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The Editing of Jack Burden

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Robert Penn Warren published his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *All the King's Men* in 1946. The work was not sent to the press until Lambert Davis had heavily edited it; in fact, Davis had been editing sentences and whole chapters since Warren's first submission in 1943. In 2001, Noel Polk of the University of Southern Mississippi released the restored edition of Warren's text.¹ Polk explains that this restored edition corrects the mistakes of the original editors who had altered Warren's novel: "Thus it seems proper to offer it in a newly-edited text which, in so far as it can be reconstructed from the original documents, is closer, in those hundreds of particulars, to what Warren wrote than the novel we have read this half century" (632, 2001).

The 2001 text not only brings into question the role that an editor plays in the publication process, but it also presents a dilemma for students of literature: which of the texts is better? Whether or not it is possible to judge art in terms of better or worse is an exercise that has been in vogue among intellectuals since before Socrates and Ion, but this exercise will not be carried on here. Instead, a much more elementary discussion will take place, one that recognizes that there are now two texts of *All the King's Men* that tell roughly the same story and tell it by means of Jack Burden. Jack of the 1946 text, however, differs greatly from Jack of the 2001 edition. Through a comparison of these differences, some of which can be credited to Lambert Davis and Harcourt, the originally published Jack Burden emerges as the better narrator, and the 1946 *All the King's Men* is the better for it.

¹Throughout this paper, "restored" will be used to describe the text as it existed prior to Lambert Davis and the Harcourt editors' alterations, and the two texts, 1946 and 2001, will be cited parenthetically by page number, followed by year: Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (1946; Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2005); Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*, Restored Edition, ed. Noel Polk (San Diego: Harcourt, 2001).

Before it is possible to establish which Jack is the better narrator, it is first necessary to define what Jack is and how who he is when he tells the story affects the text. Jack is telling his story *ex post facto*; more importantly, he is telling a narrative that involves him after he has had “a good while” to reflect over all of the details (75, 1946). Many of the individuals in Jack’s story are dead, he has married the most significant female character, and he has changed professions. Accordingly, while Jack may be able to remember the emotions that correlated with the events of the story, he has developed beyond them. Throughout the story, Jack undergoes several epiphanies that change his outlook on life, and he discovers several facts that directly impact his existence. It is imperative to keep in mind that while Jack is a significant participant in *All the King’s Men*, he is also removed by both time and circumstance from its events. This fact manifests itself differently in the two different versions, and it is through these differences that it is possible to determine who the better narrator is.

In her review of the 2001 edition, Joyce Carol Oates writes that “we are supposed to trust Jack Burden as a man of conscience.”² Throughout the novel, Jack earns the reader’s trust by narrating a complicated story that reveals his earlier sins with the humble wisdom of a man who has since repented. From the very first phrase of the 1946 text, Jack establishes himself as the reader’s guide: “To get there you follow Highway 58” (1, 1946). A journey is going to take place, and in the first seven words, Jack demonstrates he knows the way and is willing to share his knowledge with the reader. Furthermore, the phrase seems to flow from an existing conversation. Someone wants to know how to get to somewhere, and Jack knows how. Conversely, the restored Jack begins emphatically, “You follow Highway 58” (1, 2001). With this implicit command, Jack announces himself as the text’s authority figure. We don’t know why we are following Highway 58, but Jack said to do it. It is not typically in the narrator’s best interest to captivate his audience by commanding them. The first sentence sets the tone

²Joyce Carol Oates, “‘All the King’s Men’—A Case of Misreading?” *New York Review of Books* March 28, 2002, 43.

and mood for the entire work, and the 2001 text has a definite edge and abrasiveness that Jack has outgrown in the 1946 text.

Jack has grown in other ways, too. Looking back over an erotic scene with Anne Stanton, the 1946 Jack does not reinvent his sexual frustrations and hesitations to the extent that the 2001 Jack does. Granted, both texts reveal Jack's obvious lust for Anne: "I didn't know why I didn't reach over. I kept assuring myself that I wasn't timid, wasn't afraid, I said to myself, hell, she was just a kid, what the hell was I hanging back for, all she could do would be to get sore and I could stop if she got sore" (413, 1946; 383, 2001). His frustrations become vulgar in the Restored Edition, though, in two sentences struck through in the typescript: "To hell with Adam, I told myself, did he think he could put lead seals on his sister's drawers. Hell, somebody had probably hosed her already" (384, 2001). Jack may have in fact felt this way about Anne, but keeping in mind that Jack marries Anne before he tells his story, it is hard to imagine that he would express his feelings about his wife's adolescent sexuality with such a contemptuous vulgarity. Because the 1946 text remains true to the facts of Jack's life, both during the events of the story and the events that had taken place prior to his writing, and because it realizes Jack's current relationship with Anne, it shows Jack has outgrown his adolescent, hormonal outbursts, thus making him the better narrator. Since these feelings are implied by the text in the 1946 edition and subsequently inferred by any adult reader, Jack is understood to be both a faithful narrator and an emotionally developed adult who has outgrown his teenage tendencies while still being able to communicate his adolescent feelings.

