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Cass Mastern, Josiah Royce, and the Envelope of Responsibility

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In his essay *The Legacy of the Civil War*, Robert Penn Warren indicates a pressing need to “determine the limits of responsibility”¹ through a studied consideration of the degree of inevitability in the course of past events. While Warren frames this ethical problem in terms of North/South relations in the wake of the Civil War, it is also inextricable from the historical transition from secure transcendent morality to uncertain humanist ethics, or otherwise put, from the onset of secular modernity. In his novel *All the King’s Men*, Warren is deeply concerned with this shift in American moral ethics, which has its parallel in intellectual history in the shift from the residual Absolute Idealism of Josiah Royce to the emergent philosophies of James’s Pragmatism and Santayana’s Naturalism. The novel’s philosophically-minded protagonist, Jack Burden, tries to navigate this vexed terrain of modern secular ethics, and his beacon is the story of Cass Mastern, the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation in history.

While many critics rightly see Cass Mastern’s story embodying a lesson for Jack in the burden of responsibility, this perspective generally overlooks a nuanced but essential point in Warren’s philosophy of balance, and also underlies a common mischaracterization of Jack’s philosophy of “brass-bound idealism.” I will show that, far from constituting a means to avoid his personal responsibility, Jack’s brass-bound idealism in fact implicates him as fully complicit with the ethically problematic course of events, and thus makes him thoroughly responsible for these events. This is not a moral responsibility, however, since the extreme of absolute responsibility is, for Warren, just as deeply problematic as Jack’s

¹Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press [Bison Books], 1998), 100.

alternate Naturalist philosophy of “the Great Twitch,” a truly escapist philosophy constituting a means to avoid responsibility absolutely. Both of these extremes reflect what Warren sees as the phenomenon of self-delusion that results from a neglect of the lessons of history. I will explore here the specific “limits of responsibility” that emerge from Jack’s narration of the Cass Mastern story. I will demonstrate that Jack’s ultimate reconciliation does not come, as most readers see it, from learning to accept full responsibility for his actions where he formerly had none, but rather from his ability to define for himself, through his historical researches and creation of iconic “images,” a clear picture of the boundaries of his responsibility—its burdens as well as its limits. Further, I will show that this envelope of responsibility is for Warren thoroughly historical—an envelope whose contours change through time, crucially dependent upon the narration of past events in the present.

1.

A remarkable near-consensus exists among scholars as to the ethical meaning of *All the King’s Men*, and one oft-quoted passage seems to hold the key for many readers:

This has been the story of Willie Talos, but it is my story, too... 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. The change did not happen all at once. Many things happened, and that man did not know when he had any responsibility for them and when he did not. There was, in fact, a time when he came to believe that nobody had any responsibility for anything and there was no god but the Great Twitch.²

Warren’s seeming emphasis on Jack’s brief flirtation with the “Great Twitch,” a philosophy of naturalistic determinism, leads critics such as Robert Chambers to see the younger Jack as “totally unaware of the ‘truth’ of complicity”; he is someone who can “hope to transcend [his innate corruption] only through conscious recognition of the

²Robert Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men: Restored Edition*, ed. Noel Polk (New York: Harvest Books, 2001), 605; hereafter cited by page number in the text.

absoluteness of his complicity. Acknowledgement of his responsibility... is, according to Warren, man's sole route to that genuine selfhood which is his freedom."³ What is perhaps most interesting about this assertion by Chambers is that it appears in the introduction to a collection of critical essays, and is presented not as an argument or interpretation, but rather as something approaching bare fact. Indeed, the other essays in this collection share, or at least never contradict, Chambers' assumptions about Jack's transformation from one who denies any responsibility in a world of naked determinism, to one who acknowledges "absolute complicity." Robert Heilman, for instance, describes Jack's peculiar brand of idealism as "his version of Platonism, which rationalizes away responsibility," and his subsequent "inner development in his coming to terms with the past [and] knowing the reality of guilt."⁴ James Simmons states up front that "*All the King's Men* is primarily a novel of one man's search for self-realization, culminating in the development of his moral awareness and his acceptance of individual responsibility," while Beekman Cottrell informs us that ". . . the major philosophical image of the novel, the Spider Web...demands responsibility, and Jack only gradually learns to become responsible."⁵

Among the rare exceptions to this consensus is John Burt's insight that the "connectedness" of the spider web causes an

³Robert H. Chambers, Introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Robert H. Chambers (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 8.

⁴Robert B. Heilman, "Melpomene as Wallflower; or, the Reading of Tragedy," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men*, 27-28.

⁵James C. Simmons, "Adam's Lobectomy Operation," and Beekman W. Cottrell, "Cass Mastern and the Awful Responsibility of Time," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men*, 116 and 118. The critical consensus (or about as close to a consensus as one is likely to get in literary criticism) about the nature of Jack Burden's self-realization is overwhelming. For more examples from other sources, see Barnett Guttenberg, *Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975), 52-55; Charles Bohner, *Robert Penn Warren* (Boston: Twayne, 1964), 75-77; William Bedford Clark, *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 93-94; John M. Bradbury, "Robert Penn Warren's Novels: The Symbolic and Textual Patterns," in *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Gray (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980); William C. Havard, "The Burden of the Literary Mind: Some Meditations on Robert Penn Warren as Historian," in Gray, 186; Robert S. Koppelman, *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 39-40; and Jonathan S. Cullick, *Making History: The Biographical Narratives of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 99-100.

