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*Time and Space Connect the World
in Robert Penn Warren's
All the King's Men*

AMY K. LAVENDER

Robert Penn Warren published ten novels in his lifetime and he incorporated several central recurring themes into them all. Most contain Warren's theme of interconnectedness, his theme of the "spider web" that reveals the inherent connection that exists between all things. In *All the King's Men*, Warren delivers this theme of interconnectedness in a new way: by taking his connections beyond the physical realm into the space of time. *All the King's Men* is a novel of many stories and how they all connect in an intricate "spider web" of time. However, Warren treats time as a spatial entity and a physical object in *All the King's Men* to reveal the interconnectedness of the stories, events, and people in the novel, an interconnectedness that finally transcends both time and space.

In the first few pages of *All the King's Men*, Warren begins to prepare the reader for perceiving time in a new way. Very early in the novel, time becomes something physical, something movable, or even a place someone can go. When Jack Burden goes with the Starks to Willie's old homestead, Jack comments that they were all sitting in the midst of "the slow swell of Time which had fed into [the] room, day by day since long back."¹ Here, time is a physical entity that has filled the parlor of the Stark home to deposit its weight, the weight of years, into the room. This "swell of Time" that Jack notices reveals its function in one of the following scenes. Willie, Jack, and the rest of the photo crew go up to Willie's old room, the room he grew up in. The room is just as Willie had left it, complete with "third readers and geographies and algebras." But

¹Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1974), 25; hereafter, cited parenthetically by page number in the text. A locus classicus in Warren of time as a dimension of space appears in the short story "Blackberry Winter," in the famous passage near the beginning in which time is described as "a kind of climate." However, "Blackberry Winter" was written after *All the King's Men*, and the passage in question describes time as perceived by a nine-year-old boy.

Jack, as an observer of the scene, does not just see artifacts from the past, he sees the past layered over the existing present. Willie says, "Jesus, put the old white thunder-mug under the bed and it'll look just like home"(27). However, it is home even though the "only prop missing" is this chamber pot. Willie is there and his presence completes the scene and the transportation into the past. Jack does not see his boss before him anymore. Instead he sees "a kid with a pudgy face and freckles on his face and sandy hair falling down on his forehead, bending down at the table by a coal-oil lamp"(28). Here we see the past and the future touching and overlapping one another in Jack Burden's imagination through the use of space. Jack sees the grown Willie Stark standing in front of him, but the space he is standing in transports him into the past. His room belongs in both the present and the past. Thus, Jack is able to place the current surroundings of the room in the past and envision what the same room looked like when Willie was a boy. The rest of the house may have the weight of time pressed upon it, but Willie's old room has the ability to reveal the past that is pressing its weight upon the house. Jack is instrumental in connecting past and present in the spaces he occupies and in helping the characters in *All the King's Men* become "whole people in time, which comprehends past, present and future."² We see the beginning of the connection of time through space as Jack connects the young and old Willie Stark by reconstructing the past in Willie's old room.

Jack does not just connect the past and present, though; he travels into them as well. While investigating his ancestor, Cass Mastern, Jack travels to Annabelle Trice's house in order to see the place where she and Cass Mastern met. He wants to inspect the remnants of history. Jack "wande[rs] about the room where the first meeting had taken place"(171). He envisions and recreates the events that took place there as he walks through the rooms. Visiting the house seems to validate and solidify history for Jack. The house acts as a space where different times can exist at once and Jack can observe these two separate times: the present and the Cass Mastern past. Jack observes these two moments in time and is able to connect

them and merge them because the space he is standing in is a place that allows both to exist simultaneously. He sees the furniture, rooms, and hallways and superimposes the events from the past onto the scenery of the present to see if they match up as he thinks they should according to the information he has gathered about the house. Yet, Jack does not realize at the moment that this is what he is doing. He still sees the two times as separate and believes he is simply visiting a place that existed in the past and the present. At the moment the past is dead for Jack: "Annabelle Trice and Cass Mastern were long since deader than mackerel, and Mrs. Miller certainly was not 'agile' and didn't look 'resourceful'" (171). The past at this moment is still disconnected from the present for Jack Burden. Jack will eventually see that history and the times he "visits" are in fact "all of one piece, all part of that enormous spider web."³ However, though Jack does not see the connection now, the reader is aware early on of these connections because the reader can see the story through the eyes of the older Jack Burden who has given up his "brass bound idealism."

