Corruption and Innocence in Robert Penn Warren’s Fiction

Steven D. Ealy

AN EPISODE IN Robert Penn Warren’s novel Flood is emblematic of his understanding of human guilt and innocence. The deputy warden is giving a tour of Fiddlersburg prison, and he recounts how one of the sharpshooters in the prison tower had cost him a guard. One day a trustee who was tending the prison garden attacked and killed a guard with his sickle, and the sharpshooter in the tower never fired on the prisoner. When confronted, the sharpshooter said he was afraid of hitting an innocent man. The deputy warden concludes the story, “‘Jesus Christ,’ I said, ‘a innocent man! There ain’t no innocent man!’”¹ There are no innocent men in the sense of “guiltless” in Robert Penn Warren’s world. There may be innocent men in the sense of “ignorant” or “naïve,” but generally this innocence is a tack taken to avoid overt responsibility for actions or outcomes one is somehow involved in.

In the Modern Library introduction to All the King’s Men, Robert Penn Warren stated that Bogan Murdock, the dark but attractive presence around which the action swirls in At Heaven’s Gate, was a prototype for Willie Stark, central figure in All the King’s Men.² Both novels revolve around the themes of power and corruption. In All the King’s Men, Willie Stark’s story is one of the rise and fall of a politician; in At Heaven’s Gate, we learn of the fall and recovery of the financier Bogan Murdock.

Willie Stark often has been taken to represent political corruption at its most blatant, but I will argue that the country boy Willie Stark is in fact a more morally complicated character than that simple view of him allows. By the same token, Bogan Murdock is also a more ambiguous character than at first appears.

All the King’s Men³

Jack Burden narrates the story of Willie Stark. Jack, a newspaperman sent by his editor to get the lowdown on the unknown Willie, becomes Willie’s friend, teacher, chronicler, and pupil. Willie Stark, often seen as a barely fictional portrayal of Huey Long, is the stereotypical southern demagogue,⁴ using his political power to accumulate benefits for himself and his political allies. Even if this view of Willie Stark is true as far as it goes, it does not go far enough. Willie Stark is not a mindless political shark, ingesting whatever smaller fish happen to swim in his way—he is a politician with a philosophy, and that philosophy provides the foun-
ation for the action of the novel.

Willie is an idealist turned utilitarian whose serious career in politics began with an accident. As the County Treasurer of Mason County, Willie made the mistake of favoring the low bid on a school construction project, a bid that would involve hiring Blacks to work on the construction crews. Willie had gotten his job as County Treasurer because he was supported by the Chairman of the County Commission, Dolph Pillsbury. But the stir Willie caused by supporting the low bid for a school construction project, a bid not supported by the Chairman and the rest of the County Commission, cost his wife Lucy her teaching job, for she was fired, and cost Willie his position when he was defeated in his bid for re-election.

After Willie’s electoral defeat, the Commission awarded the school contract to a high bidder, who proceeded to cut corners and use inferior materials in the construction. During a fire drill at the school, the emergency escape collapsed, killing three children in the accident. One consequence of this accident was Willie’s political resurrection. The accident provided Willie with a local identity as a politician who stood for honesty and against corruption. As one of the grieving parents cried at the funeral, “Oh, God, I am punished for accepting iniquity and voting against an honest man.” (65) Willie became known as that rarity among men, an honest politician.

Willie’s reputation for honesty led him into his first race for governor. His honesty and small-town background made him the perfect tool for the urban (Harrison) machine to use to split the rural vote and thus ensure Harrison’s reelection. His message then became immediate and simple: “Whatever a hick wants he’s got to do for himself.” (93) Willie withdrew from the sham race and campaigned for his former opponent McMurfee, arguing that the hick vote should show its strength by electing McMurfee and holding him accountable: “Yeah, nail him up if he don’t deliver. Hand me the hammer and I’ll nail him.”

Willie’s withdrawal and subsequent support helped McMurfee win the election, but Willie had not surrendered. He entered the next gubernatorial primary after McMurfee’s first term and unleashed his newfound populism. As Jack Burden
hospital he plans to build. Willie tells Jack that as soon as he consolidates power in the legislature he is going to build a hospital.