“overdetermination of events [in which] there can be no clear connection between one act and one meaning.”⁶ This position, while largely agreeing with the consensus that Jack lacks responsibility prior to the Judge’s death, also sees a more complex redemption for Jack, where the lesson he learns is not his absolute complicity, but rather “humility and compassion”: “It grounds the human state and gives it moral bearings by putting it into contact with something outside of the human with which it can never come to terms.”⁷ The spider web both teaches of the interconnectedness of all things and thus a certain *degree* of responsibility, yet its “horrificing... plottiness”⁸ teaches as well the implicit limits of responsibility by confronting Jack with a web whose tangles often overwhelm individual agency.

The position I take here is that Burt’s insight, although it doesn’t fully recognize Jack’s pre-conversion oscillation between absolute complicity and escapist naturalism, nonetheless points toward the true nature of “The Education of Jack Burden”: He does not, in the end, come to accept full responsibility; rather, Jack realizes balance by describing the envelope of responsibility—the compass *and* limits of responsibility. The spider web teaches responsibility as well as helplessness, evitability as well as inevitability. What Jack eventually learns is to put his knowledge to use—to utilize his constructed images of history to describe the changing contours of the envelope of responsibility through time.

The consensus interpretation assumes that Jack begins with no conception of responsibility, and then undergoes a complete change in which he acknowledges his “absolute complicity.” That is not what Burden says of his former self, however; what he says is, “Many things happened, and that man did not know when he had any responsibility for them and when he did not” (605). His initial problem is not that he has no sense of responsibility, but that he oscillates between accepting and rejecting responsibility absolutely. The early Jack thinks of responsibility in absolute terms, rather

⁶John Burt, *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 168.

⁷Burt, 169.

⁸Burt, 166.

than as a constantly changing field negotiated by a dynamic envelope of responsibility. This inability to respect the limits of responsibility is the source of his initial lack of moral ground.

It is not that Jack lacks any sense of responsibility, it's that he doesn't know when and where to feel it—he doesn't understand which actions he is responsible for and which are dictates of the web's plot. It is for this indecision that he swings back and forth from the extremes of brass-bound idealism to the Great Twitch. While the Great Twitch is indeed a naturalist philosophy that reduces individual agency to mechanical causality, and thus provides an escape from the burden of responsibility, brass-bound idealism is, contrary to most critics' assumptions, a philosophy entailing full individual responsibility.

Before continuing further, I wish to distinguish between three subcategories of responsibility that interpretations of Warren's novel do not sufficiently separate. The first category of responsibility is complicity, for which the OED's definition of "complicit"—"involved knowingly or with passive compliance"⁹—will suit our purposes. This category describes well Jack's normally passive stance as a knowing member of a system that commits injustice. Complicity does not necessarily entail direct causal responsibility for an act, but it entails knowledge of the act and an unwillingness to intervene. The second category of responsibility is causal responsibility, in which one's actions lead directly to the outcome for which one is responsible. Causal responsibility can include complicity, that is, direct knowledge of the results of one's actions, but it can also entail unanticipated and unknown consequences. The third category of responsibility is what I call moral responsibility, which I contend is possible, in the logic of Warren's text, only with the recognition of the envelope of responsibility. These three categories are certainly not entirely distinct and they often overlap, but Chambers' conflation of complicity and responsibility, for instance (and this or a similar mistake is made by most critics of Warren's novel), oversimplifies Jack's moral

⁹"Complicity," in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J. A. Simpson and Edmund S. Weiner (1989).

trajectory through the novel. The distinction I make is intended to clarify Jack's development and provide a more nuanced reading. So let me now qualify the claim I made at the end of the last paragraph, and say that Jack's brass-bound idealism is a philosophy of absolute responsibility, because it entails absolute complicity.

Of his idealism, Jack says:

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. They called that Idealism in my book I had when I was in college, and ever after I got hold of that principle Little Jackie was an Idealist. He was a brass-bound idealist. (44)

At this moment in the novel Jack invokes his brass-bound idealism as an excuse to ignore Willie, who is about to shoulder him with a weighty burden. This leads several critics to the conclusion that his philosophy is escapist—a means to bracket events that trouble him and deny their existence. Jack's narration is obviously sarcastic, however, since certainly he is aware of Willie's approaching footsteps. While Jack pokes fun at himself and his philosophy here, indicating he is aware on some level of its shortcomings, if we want to take the philosophy at all seriously, and I think we should, we need to bracket Jack's smart-aleck comments and look a little more deeply into what brass-bound idealism means for him as a personal philosophy. This means, among other things, going back to his acknowledged source: the book about idealism he studied in college.