Jack remains in a state of detachment throughout most of the book but still participates in the world, mechanically gathering information (with his training as a historian) until he realizes the interconnectedness of the events that he has been recording. Once again Jack travels into a space that contains a time other than the present. Jack goes to the house where the slaves were held in Lexington, but we only know this because of a couple of sentences placed in parentheses in the middle of the Cass Mastern Story. The effect is that Jack Burden is placed there at the same time as Cass Mastern in the reading and it is as if Jack is there witnessing the Cass Mastern story in person, as if the two men exist at the same time and place. Jack achieves all this by simply visiting the house in his present time. This tool of superimposing the present over the past is one Warren utilizes often in the *All the King's Men* in order to reveal how the people in the many parts of Jack's story are interconnected and to reinforce his idea of "a community perceived across all time."⁴ Thus, despite the fact that Jack is slow to realize

²Robert Drake, "Robert Penn Warren's Enormous Spider Web," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 48, no.1 (winter 1994): 12.

³Drake, 16.

⁴Leonard Casper, *The Blood Marriage of Earth and Sky* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 5.

the connection of the past and present that he effects by traveling to these time-loaded places, the reader, at least, can see these connections early on thanks to Warren's structure and organization of the novel.

Warren also uses many metaphors to show the presence of time in certain spaces and in different scenes of the novel. After Tom and Willie Stark's deaths, Jack goes to Lucy Stark's home and describes the atmosphere inside the room with the use of a metaphor, calling it a place where "the minutes sifted and wavered down around us, one by one, like leaves dropping in still autumn air" (424). Once again time is contained in a space and becomes a physical entity that fills the room and can descend upon the people in the room and make them feel its weight. The fact that the leaves of time are dropping in a room characterized as having "still autumn air" shows how the room is stagnant or unmoving and that time moves in and out of the room instead of the room moving through time.

It is clear though that the older Jack Burden, who is narrating the story, is aware that he "travels" between the past and present as he recounts his own involvement in the stories. He calls the end of his Cass Mastern investigation "the end of my first journey into the enchantments of the past, my first job of historical research" (191). The Jack that narrates the story realizes that his younger self is out of touch with the past and its connection to the future simply because he denies his own connection to everything. He is an idealist and does not believe in reality, so until he admits that the world is real, he is unable to see the interconnectedness of that reality through time. Therefore, the Jack in the story is not able to grasp the past as easily as he does later on as a narrator, after he has given up idealism. At one point in the story, he remembers, "Some voice out of my childhood whispered, but I could not catch what it said. I had the vague sense," he continues, "rising from a depth of time, and of myself, of being a child, of entering the room where the grown people were, of knowing that they had just that instant stopped talking because I had come into the room and was not supposed to know what they were talking about" (193). At this point in the story, Jack still has not embraced the past as a "real" influence in his life.

Here, the past is physically rising out of a place of depth, from a hidden place, and trying to penetrate Jack's mind and manifest itself in the space he inhabits.