I'm going to build me the God-damnedest, biggest, chromium-platedest, formaldehyde-stinkingest free hospital and health center the All-Father ever let live. Boy, I tell you, I'm going to have a cage of canaries in every room that can sing Italian grand opera and there ain't going to be a nurse hasn't won a beauty contest at Atlantic City and every bedpan will be eighteen-carat gold and by God, every bedpan will have a Swiss music-box attachment to play “Turkey in the Straw” or “The Sextet from Lucia,” take your choice.

Willie is determined to keep this hospital and clinic free from the dirty hands that have infiltrated the rest of his administration. Tiny Duffy, the Lieutenant Governor, wants to throw the contract to Gummy Larson, MacMurfee's biggest backer, to buy his support. Finally Willie is forced to make a deal with Larson, but threatens Larson not to attempt to cut corners in construction methods. “Yeah, it's arranged, but you—you leave one window latch off, you leave one piece of iron out of that concrete, you put in one extra teaspoon of sand, you chip one piece of marble, and by God—by God—I'll rip you open.” At this point Willie still thinks of the hospital as his. After his son Tom Stark is hurt in a football accident, and Willie decides to name the hospital after Tom, he reneges on the deal with Gummy Larson. Willie has become even more determined that the hospital will be built without the muck of dirty hands. At this point it becomes ever more critical to Willie to engage the good doctor, Adam Stanton, in his hospital enterprise.

Willie's strategic use of “the sons of bitches,” however, does not wholly obscure his earlier commitment to good government. The final, and greatest, legacy of his administration will be the
his preparation for the bar examination.

“I sure was a fool,” Willie said to me once, talking about those times, “I thought you had really to learn all that stuff. I thought they meant for you to learn law. Hell, I got down to that bar examination and I looked at the questions and I nearly busted out laughing. Me sitting up there bearing down on those books, and then they gave me those little crappy questions. A corn-field nigger could have answered them if he’d been able to spell. I ought to have looked twice at some of the lawyers I’d seen and I’d have known a half-wit could pass it. But, oh, no, I was hell-bent on learning me some law.” (67-68)

On another occasion Willie showed Jack Burden his American history book and said, “I durn near memorized every durn word in it. I could name you every name. I could name you every date.” But, Willie concluded, “the fellow that wrote it didn’t know a God-damned thing. About how things were. He didn’t know a thing. I bet things were just like they are now. A lot of folks wrassling around.” (67)

“A lot of folks wrassling around” is a description not only of Willie’s understanding of politics, but of morality also. “Good with a capital G,” Willie tells Adam Stanton, is made up by man as he goes along.7 Willie’s view of the good is evolutionary in nature.

When your great-great-grandpappy climbed down out of the tree, he didn’t have any more notion of good or bad, or right or wrong, than the hoot owl that stayed up in the tree. Well, he climbed down and he began to make Good up as he went along. He made up what he needed to do business, Doc. And what he made up and got everybody to mirate on as good and right was always just a couple of jumps behind what he needed to do business on. That’s why things change, Doc. Because what folks claim is right is always just a couple of jumps short of what they need to do business. Now an individual, one fellow, he will stop doing business because he’s got a notion of what is right, and he is a hero. But folks in general, which is society, Doc, is never going to stop doing business. Society is just going to cook up a new notion of what is right. Society is sure not ever going to commit suicide. At least, not that way and of a purpose. (257-58)

Willie’s view of the law is much like his view of morality. When Hugh Miller tells Willie that he is resigning, Willie says that the law is “like a single-bed blanket on a double bed and three folks in the bed and a cold night.... The law is always too short and too tight for growing humankind. The best you can do is do something and then make up some law to fit and by the time that law gets on the books you would have done something different.” (136) The law, too, must be made up as we go along, according to Willie, and the law always seems to be a step behind our needs.