When Jack was in college, the reigning American philosopher of idealism was Josiah Royce,¹⁰ a professor at Harvard, the school Jack would have attended had he obeyed his mother's wishes. Although Royce was younger than William James, his pragmatist counterpart at Harvard, philosophical idealism was still the dominant philosophical tradition in America, and Royce's version was

¹⁰See Douglas Anderson, "Idealism in American Thought," in *The Blackwell Guide to American Philosophy*, ed. Armen T. Marsoobian and John Ryder (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 28; and W. H. Werkmeister, *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America* (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), 133, who, writing only a few years prior to Warren, calls Royce "America's most outstanding representative of Absolute Idealism."

generally considered the culmination of many years of American thought in the objective idealism school stretching back to Jonathan Edwards' 1730 "Notes on the Mind."¹¹ Had he attended Harvard and learned Royce's idealism first-hand, Jack would likely not have formed his own brass-bound version, yet Jack's take is in many ways a direct translation of Royce's objective philosophy into a fragmented and modern secular world-view.¹² While Heilman suggests Jack's brass-bound idealism is a degraded version of Plato that "rationalizes away responsibility," and while Bohner agrees, suggesting that "it is less a philosophy than a strategy of retreat and withdrawal,"¹³ an examination of Royce's idealism reveals that Jack's philosophy is, despite his sarcasm, a quite sophisticated version of Royce. And surprisingly, contrary to these critics' interpretations, this philosophy is morally irresponsible precisely because it makes Jack *too* complicit, not because it absolves him of his complicity. Absolute responsibility is not the proper conclusion to Jack's Bildungsroman; it is, rather, its genesis. This problematic position comes from Jack's logical fragmentation of Royce's unitary mind of God into secular human terms—what was formerly the responsibility of God's will is now the full responsibility of the individual actor.

Royce's absolute idealism was founded on his observations regarding human error, spelled out in his essay, "The Possibility of Error," which appeared as a chapter in his 1885 book *The Religious Aspects of Philosophy*. In this essay, he proceeds from the *a priori* fact of human error in knowledge to demonstrate the existence of an absolute judge who is perfect in knowledge and knows the errors of individual humans, who have only imperfect

¹¹See Anderson, "Idealism," 22-34, for an overview of objective idealism in America.

¹²The other obvious choice for Jack's major philosophical influence would be George Berkeley. Jack's statement that "What you don't know don't hurt you, for it ain't real" recalls Berkeley's subjective idealism perhaps more so than Royce's objective idealism, yet a secularized Berkeley would indicate a pluralist solipsistic world-view in which all subjects would be, in effect, equal masters of their own particular domains of knowledge. Jack seems not to recognize that others have such rights to their own domains of knowledge in his brass-bound philosophy. A secularized Royce, however, gives a philosophy more akin to Jack's, where his own privileged and encompassing knowledge as a historical researcher and blackmailer mirrors the function of Royce's absolute knower.

¹³Heilman, "Melpomene," 27; Bohner, *Robert Penn Warren*, 71.

knowledge.¹⁴ Reality exists as a manifestation of the infinite mind, to which humans have only partial access.

The most vivid account of Jack's secularization and fragmentation of Royce's absolute idealism occurs on the day Willie's impeachment proceedings are to come to a vote. Jack looks out a high window onto the throngs of Willie's supporters with foreknowledge of the results, and imagines himself as "God-All-Mighty brooding on History" (213). In this scene Jack places himself in the position of Royce's infinite mind, with perfect knowledge of the truth, as well as knowledge of the errors of those with only partial knowledge:

To me they looked like History, because I knew the end of the event of which they were a part. Or thought I knew the end.

I knew, too, how the newspapers would regard that crowd of people, as soon as they knew the end of the event. They would regard that crowd as cause.... But no, it could be said, Willie Talos caused the event by corrupting and blackmailing the Legislature. But no, in turn it could be replied that Willie Talos merely gave the Legislature the opportunity to behave in the way appropriate to its nature and that MacMurfee...was truly responsible. But no, to that it could be replied that the responsibility belonged, after all, to that crowd of people, indirectly in so far as it had allowed MacMurfee to elect such men, and directly in so far as it had, despite MacMurfee, elected Willie Talos. But why had they elected Willie Talos? Because of a complex of forces which had made them what they were, or because Willie Talos could lean toward them with bulging eyes and right arm raised to Heaven?

One thing was certain: The sound of that chant hoarsely rising and falling was to be the cause of nothing, nothing at all. I stood in the window of the Capitol and hugged that knowledge like a precious and thorny secret, and did not think anything.
(216)

Portraying himself as the Roycian absolute, Jack has perfect knowledge of the entire chain of causality that leads to Willie's

¹⁴Josiah Royce, "The Possibility of Error," in *The Development of American Philosophy: A Book of Readings*, ed. Walter Muelder and Laurence Sears (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), 244-246.

redemption, including knowledge of the partial knowledge of others who err. His perfect knowledge does not, however, enable him to assign responsibility, since the chain of causality has no determinable end within his image of perfect knowledge. The people within Jack's sphere of knowledge have imperfect knowledge themselves, and so Jack excuses them of their complicity. Although they are causally responsible for the events, Jack logically defers their causal responsibility down the chain of causality. And, with the possible exception of Willie, who may or may not have responsibility for the actions of others, none have moral responsibility since they have no independent will of their own—only deferred will originating from somewhere down the causal chain or dispersed into an array of naturalistic forces. However, because Jack does not implicate himself in the causal chain, since he has no self-knowledge and is thus not within the sphere of his own knowledge, he ultimately bears absolute responsibility, since his complicity cannot be deferred down the chain.

Jack's secular Royceanism makes man the locus of all knowledge, and with that knowledge comes absolute responsibility. Since Jack's world is solely constituted by what he knows, and since he is effectively outside this world since he lacks substantial self-knowledge, his idealism ends up looking remarkably like naturalism, with the important addition of a deferred and complicit transcendental (Jack himself transcends) outside the proper purview of action. This seeming similarity between brass-bound idealism and the Great Twitch is what may give many critics the impression that his idealism is a means to escape responsibility, when in fact the important addition of Jack as a transcendent and complicit figure implicates him as the sole responsible actor.