In his "Editorial Afterward," Polk expresses his thought that "The editors unfortunately deleted the struck-through sentences [in the typescript], apparently in the name of the era's 'taste'" (639, 2001). He goes on to say that "[...]this passage, perhaps more than any in the book, reveals [about Jack] his soul's bitterness about his legacy from Willie Talos³ and Burden's Landing, and makes his final sentence about the awful responsibility of time resonate quite

³Talos is Willie Stark's "restored" surname.

differently than it does in the 1946 text” (639-640, 2001). If this is the case and Polk is correct, then Jack told his story as an expression of his bitterness and despair. However, the ending confirms that Jack has overcome the bitterness of his past and his wife’s past. Just as Anne offers her house as a Children’s Home to “comfort the ghost [of Adam] and send it on its way so that it would trouble the living no longer,” so Jack tells his story as an expression of his contentment and as completion of the satisfaction that he was denied by Miss Littlepaugh’s death (660-661, 1946). The ending does not reflect Jack’s bitterness, resentment, and anger because Jack, like Dante, knows and believes “*Mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde.*”⁴

Beyond maintaining his emotional maturity, Jack also has a better grasp of his role as a narrator in the 1946 text. Before Jack begins the retelling of the final sequence of events that led to Willie and Adam’s death in the 2001 text, he pauses for an aside. He does not foreshadow the events to come, nor does he clarify his feelings at the time, but he takes a moment to express his narrative dilemma:

[...]The fact of my ignorance during the course of the events of the day creates a peculiar problem in narrative. Things as they came to me that day were only, or almost only, appearances, for I lacked knowledge of their logic. But if I narrate them in terms of the logic later perceived, that is, in terms of the principle in which inheres their reality, something is wrong, too. For in art as in life there is a sin against Appearance as well as against Reality. And there are no descending circles and only one flame in Hell. But it is a beauty.

I shall keep distinct what I knew that day, and what I came subsequently to know. (535, 2001)

This aside in the 2001 text shows that Jack has either forgotten the assumed role of a narrator or never knew it. Every reader trusts the narrator to maintain constantly the distinction between what happened and what has since happened. Aside from ironical purposes, there should be no confusion of the two. Jack

⁴The novel’s head note: “As long as hope hath still a speck of green” –*The Divine Comedy*, Purgatory, III.

communicates that he does, in fact, know the role of the narrator, immediately before the aside in the 2001 text, making the actual aside superfluous:

As I experienced that day, there was at first an impression of the logic of the events, caught flickeringly at moments, but as they massed to the conclusion I was able to grasp, at the time, only the slightest hints as to the pattern that was taking shape. This lack of logic, the sense of people and events driven by impulses which I was not able to define, gave the whole occasion the sense of a dreamlike unreality. It was only after the conclusion, after everything was over, that the sense of reality returned, long after, in fact, when I had been able to gather the pieces of the puzzle up and put them together to see the pattern. (534, 2001)⁵

Jack makes his point in this paragraph, and the aside is merely repetitious and burdensome. He is able to piece together the events of black Monday only after they have occurred. Likewise, it can be assumed, in accordance with the manner of storytelling up to this point, that Jack will reveal information only as it becomes necessary, not only to remain faithful to the story line, but also to keep his readers in suspense. Again, the aside is redundant, and Jack realizes this in the 1946 text, consequently leaving it out of his retelling. Thus, not only is he more emotionally and socially mature, but his literary maturity also makes him a better narrator.

Before continuing, let us pause to differentiate again between the two Jacks and their creators. The 1946 Jack is the cooperative creation of Lambert Davis and Robert Penn Warren, while the 2001 Jack is the original creation of Robert Penn Warren as genetically restored by Noel Polk. Looking again at the aside and its role not only in the text but also in describing Jack, Davis seemed to realize that it is not needed in the text. By examining the novel as a whole and the preceding paragraph specifically, Davis sees that the Jack of the manuscript has the potential to be a great narrator. Through his suggestions and edits, Davis turns Jack's potential into a reality. Polk, on the other hand, removes Davis's work and consequently

⁵This is identical to how it reads in the 1946 edition (577-578, 1946).

restores Jack to the original, albeit constipated narrator who suffers from uncertainty and unresolved anger. Polk is mistaken if he thinks that by removing the original editorial changes, he is thereby offering “a novel superior to, more interesting and complex than, the novel published in 1946” (632, 2001). He has forgotten that by removing Davis’s changes to *All the King’s Men*, he, in fact, becomes the editor and is responsible for the additional complexities that burden the text and undercut the authority of the novel’s central character. “More complex” does not necessarily mean better.

In order to approach the 1946 edition with intellectual honesty, readers must keep in mind that while *All the King’s Men* is the work of Robert Penn Warren, it also reflects the intervention of Lambert Davis. Every writer struggles to tell his or her story with clarity and precision while maintaining a captivating style, but unfortunately, what is clear to the author may be vague to the reader—or, ironically, vice versa. This is particularly evident in Jack’s narrative aside in the Restored Edition. In the aside, Warren goes overboard: he clarifies the already obvious, so Davis astutely and correctly removes the aside. Obviously, Warren trusted the alterations that Davis suggested and believed that they did not alter the story that he wanted to tell. Had he in fact preferred his manuscript, he could have taken his work elsewhere.

All the King’s Men, whether it is the 1946 or the 2001 version, is an undeniable masterpiece. It is a masterpiece because of the story it tells and of the deeper meanings embodied and dramatized in that story. This essay has focused on one aspect that separates the two texts, and while Polk may succeed in defending his restoration using other areas of the text, he will be hard-pressed to overcome the deficit that is established by the 2001 version’s weaker narrator. The burden of the story rests solely on Jack Burden; it is his responsibility, as the historian, to record the events for posterity. Therefore, the better he is at telling the story, the better the story will be. Lambert Davis can be thanked for some of the alterations that add to the overall success of *All the King’s Men*, but his work does not diminish Warren’s achievement, any more than pruning rose bushes diminishes God’s creation.