But Jack Burden spies a contradiction in Willie’s arguments and in his decisions regarding the hospital. Willie had said that you have to make the good out of the bad because bad is all you have to make into good. Willie was busy trying to make the hospital, which would be a good. Jack wondered, “Now if Willie Stark believed that you always had to make the good out of the bad, why did he get so excited when Tiny just wanted to make a logical little deal with the hospital contract? Why did he get so heated up just because Tiny’s brand of Bad might get mixed in the raw materials from which he was going to make some Good?” (260) Jack sees the inconsistency and makes a note to ask Willie about it.

Jack never had the opportunity to ask Willie about this inconsistency, but perhaps the answer can be found in reflection on another question that Jack did ask Willie—a question about the foundation of Willie’s power. One of Willie’s campaign posters features his picture, the legend “My study is the heart of the people,” and Willie’s signature. This notion is not new with Willie Stark. Edmund Burke wrote, “The temper of the people
amongst whom he presides ought … to be the first study of a Statesman.” In a speech after the failed effort to impeach him, Willie tells the crowd at the capital, “Your will is my strength. Your need is my justice.”

Jack asks Willie if he really meant what he said in this speech. This speech offers a return to Willie’s populist roots. He began his serious political career by claiming that a hick must depend on himself and no one else, and offered himself as the hick spokesman for the rest of the hicks. Along the way he forgot about his roots, and became engaged in political infighting to promote his own power, not to fulfill a hick political agenda.

Willie’s early political account of himself shows the role of the people—“the common herd”—the hicks—in his thinking. Speaking of himself, Willie said:

He figured if he wanted to do anything he had to do it himself. So he sat up nights and studied books and studied law so maybe he could do something about changing things. He didn’t study that law in any man’s school or college. He studied it nights after a hard day’s work in the field. So he could change things some. For himself and for folks like him. I am not lying to you. He didn’t start out thinking about all the other hicks and how he was going to do wonderful things for them. He started out thinking of number one, but something came to him on the way. How he could not do something for himself and not for others folks or for himself without the help of other folks. It was going to be all together or none. That came to him. (91)

But along the way he lost that sense of commitment to the “all together.” This is the foundation of the political corruption that Willie caught himself up in, a corruption symbolized in a personal way in his infidelity to his wife Lucy. Willie’s effort to recover his original commitment to the “heart of the people” is signaled by his ultimate unwillingness to let Gummy Larson have the hospital contract. As he tells Jack, who does not understand the significance of the decision, “You got to start somewhere.” (387) This decision, a decision to be true to what is best for his constituency, and not to do what is politically expeditious, is paralleled by Willie’s decision to return to Lucy. (391)

Willie’s personal and political plans are preempted by his assassination. But Willie’s death only prevents him from carrying out his intentions, it does not change his intentions. When Jack visits Willie in the hospital for the last time, Willie says, “It might have been all different, Jack.” Jack nodded, and Willie reinforced what he had just said: “You got to believe that.” Willie’s last words to Jack are, “And it might even been different yet…. If it hadn’t happened, it might—have been different—even yet.” (400)

Jack narrates not only Willie’s story, but also his own as it intertwines with that of Willie. Jack tells us early on that “the end of man is to know,” (9) but as Willie’s henchman he actively seeks to limit his knowledge. At one point he cuts Sadie Burke off by claiming “ ‘...I don’t want to listen. I know too God-damned much now.’ And I wasn’t joking. I didn’t want to listen. The world was full of things I didn’t want to know” (142). During an argument over his job with Willie, Jack tells his mother, “I don’t know what those people, as you call them, do. I’m very careful not to ever know what anybody anywhere does any time.” (126)

Based on his studious efforts to avoid knowing, Jack is able to describe himself variously as “a piece of furniture” (52), a “hired hand” (113), and an “office boy” (123). He is able to carry out assigned tasks without remorse or even pangs of conscience because he is able to block from his field of vision knowledge about the origins or impact of the items that he happens to be working on at the time.

Jack uses his principle of ignorant happiness to give himself what today might be called “plausible deniability,” but this runs counter to his deeper inclination, the necessity to know. These two
inclinations run headlong into each other in “The Case of the Upright Judge.” (157, 191) This case eventually leads Jack Burden to an understanding of human responsibility and to an understanding of the necessity of understanding one’s past. (435-36) As Jack puts it, “if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future.”