The extreme ends of responsibility (absolute complicity and absolute naturalism) both lack moral weight, since they fail to acknowledge the envelope of responsibility. As the knower, Jack is complicit and thus responsible, but as the passive conduit of man's teleological drive to knowledge (13), his is an amoral responsibility. He serves Willie by uncovering and threatening to expose knowledge, and the "moral neutrality" of facts makes him exempt from moral responsibility, even though his privileged knowledge makes him absolutely complicit. Willie, the driving force behind

action, can defer moral responsibility down the causal chain, since he is merely the agent of the will of the common people, whose will is in turn formed by a complex of causal forces. The other possibility, that Willie is in fact driven by an authentic will of his own, is a question that Jack's idealism is unable to resolve, but it is one that makes no difference as to his own responsibility. While the questions of whether Willie's "bulging eyes and right arm raised toward Heaven" is a cause, and of whether Willie did, in fact, wink rather than twitch at Jack that time in the back room at Slade's, are gnawing ones for Jack, and show the cracks in his pretenses to knowledge, they make no difference as to his moral responsibility. Jack cannot defer his absolute complicity, since he is the ultimate knower; yet he can avoid the specifically moral aspect of his responsibility, since as the knower he is not himself subject to knowledge, and thus he is outside causality. Obviously, this is an unsustainable philosophy, and it comes to a head for Jack when he recognizes himself as the object of knowledge in the eyes of others. When others see him, the moral component of his complicity strikes him, and he is forced to flee—first towards his periods of Great Sleep, and later towards the Great Twitch.

2.

The first time Jack flees from moral responsibility is when he is unable to complete his Ph.D. dissertation in history on the story of Cass Mastern. He flees because ". . . he did not know Cass Mastern. He did not have to know Cass Mastern to get the degree; he only had to know the facts about Cass Mastern's world. But without knowing Cass Mastern, he could not put down the facts about Cass Mastern's world." This is the later Jack telling the story, and he is quick to add: "Not that Jack Burden said that to himself" (265), presumably because he lacks self-reflection and self-knowledge. Perhaps surprisingly, Jack the narrator is not himself quite sure if that is actually the case, however, for he also says, "Or perhaps he laid aside the journal of Cass Mastern not because he did not understand, but because he could understand and what he understood there was a reproach to him" (267).

If, in the first case, Jack quits the dissertation and enters the Great Sleep because of a lack of understanding, this would not be

in keeping with his brass-bound idealism, in which what you don't know does not exist and therefore certainly shouldn't bother you. The fact that he knows the existence of something which he cannot understand (Cass Mastern's character and motivations) implies cracks in his idealism—a realization that another being's knowledge has a very real bearing on his own life. This implication converges on the narrator's second interpretation—that Cass Mastern's story holds a reproach for him.

Cass's knowledge and self-understanding, when put in relation to Jack's own, holds Jack to be deficient and incomplete. This comparison is not part of Jack's unsustainable brand of egocentric secular idealism, but it does represent an unavoidable confrontation with the other that the logical consequences of his philosophy entail. In Jack's secular idealism, in which a Roycean God's knowledge is no longer the arbitrator of truth and error, the individual's realm of knowledge is the bounds of his own moral universe. If this realm of knowledge does not include the self (as in Jack's case), then the self is complicit in its knowledge, but not morally responsible as the object of that knowledge. When the other's knowledge is considered, however, the self becomes an object of knowledge when seen through the other's eyes, and the self becomes ethically responsible to the other. This is the crushing confrontation Cass Mastern represents for Jack.

When Jack spends his time with Cass Mastern, he either cannot penetrate Cass's realm of knowledge, in which case he acknowledges that the other has importance for his own sense of self by quitting the project for lack of this knowledge, or he can penetrate Cass Mastern's world, in which case Cass's story places Jack as an object of moral scrutiny. In either case, the Cass Mastern story demonstrates for Jack the intersubjective constitution of morality—that self and other are mutually responsible to each other. This intersubjective morality means that, on the one hand, Jack's secular idealism has become a relativistic one in which Jack as a replacement for God is no longer an ultimate arbitrator but must instead negotiate with others, but it also opens up, on the other hand, the possibility of a morally responsible self previously unavailable to Jack. Such a morally responsible self becomes so by recognizing the *limits* of its responsibility—it is no longer

absolutely complicit with and responsible for an externalized sphere of knowledge, but must now instead defer to others, and especially to the others' judgments of the self. The morally responsible self only comes to know itself through proxy—by considering and knowing the other, and seeing through the other's eyes. So how, exactly, does the story of Cass Mastern confront Jack with this insight, and why does he recoil from it?

3.

Jack describes his first encounter with Cass Mastern curiously: “[Cass] was the pair of dark, wide-set, deep eyes which burned out of the photograph, through the dinginess and dust and across more than fifty years.” He then emphasizes the point: “The eyes, which were Cass Mastern, stared out . . .” (228). In case we missed it, he says again, two paragraphs later, “. . . everything in the picture in contrast with the dark, burning eyes, seemed accidental” (229). Cass does not just possess extraordinary eyes; he is, from Jack's perspective, the eyes themselves: for Jack, the image of Cass Mastern is his eyes. Warren has a very specific use of the term “image” in relation to history, and since this encounter of Jack's is an encounter with an image from history, Warren's terminology bears some explication.

