusses how *All the King's Men* grew out of *Proud Flesh* at several points in the interviews in *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, edited by Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weaks (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

[4]Much of what the novel dramatizes is not dramatized in the play. And much of what is presented directly in the play is presented indirectly in the novel. We actually see Willie's attempted reconciliation with Clara–a tougher customer in *Proud Flesh* than Lucy in *All the King's Men*–as well as the conspiracy between Sue Parsons (Sadie Burke in *All the King's Men*) and Tiny Harper to push Keith Amos into murdering Willie (in the novel Jack Burden learns about Sadie Burke's role almost by accident from Sadie herself long afterwards). We even see Tiny Harper, in person, working Keith Amos up to the murder (In the novel, even Adam's murderous rage is presented indirectly, through Anne's frantic search for him after he abuses her.) At the same time, we do not see anything of Willie's early career. Sue Parsons tells us that she "put [Willie] in the big time," but there is no trace of the story of the schoolhouse contract, or of Willie's first race for Governor, that is so important to establishing Willie's good faith in the novel.

[5]That in *Proud Flesh* we never see Willie as the idealistic Cousin Willie from the country may be an advantage, for the story of Willie's early career motivates a particularly common misreading of the novel which sees it as a story of how the political system corrupts decent men–as if it were "Mr. Stark goes to Baton Rouge," rather than *All the King's Men*. It is a mistake to think of Willie as a man who loses sight of his moral aims once he comes to power; his problem is that his seriousness about his moral aims blinds him to the amorality of his means, and he only really understands those moral aims once he comes to power. His difficulty is not that he suddenly becomes mad for power once he has some of it, but that having torn the law down around him to serve his vision of justice he can no longer tell whether it is justice or power that he was ultimately all about. Willie does not lose his moral interest once he comes to power; it is in taking a bold if wrongheaded position as a kind of armed prophet that he has his moral interest in the first place. In presenting him only at the height of his power, *Proud Flesh* keeps its focus on what really matters about Willie, and it is not tempted into the morally simpler but also morally shallower view of Willie that the Robert Rossen film adopts. *Proud Flesh* also, unlike the novel, never teaches the lesson Jack Burden learns, that History is blind but Man is not, for the play's conclusions are unremittingly dark, and the final scene leaves Tiny Harper and his like in complete control.

[6]Adam's tirade indeed sounds more like Warren's poetry in the era of *Incarnations* (1968) than like his poetry in the era of *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942).