At Heaven’s Gate
Warren’s At Heaven’s Gate, an earlier novel, places corruption and innocence in the context of business rather than in the world of politics. Although the Murdock family has had political prominence, there is also a “political stain” in that Lemuel Murdock had shot down a political opponent. Perhaps this stain confines his son Bogan’s pursuit of power to the financial world—the mirror image of politics—from when he engages with numerous characters and through them wields influence (including political influence through the state’s incumbent governor).

Bogan Murdock is a successful entrepreneur when the novel opens, and during the novel we catch glimpses of the unraveling of his financial empire. At Heaven’s Gate is told, for the most part, by an omniscient narrator, a narrator who often allows us to see what characters are thinking. But we never see inside of Bogan Murdock—we read his letters, we hear his conversations, we learn what others say and think about him, but the ultimate reality of his own thoughts is always hidden. Unlike Willie Stark, whom we come to know primarily from the perspective of Jack Burden, we have a chance to see Bogan Murdock from a greater number of more limited perspectives. The portrait that we are able to draw of Murdock is, then, a cubist work, reflected from multiple perspectives.

Jerry Calhoun, a college-trained geologist, but more importantly, a college football hero, is hired by Bogan Murdock to work at Myers and Murdock as a bonds salesman. Duckfoot Blake works as an accountant and statistician at Myers and Murdock. He has a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Chicago. Before coming to Myers and Murdock he had worked in a bank and taught sociology at State University. (71) Private Porsum had come out of the hills to serve his country during World War I, and for his single-handed efforts at subduing a German machine gun emplacement came back home a war hero. Porsum served in the state legislature and then became involved in various business deals with Bogan Murdock.

When Jerry Calhoun comes to work for Myers and Murdock, Bogan tells him that any special training he needs will come from the only teacher he will need, experience (56). But Murdock did assign Morton to break Jerry in and suggested that Jerry talk to Duckfoot Blake: “He can give you a lot of pointers. He probably knows more about the business than anybody. He’s a highly valuable man.” (72) Duckfoot proves to be Jerry’s primary teacher in learning about life at Myers and Murdock. Some of Duckfoot’s advice is geared to a very practical level. Since bond salesmen have to keep up appearances and make the right connections in order to sell, Jerry should move out of the boarding house where he is rooming into a nicer place (69), move from the Baptist Church he grew up in to the Episcopal Church (72-73), and dump his poor friends for rich ones (73). In an interesting way, Duckfoot’s most important advice to Jerry paralleled what Bogan Murdock had already said. Duckfoot tells Jerry to forget what he learned at college. “You don’t want to let anything tarnish that profound and fruitful ignorance which is the sine qua non of your chosen profession.” (72)

When the Southern Fidelity Bank is founded, Murdock selects Jerry to be Vice President of Securities. (130) Private
Porsum, hero of World War I and Medal of Honor winner, will be the bank’s president, and Duckfoot Blake will also be an officer in the new venture. When various illegal financial dealings threaten the collapse of the bank, along with the rest of the Bogan Murdock financial empire, Duckfoot resigns. (267)

Duckfoot tells Jerry that he will lose all of the money he had invested in the Happy Valley development project because the bonds behind the project had been switched for worthless paper, and eventually all of the cash collateral would be called in. Jerry decides to confront Bogan Murdock directly on this issue. Bogan admits that problems existed, but claims that the problems stemmed from another bank, not Southern Fidelity. (267-68)

Bogan tells Jerry that “A complete review of collateral is being conducted by Mr. Shotwell. I suggest, my boy, that if you are uncomfortable you confer with Mr. Shotwell. All I ask...is that you make a sober investigation before you come to any decision. You must act according to your best judgment. You must not be swayed by your personal attachments.” (268-69) Later Bogan tells Jerry that he had mentioned Jerry’s concerns to Shotwell and asks Jerry if he had contacted Shotwell. Jerry has not. He had decided not to talk to Shotwell, not to pursue the truth Duckfoot’s allegations. Much as Jack Burden resists knowing too much, so does Jerry Calhoun, even when the knowledge in question involves the legitimacy of his business and his personal well-being.