In his essay “Knowledge and the Image of Man,” Warren traces the individual's achievement of personal identity and self knowledge through the mediation of “images”:

Knowledge gives [man] his identity because it gives him the image of himself. And the image of himself necessarily has a foreground and a background, for man is in the world not as a billiard ball placed on a table, not even as a ship on the ocean with location determinable by latitude and longitude. He is, rather, in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms, his identity. It affirms it, for out of a progressive understanding of this interpenetration, this texture of relations, man creates new perspectives, discovers new values—that is, a new self—and so the identity is a continually emerging, an unfolding, a self-affirming and, we hope, a self-corrective creation.¹⁵

Warren's vision of identity rests on the individual's self conception as a differentiated being within a flux of "relations" and "values" that evolves through time by re-appraising its relation to this environment. These images can be created through both literature and the arts (which Warren refers to as "poetry" in the inclusive sense) as well as through the study of history.

Warren conceives literary and artistic form "giv[ing] man an image of himself...insofar as it gives the image of experience being brought to order and harmony.... [It is] a myth of order, or fulfillment, an affirmation that our being may move in its totality toward meaning."¹⁶ The study of history serves much the same function, as he explains in "The Use of the Past." In his description of historical knowledge, there is very little to distinguish the forms and functions of literature from those of historiography:

There is no absolute, positive past available to us, no matter how rigorously we strive to determine it—as strive we must. Inevitably, the past, so far as we know it, is an inference, a creation, and this, without being paradoxical, can be said to be its chief value for us. In creating the image of the past, we create ourselves, and without that task of creating the past we might be said scarcely to exist.¹⁷

For Warren the task of reconstructing the past is a task of creating the past anew as an image for use in the present. This creative process blurs the boundaries of fiction and history, and could rightly be described, à la Hayden White, as the "emplotment" of historical fact. The facts of history, which Jack tells us are readily accessible to him, need to be absorbed into a literary form, which form gives those in the present an image with which to come to self-knowledge and identity. Indeed, it seems as though Warren anticipates many aspects of Hayden White's thinking when he insists on referring to the Civil War as a "dramatization," a "tragedy," and a "history lived

¹⁵Robert Penn Warren, "Knowledge and the Image of Man," in *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Lewis Longley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 241.

¹⁶Warren, "Knowledge," 246.

¹⁷Robert Penn Warren, "The Use of the Past," in *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989), 51.

in the national imagination.”¹⁸ For Warren, historiography is “experience brought to order” through literary and imaginative form, which results in a cohesive image of the past. Although Hayden White uses different terms, the insight is the same:

Histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of *mere* chronicles; and stories in turn are made out of chronicles by an operation...called “emplotment.” And by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures.... Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic—to use Frye’s categories—depends upon the historian’s decision to *configure* them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another.¹⁹

What White adds to our understanding of Warren’s novel is an explicit enunciation of the transformation from history as “value-neutral” or, to use Jack’s terms, “the moral neutrality of History” (548), to knowledge with moral weight. This transformation is achieved by “encoding” “facts” within mythic “plot structures” that enable them to be understood. This transformation is exactly what is lacking when Jack says of his Cass Mastern research that “It had not been successful, because in the midst of the process I tried to discover the truth and not the facts. Then, when the truth was not to be discovered, or discovered could not be understood by me, I could not bear to live with the cold-eyed reproach of the facts” (224).

The cold eyes of the facts contrast nicely with Cass’s own “burning eyes,” and they both hold for Jack a “reproach.” The cold eyes of fact reproach Jack because he cannot make sense of the facts—he cannot “encode” the facts into a literary form that gives him an image or understanding of Cass. At the same time, however, we are given the possibility that perhaps Jack did in fact understand Cass, in which case the reproach comes from the image of Cass he

¹⁸Warren, *Legacy*, 107, 103, 4.

¹⁹Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 1714-1715.

constructs. This image consists entirely of his burning eyes, to which all other features are appended but non-essential. These eyes represent knowledge for Jack, and they hold a reproach because through his research Jack caught a glimpse of the knowledge Cass learned, and he began to see himself in Cass's eyes. He saw himself as an object of knowledge rather than as the knower, which threatened his brass-bound world-view and forced him to flee into his Great Sleep.

The crisis Jack confronts here is parallel to the crisis Cass confronts when he receives Annabelle Trice's reproach accusing him of responsibility for his dead friend. This encounter precipitates Cass's realization that "... all had come from my single act of sin and perfidy... 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'" (251-52). Jack later learns this same lesson in the form of his spider web metaphor, and it is interesting here that, although Cass explicitly states in a journal entry that "It is the human defect—to try to know oneself by the self of another. One can only know oneself in God and in His great eye" (245), this insight comes as a direct result of Annabelle's penetrating insight into his responsibility. Annabelle's insight, in turn, was formed by the eyes of another as well—the slave Phebe, who discovers her secret. Annabelle and Cass do not come to self-knowledge through transcendental revelation, but rather through the images of themselves as seen in the eyes of others. Just as Jack's idealism translates the eye of God to the eye of the individual, the story of Cass Mastern is the story of people coming to self-knowledge through the eyes of fellow humans. Annabelle and Cass were unaffected by their image in the eyes of God for an entire year while they continued their affair. They only come to know the truth of their deeds, and the weight of their burden, when they can see through the eyes of others.