Eventually, Jack visits enough places and witnesses the overlapping of time enough to realize that he has a sort of "power" of imagination to travel from the past to present and from the present to the past by traveling from one physical space to another. When Jack is trying to "dig up dirt" on Judge Irwin, he decides his visit to the past has come to an end and says, "I had dug that much up out of the past, and tomorrow I would leave Burden's Landing and the past, and go back to the present. So I went back to the present" (212-213). Jack categorizes Burden's Landing as "the past" because it embodies the past for him. The Landing is the place that "holds" his past, his childhood, and, in this case, the past of his boss's political enemies. The past is not just held in this space, it is also something he is looking for, as if he is on a treasure hunt seeking a real, solid substance. The past is something he has to sift through in order to find the piece of the past that he is looking for. In all, the past is conceived as something that is in a certain location and is something he can find in this scene. To Jack, it was something that only affected a certain spatial area, and he must go there in order to encounter it physically through memories, documents, and interviews.

Jack does not only travel to *time-loaded* spaces but also to *timeless* spaces. He does this in order to escape the heavy burden of reality. Even though he supposedly does not believe in reality, he still has the need to escape from it, and to do this, he must escape from time itself. One of the places he goes to escape time is the West. Jack goes west to escape a reality that he cannot yet confront: Anne's affair with Willie Stark. By going west, he removes himself from the passage of time and reality. In Chapter VII, we see that spaces can not only contain time but also be devoid of it. The West is timeless for Jack. The West, as an idea, has always been a symbol of both hope and death in America, and Jack, as an American, is a part of this tradition. West has always been the direction of death because it is where the sun sets, where it "dies" if you will. As Jack Burden says, "West is where we all plan to go some day" (270).

However, it is purely American for the West to have the dual responsibility of representing both death and hope. The West gives Americans hope because it is a place that wipes the slate clean and allows one to start over. In a sense, it starts time all over again for a kind of “new” beginning. It does this for Jack: it helps him wipe away the time that existed before his visit to the West. It helps him wipe away the past that included his knowledge of Willie Stark’s affair with Anne Stanton. His visit to the West has allowed him to leave history temporarily, but he must move backwards through time in order to erase the memories he is trying to escape: “I was moving West at seventy-five miles an hour, through a blur of million-dollar landscape and heroic history, and I was moving back through time into my memory. They say the drowning man relives his life as he drowns. It took me seventy-eight hours to drown. For my body to sink down to the very bottom of West and lie in the motionless ooze of History, naked on a hotel bed in Long Beach, California”(271-272). Here, Jack is traveling back through both space and history at the same time to get to a new starting point so that he, like so many others, can start over again. Only Jack is trying to start over his history, his time, and his memories. In a sense, he is born again. Jack lies naked on a hotel bed in a state of rebirth in the lap of time, like a newborn baby or new life in the primordial “ooze.” Once again we see the connection between time and space as Jack physically travels backwards in time by traveling to a specific place. Here the West is a traditional place of death as Jack’s old memories “die,” and is a place of hope and renewal as a new and as yet unwritten history for Jack Burden begins.

The other “timeless” space that Jack uses to escape time is the beach. Jack often goes to the beach in times of heavy recollection or emotional confusion so he can collect his thoughts. Jack needs a timeless place in order to examine the spaces he regularly occupies that are loaded with time and history. But, the beach also becomes a place where time overlaps, mixes, blurs, and is almost distorted. Jack is at the beach contemplating a new burdensome task at hand when he sees a young couple. He is suddenly confronted with memories of when he and Anne Stanton were together. He is faced

with the reality of the passage of time and realizes that they, like he and Anne, would not “be here this way forever” —as he had been imagining his relationship with Anne Stanton (339). Jack’s journey into the West has made this realization possible. Thus, the trip to California is the step that begins to bring Jack Burden more in touch with the reality and interconnectedness of time and his history. At the beach, he admits his connection to history and that all moments are connected, not just the moments that he has had with Anne, which are the only ones he has bothered to continuously connect thus far in the novel. He says, “I saw that the moment tonight was just an extension of the moment long back, on the picnic, that this moment tonight had been in that moment all the time, and I hadn’t known it. I had dropped it aside or thrown it away, but it had been like a seed you throw away to find, when you come back that way again, that the plant is tall and covered with bloom”(277). These moments with Anne are connected in his mind through spaces. Even if different aspects of the story manifest in different places, they are all rooted similarly in space and manifest from Jack’s visitation of any one of the spaces that he describes in his memoirs. Just like Jack’s mind, the places Jack visits, like the beach, hold and contain memories themselves and act as a holding place for history as it continues to move forward. Much like Jack’s seed and flower metaphor, the beach and the West hold back the past until Jack is ready to return to reality and find the fruition of time in the present.