Private Porsum also decides to resign from Southern Fidelity. When Porsum visits Murdock to tell him of his resignation, he admits that “Things went on that had no business. I tried not to know about them.” (344) In reflecting on the events which led to his becoming a war hero in the light of the financial collapse which has tarnished his reputation, Private Porsum says that when he prayed to God for help he should have prayed for one more thing. “I ought to have prayed to him to let that last bullet coming out of the gun hit over in that patch of woods hit me clean between the eyes.” (340)

Perhaps the most intimate portrait we get of Bogan Murdock comes from his daughter, Sue. From Sue’s standpoint, Bogan Murdock is a tyrant trying to run her life. We first encounter Bogan when Sue comes into the study, where Bogan is reading a magazine. We hear the conversation, and read Sue’s thoughts: “He is so polite; he is the politest man in the world.” This, in Sue’s mind, is not necessarily a compliment: “Politeness, it’s just a way of making people do things.” (6) Sue’s relationship to her father is captured in a conversation she has with Jerry:

“I won’t be bullied. I don’t care if he is my father. That’s it—”
“Now, look here—”
“—because he made me, he thinks he owns me. He makes something, then he sits back and looks at it.” (104)

Later in the story, Sue accuses Sweetie Sweetwater of being like her father: “you’re just like him, you want to run everybody, you want to run everybody for their own good, and you don’t give a damn for anybody, not anybody in the world, just yourself.” (320)

But Sue’s vision of her father is not necessarily in line with what we observe from other sources. When Sue leaves home, Bogan Murdock provides funds for her, without strings, to ensure that she can survive. In one of his conversations with Jerry Calhoun, to whom Sue is for a time engaged, Bogan hoped that Jerry would

“...be able to do what I have failed to do. It is a sad thing for a father to say, Jerry, but it is true: I have somehow failed to be a good father to Sue. How, I don’t know. I wish to God I knew. I am not a devout man—no, not even religious in the ordinary sense of the word—but my failure with Sue has brought
memore than once to my knees. It has taught me—" and he swung his head, deliberately, to face Jerry, as though he had steeled himself for a confession, "humility." (105)

I suggested that the portrait of Bogan Murdock is cubist in nature, with odd angles put together in ways that do not fit neatly. The portrait of Bogan as father, with the apparent conflict between Sue’s perception of him and the great care and concern for Sue which he shares with Jerry, is an example of the way in which *At Heaven’s Gate* presents us with contradictory evidence. Another example of this technique is the interplay between Duckfoot’s increasingly critical review of Myers and Murdock financial practice and Bogan’s apparent openness in discussing the problems with Jerry, and in encouraging Jerry to investigate on his own.

*At Heaven’s Gate* concludes with Sue Murdock murdered, Jerry Calhoun out of jail on bail for his part in the mismanagement of Southern Fidelity Bank, Private Porsum in the hospital for injuries sustained while trying to quell a riot at the jail, and Bogan Murdock holding a press conference in which he assumes responsibility for the failure of Southern Fidelity. Bogan Murdock assumes complete responsibility “because I followed too faithfully my larger vision and trusted too much in friends, in subordinates in whom I thought I had found loyalty.” (391) He concludes with reflections on true loyalty and courage. All of this is done under an imposing portrait of Andrew Jackson designed to add an element of dignity and historical luster to the event. There can be little doubt that Bogan Murdock will weather the storm and resurrect his financial career.

*The Interplay Of Innocence And Corruption*

Both *At Heaven’s Gate* and *All the King’s Men* present worlds in which the line between corruption and innocence is particularly unclear. The line is unclear because what is in truth corrupt often appears as perfectly legitimate, and it is unclear because corruption is often dependent on the willing cooperation of innocence in the carrying out of its schemes. Much of the innocence found in these novels could be called “plausible deniability”—characters have the opportunity to learn what is going on but they willingly choose to remain ignorant. Jack Burden’s characterization of himself as just a piece of the furniture allowed him to distance himself from the consequences of the orders from Willie which he followed. In *At Heaven’s Gate* both Jerry Calhoun and Private Porsum allow themselves to become a part of Bogan Murdock’s financial empire without exploring the implications of their actions.