Duncan too, we can assume, saw himself through the eyes of Annabelle when he discovered her secret affair, and this affair certainly held for him a reproach. True to Jack's teleology ("The end of man is knowledge, but...he can't know whether knowledge will kill him or save him" [13]), Duncan is killed by his knowledge.

Annabelle likewise is transformed, becoming all but dead—“Her lips were cold . . .,” and she appeared “cut off, remote, and vague in manner, like a somnambulist or a person drugged” (246, 249). Cass is saved, however, for he “looked back and wrestled to know the truth” (251) rather than letting the truth run him over. His salvation eventually comes only after years of struggle to define for himself the envelope of his responsibility.

To accept full responsibility would be to let the truth kill him, as it did for Duncan in actuality and for Annabelle spiritually. To deny responsibility would be to flee, as Jack has a habit of doing. Instead, Cass takes the middle path and continues to live his life, seeking to determine for himself as a living individual through history the reach of his brush with the determinist spider web. To discover this fact is to accept moral responsibility because it defines the scope of the will in the chain of causality. If the will is all, not only will the weight of responsibility kill the individual, the totality of the self’s will logically denies the other’s will, and so it has no ethics of responsibility to the other.²⁰ Responsibility becomes directed entirely towards the self, because the self’s will is all that is. If the will has limits in its responsibility, however, it must negotiate with the other’s will and thus must define for itself an ethics of responsibility grounded in intersubjective morality. Because the envelope of will is the inverse envelope of fate, Cass’s struggle with the role of the will in the chain of causality takes the form of an investigation into the degree of evitability or inevitability in the course of historical events.

²⁰ I should note here that while I draw an implicit parallel between Duncan and Annabelle’s acceptance of full responsibility and Jack’s absolutely complicit Roycean eye, there are important differences. Duncan and Annabelle could not foresee the consequences at the time of their actions, and so although they had causal responsibility, they were not complicit with the course of events, since they did not knowingly permit things to go awry. Jack has in some ways the opposite position: he assumes full knowledge of the course of events, yet denies his causal responsibility by assuming a teleological position that “the truth will out,” regardless of his involvement. Neither of these forms of responsibility, neither the causal nor the complicit variety, by themselves constitute what I term a specifically moral responsibility, which requires a recognition of the *limits* of individual agency in order to enable an ethics of responsibility to the other.

4.

Warren frames the question of evitability and inevitability in *The Legacy of the Civil War* in terms of what he calls the South's "Great Alibi" and the North's "Treasury of Virtue." The South's Great Alibi is the universal explanation it gives for all the social ills of its post-war society. Seeing itself as a victim of the North's aggression, the South has an inevitable, mechanistic view of history, which absolves it of responsibility and forestalls any meaningful confrontation with its problems "at either a practical or an ethical level": "The whole process of the Great Alibi resembles the neurotic automatism. The old trauma was so great that reality even now cannot be faced. The automatic repetition short-circuits clear perception and honest thinking.... We all seem to be doomed to reÎnact, in painful automatism, the errors of our common past."²¹ The South uses the Great Alibi, as Jack uses the Great Twitch, to absolve itself of moral responsibility by deferring it down the chain of causality, which implicitly invokes a naturalistic world-view in which neither will nor transcendence has any place.

If the South uses a mechanistic vision to absolve itself of responsibility, the North instead asserts a triumph of the will by invoking their Treasury of Virtue. Their purely evitable view sees the war as "a consciously undertaken crusade"²² of right against wrong, which blinds them to their own ambivalent history, and excuses them for their post-war excesses. If the South is trapped in a mechanistic history, the North severs itself from history.

Contradicting each side's implicit logic, however, Warren notes that Southerners generally embrace an evitable view of the war, whereas Northerners tend to see it as inevitable. The Southern evitable view helps relieve their responsibility by sharing it with the North: "If the War could have been avoided, it is an easy step, then, to show how both sides participated in the responsibility.... [The Southerner] would certainly enjoy the inestimable privilege of being able to call the kettle black." The Northern inevitable view likewise excuses their own responsibility: "... the evil of the

²¹Warren, *Legacy*, 58-59.

²²Warren, *Legacy*, 64.

South made the civil War *morally* inevitable, and the North was merely the bright surgical instrument in the hand of God, or History.”²³

In arguing that each side’s world-view was formed only to avoid moral responsibility, Warren makes a strong case for the rejection of any whole-hearted embrace of either pure inevitability or pure evitability. Instead, he advises historians to search for “the limits of responsibility in experience,” which involves constant revision and reexamination of the past. The North and the South both alternately accept and reject absolutist visions of historic inevitability, just as Jack alternates between his “God-All-Mighty” idealism and his theory of the Great Twitch. Willie too shows this oscillation between absolutes when he, on the one hand, asserts with grim determinism the inevitability of human failures (“There is always something”), while on the other hand he forges a political powerhouse through the shear force of his enormous will. Cass Mastern’s story is for Jack a model (or “image”) of a successful negotiation between the extremes of this “terrible division of their age” (606). He discovers through his experiences as a slaveholder and Confederate soldier the limits of his responsibility—the degree to which he can will change, and the degree to which he is subject to mechanistic history.