The Millet Sanitarium is a space utilized for the complete escape of time and the “awful responsibility” that comes with it, but here, it is not Jack Burden who finds himself in need of escaping; instead, it is Sadie Burke. She has to remove herself from the reality of passing time by entering into a timeless space as Jack does at the beach. Jack says her experience there “must have been like smearing a cool unguent of time on the hot pustule and dry itch of the soul” (407). This quote reveals that Sadie needs a new application of time in her life in order to heal her soul. The reality of the past has damaged her soul and she must apply a new history to her past in order to erase her existing history. She must do this in a space where linear time is not a priority. So, she uses the timeless environment of the sanitarium to superimpose a new history over the one she is

trying to erase into nothingness.

After Jack leaves the beach he continues to see more of the connections of time. He realizes the "awful responsibility of time" (438) after he himself causes another overlap in time across history when he threatens to reveal Judge Irwin's sordid past. Judge Irwin unknowingly reproduces the suicide of Duncan Trice from the Cass Mastern story when he takes his own life. The two incidents are a mirroring of events across time. Both suicides take place in the men's libraries and both shoot themselves through the heart because they are heartbroken by someone they love dearly. Further, Jack has been the cause of the event, just as his supposed relative Cass Mastern was a couple of generations before. But, this is not the first time Jack had drawn a parallel between Cass Mastern and himself, even if only in speculation. Jack says, "So, I observed, 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" (297). He says this after he and Anne are almost caught in his room together. However, later his actions do have just as dire consequences as Cass Mastern's sin. As Beekman Cottrell states, "the worlds begin to join, as the events and decisions of Cass' life begin to pervade Jack's own."⁵ This time, events in the past and present are reenacted similarly in different spaces but are connected by a person who travels across space and time instead of being connected by the spaces they occupy or manifest within. Here, time connects the two spaces instead of the space connecting two separate times. The past and present are sharing a moment once again, only this time, they share it in different spaces. However, what both the reader and Jack learn from this parallel of events across time is "that no story is ever over, for the story which we think is over is only a chapter in a story which will not be over. . . . I had forgotten that the story of Judge Irwin, which seemed so complete in itself, was only a chapter in the longer story of the Boss, which was not over and which was itself merely a chapter in another bigger story" (355). So the story does not just continue, it continues across space and time; and Jack finally realizes the

⁵ Beekman W. Cottrell, "Cass Mastern and the Awful Responsibility of Time," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of All the King's Men*, ed. Robert H. Chambers (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977), 121.

interconnectedness of his own life to the lives of all the people he knows and even the ones he does not know.

Jack reveals the purpose of all of these moments of merging between time and space at the end of the novel: "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 and put them together to see the pattern. This is not remarkable for, as we know, reality is not a function of the event as event, but of the relationship of that event to past, and future, events" (383-384). Like Jack, the reader needs all the pieces of the puzzle to see the interconnectedness of all the events in *All the King's Men*. With these many moments and events of time filling space or space moving into time we are able to see how all the scenes, the people, and the historical events in the novel are connected. Warren used metaphors, images, physical time, movement between times, and time's possession of space in *All the King's Men* to show the interconnectedness of space across time and time across space. Without Warren's unique treatment of time in this novel to reveal his "spider web" metaphor of time and history, the meaning and purpose of the novel would be lost and the importance of the "spider web" of history would never have emerged from the numerous stories that comprise *All the King's Men*.

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