When Cass first embarks on his mission to find Phebe, the wronged slave whom Annabelle sold down the river after Phebe’s eyes reproached her for her responsibility for Duncan’s death, he is inclined to accept full responsibility for the actions he set in motion. Annabelle’s reproach struck a chord deep within him and he feels it his obligation to right all the wrongs he has caused. Like Duncan and Annabelle, this burden of total responsibility puts him in a morbid mindset, as evinced soon after his fight at the slave market, when he describes his “will towards darkness” during his “delirium between life and death” following his infection (257). However, just like his discovery that he does not have the agency to recover Phebe—that his will is not strong enough and that she has been carried off down the river by the historico-sociological forces of

²³Warren, *Legacy*, 97-98.

the time (Warren is careful to insert the specific historical figure Lewis Robards as the slave trader whose business is responsible for Phebe's presumably tragic fate)—his “constitution was stronger than his will” (257). His body's constitution, which represents the purely mechanical and deterministic physical properties of his self, intervenes to place a limit on the agency of his will towards death.

After returning to Mississippi, again he is forced to realize the limits of his will when, “strangely enough, [he] prospered greatly, almost as though against his will” (257). Within this specific historical matrix of the ante-bellum South, he does have some control over his will, and he is able to accept some responsibility, but the historical forces that surround him constantly foreground the limits of this responsibility. He is able to set his slaves free after paying off his debts, but he also realizes that this gesture is largely a selfish response to his guilt that makes no real difference in the face of the “strong currents” of history:

“I saw the boat head out into the channel, and watched the wheels churn against the strong current, and my spirit was troubled. I knew that the negroes were passing from one misery to another, and that the hopes they now carried would be blighted.... I had not flattered myself that I had done anything for them. What I had done I had done for myself, to relieve my spirit of a burden, the burden of their misery and their eyes upon me.”(258-259)

Cass himself doesn't fail to note the irony of his actions. While he condemned Annabelle for selling Phebe down the river because of the reproach her eyes held, Cass likewise “freed [his slaves] into misery” because he sees himself in their eyes (259). He realizes his moral responsibility to the slaves by recognizing the intersubjective constitution of morality, but he also recognizes the limits of this responsibility imposed by his historical situation, and the limits of his will in affecting meaningful change. He finds a means of negotiating this problematic position by refusing to comply with the morally objectionable practices so that “. . . there is my example. If it is good, it is not lost” (258).

Meanwhile, he continues to acknowledge his implication in the historical matrix. He refuses to step outside history by moving

North when his brother suggests it, because “I belong here” (258). This negotiation between responsibility and non-responsibility, agency and ineffectiveness, and evitability and inevitability is Cass’s insight, his discovery of “the limits of responsibility in experience.” He puts this lesson into practice through his curious participation in the Civil War as a Confederate soldier:

“I must march with these men who march,” he wrote in the journal, “for they are my people and I must partake with them of all bitterness, and that more fully. But I cannot take the life of another man. How can I who have taken the life of my friend, take the life of an enemy, for I have used up my right to blood?” So Cass marched away to war, carrying the musket which was, for him, but a meaningless burden. (263)

Cass “marched...in his guilt,” in the “guilt of our dear Land, and in the common guilt of man” (231). Cass recognizes that responsibility is shared between himself and others and history. There are limits to responsibility, but that doesn’t absolve him of guilt, but rather gives it moral and ethical weight by forcing him to maintain historical situated-ness and work with others to negotiate the envelope of responsibility. He cannot remove himself from his situation through suicide or flight, as Duncan and Annabelle do, because he does not bear absolute responsibility, and so removing himself will not absolve him of his guilt. He will only have “rest” and “salvation” (231) by bearing the burden of the inevitable guilt of the South and History, and by redressing in part the burden of his personal evitable guilt through the example of a willful refusal to comply with the specifics of his personal participation in the “common guilt of man.” Even though his responsibility is limited, his burden encompasses both personal and common guilt. His lesson is to acknowledge the limits of the will and personal responsibility, while accepting the burden of History. This is the lesson Jack comes to know as the “awful responsibility of Time” (609).

5.

Beekman Cottrell notes the centrality of the Cass Mastern story as “the source of Jack’s salvation,” a story that “radiates through *All the King’s Men*.” Although Cottrell makes the same mistake as other critics when he assumes that the lesson it teaches Jack is the acceptance of “full responsibility,” his emphasis on the importance of the Cass Mastern story is correct, as it supplies the central metaphor of the spider-web by which Jack comes to understand the limits of responsibility.²⁴

The lives of Cass, Duncan, and Annabelle are all thrown into crisis when they are each at different times confronted with the reproaching eyes of the other, and they then glimpse a view of themselves through these eyes. Jack’s major crisis originates in a similar confrontational reproach, but unlike the historical individuals he reads about, he has not learned to see through the other’s eyes. He hears the reproach, but he cannot fully integrate its lessons because he maintains a brass-bound worldview (although he doesn’t yet have the vocabulary to enunciate it) in which the scope of his own vision defines the bounds of what is real. A reproach from the eyes of another is to him puzzling and mysterious, and can even precipitate a personal crisis, yet it is not, for him, real. Thus as Jack progresses through life, he cannot integrate this central reproach of the past into his life through time, and he is unable to negotiate the responsibility this reproach entails.

The reproach Jack encounters is not often noted by critics, but I contend it is the central fact of Jack’s problematic situation, and, as in the story of Cass Mastern, it occurs on the level of the personal and individual and radiates out through the public and the historical. The reproach occurs during Jack and Anne’s summer together when she brings up “the subject of my future,” the subject “on which I had never cared to dwell” (397). The reproach that Anne holds for Jack consists of noting his refusal to engage his will to affect meaningful change in the course of events through time. He has no notion of how to take action to form a future for himself, because he lacks an “image,” to use Warren’s terms, to guide him. Instead,

²⁴Cottrell, “Cass Mastern,” 116, 122.

his *modus operandi* of that summer is remarkably similar to his “God-All-Mighty brooding on History” position of his later brass-bound idealism. He remains passively complicit with the course of events through time in his realm of complete personal knowledge, thus maintaining absolute complicity while rejecting the agency of his will in affecting change. He says of the rest of the summer following the reproach:

I fell back into the full flood of the summer, into the full tide of feeling in which we drifted in a kind of breathless ease.... It was drifting, all right, but not drifting in any nasty pejorative sense.... No, it was a fine, conscious surrender which was a participation in and a willing of the flood itself, and not a surrender at all but an affirmation and all that, like the surrender of the mystic to God which isn't a surrendering to God any more than it is a creating of God, for if he loves God he has willed the being of God. Well, in my very surrender I willed and mastered that great current in which I drifted, and over which the days and nights flickered, and in which I didn't have to lift a hand to hurry myself, for the current knew its own pace and own time, and would take me with it. (399)

Jack wills the surrender of his own will's agency, and thus assumes a God-like stance in which he imagines a total mastery over the course of events, while still surrendering to the particular shape those events take. This is much like his later role as the blackmailer whose knowledge gives him control over the course of history, but who himself refuses to assume agency of the will in shaping its outcome.

When, at the end of summer, Jack and Anne are alone in the bedroom together, Jack has the chance to assert his will in shaping events but again refuses, surrendering to the determinism implicit in the flow of events through the course of the summer. He does not touch Anne, since he places faith in the flow of time to accomplish the consummation of their love, thinking his own will superfluous. When Jack undresses Anne, he shows her as dehumanized and mechanistic. Their impending love-making is framed as the end of a purely mechanistic view of time in which this moment is predetermined as the teleological outcome of the

summer, as if a conventional script of summer romance were about to be completed. Jack buys into the script and believes he needs merely to drift along with the course of events, not realizing that his willful touch is required to complete the act.

His even greater mistake, however, is to assign moral motivations to his unwillingness to act. He claims that to make love would not be “right,” and he later calls his failure to act as his having in fact “acted out of nobility” (412, 414). Jack orients his moral compass here around his belief in inevitability—to assert his will in the course of events would have been morally wrong. His passive complicity with the course of events must be preserved, even though he recognizes that things would have been different had he “seize[d] her hand” or “once touched her in the process of undressing her” (413). The same inner compulsion towards passivity that makes Jack unable to imagine himself as a future self makes him unable to touch Anne. Her reproach to him fell on deaf ears, and now he adjusts his moral compass in order to justify his lack of action.

While recalling these events during his drive out west, Jack explicitly identifies this moment as the moment analogous to Cass Mastern’s affair with Annabelle: “. . . my nobility (or whatever it was) had had in my world almost as dire a consequence as Cass Mastern’s sin had had in his” (415). The difference, however, is that while Cass learned from his reproach and marched through time with knowledge of the envelope of his responsibility, accepting the burden of the inevitable while changing for good the evitable, Jack never learns the lesson of Anne’s reproach. He marches through time occupying the absolutes of responsibility: he maintains absolute complicity by making himself into “God-All Mighty brooding on History” while rejecting moral responsibility by claiming that “nobility” resides in resigning oneself to the inevitability of events. After his trip West, during which he broods on his personal history with Anne, he drops all notions of morality and responsibility by submitting to the logic of the Great Twitch, his naturalistic determinist philosophy. The Great Twitch makes Jack’s sphere of knowledge irrelevant, and so even his complicity with events is dissolved. Jack only comes to understand Anne’s reproach and the

reproach of Cass Mastern's story when he encounters his third and final reproach, one that he is now ready to learn from.

6.

Just like Anne's, whose initial reproach to Jack "had seen right through me, like a piece of glass" (397), the reproach Sadie gives, the one that finally causes his transformation, "touched the sore place and made it throb. It throbbed the worse because I knew that it wasn't a secret sore place. Sadie had known about it. She had seen through me. She had read me like a book" (579). Sadie's reproach was to call him an "Eagle Scout" for his plans to thwart Duffy's reelection campaign. Sadie's insight was that Jack's fury at Duffy's responsibility for Adam and Willie's death was the result of his performance of a determined scripted role. Just as his earlier failure with Anne was the result of performing a summer romance script that negated personal agency, Jack's reason for going after Duffy was that "Duffy was the villain and I was the avenging hero" (579). This performance would have had the effect of negating his own personal responsibility for Duffy's downfall or death at the hands of Sugar Boy by deferring responsibility to a scripted social moral code of revenge. Sadie's reproach, however, made Jack realize that he and Duffy "were bound together forever and I could never hate him without hating myself or love myself without loving him," since they were both bound together as subjects of the march of history—a "monstrous conspiracy whose meaning I could not fathom" (580). Had Jack fulfilled the script he gave to those events, he would have implicated himself in another script as the villain and agent of Duffy's death. By refusing to fulfill his role, Jack asserts agency in defiance of the deterministic march of history, while also asserting solidarity with his fellow marchers as mutual subjects of the "monstrous conspiracy" and bearers of its burden. This negotiation between the evitable and inevitable represents Jack's successful personal definition of the envelope of responsibility, and it is what enables him to envision himself in a future in which, together with Anne, ". . . we shall go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of time" (609).