Warren suggests that the “same thematic considerations” were at the origin of both novels. Just as Bogan Murdock “was supposed to embody, in one of his dimensions, the desiccating abstraction of power...and to try to fulfill vicariously his natural emptiness by exercising power over those around him, so the politician rises to power because of the faculty of fulfilling vicariously the secret needs of others, and in the process...discovers his own emptiness.”

Whatever the validity of this schematic for identifying the underlying themes of these novels, in itself it is not complete. One of the questions that it fails to address is the possibility of recovery. In the case of Willie Stark, the final conversation between Willie and Jack quoted above points to the possibility of recovery. Jack’s final evaluation of Willie as a “great man” (AKM, 426-27) also reflects on this possibility. The epigram of *All the King’s Men*, taken from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, also points to the importance of the possibility of spiritual recovery: “While one green hope puts forth the feeblest sliver.” The key to this hope appears to be Willie’s ultimate recognition of his
own emptiness, and a turning toward something that can fulfill his existence.

This optimistic perspective, which holds open the possibility of spiritual recovery in *All the King’s Men*, is almost totally lacking in *At Heaven’s Gate*. It is left unclear whether any of the major characters in the novel have come to any sense of self-understanding. The most likely candidates for this are perhaps Duckfoot Blake and Private Porsum. Blake seemed to have the best grasp of what was going on around him, and to have the best sense of judgment concerning the character of those he dealt with, including himself. Private Porsum, when finally aroused from his self-benefiting ignorance, does act decisively in an effort to rectify his past errors. As a man of honor, he finally acts honorably.

I have suggested above that Bogan Murdock will weather the storm and recover financially. It is more difficult to see any spiritual recovery on Murdock’s part, because all of his actions appear to be calculated by immediate circumstance and advantage. The novel ends on an especially bleak note with Murdock “accepting responsibility” for the financial problems of his businesses in a way that provides the illusion of his own innocence by actually sloughing off responsibility onto his “trusted subordinates,” and using the murder of his daughter, Sue, as part of a media strategy to regain public favor. In contrast to Private Porsum, a simple man who lives by a code of honor, Murdock attempts to use honor as another tool in his repertoire of business practices. The moral landscape of *At Heaven’s Gate* is considerably more bleak than that of *All the King’s Men*, because ultimately Bogan Murdock’s moral sense is underdeveloped when compared with that of Willie Stark. Perhaps in this regard, Bogan Murdock, rather than Willie Stark, is emblematic of the moral drift of contemporary politics.

---

1. Robert Penn Warren, *Flood: A Romance of Our Time* (New York, 1963), 157-158. 2. “Introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *All the King’s Men*,” in *A Robert Penn Warren Reader* (New York, 1988), 225-26. 3. All parenthetical references in this section are to the Harvest Book paperback edition of *All the King’s Men* (1982). 4. Willie is perhaps stereotypical in many respects, but he is not a race-baiter. In fact, in his early career he is accused of being a “nigger-lover.” (AKM, 57) Jeffers Construction Company, which submitted the low bid for the school project, used Negro bricklayers, plasterers, and carpenters. As skilled laborers, these workmen would make more than local unskilled white workers. (60) 5. AKM, 55-56. 6. The idea for the hospital comes to Willie much earlier than the idea to dedicate it to his son. (AKM, 381) 7. AKM, 257. 8. Edmund Burke, “Thoughts on the Present Discontents,” in *Select Works of Edmund Burke* (Indianapolis, 1999), Volume 2, p. 71. 9. All parenthetical references in this section are to the New Directions paperback edition of *At Heaven’s Gate* (1985). 10. Jerry is not the first athlete that Murdock has hired (AHG, 56-57, 72). 11. “Introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *All the King’s Men*,” in *A Robert Penn Warren Reader*, 226. The complexity of what Warren is doing is signaled by the analysis Slim Sarrett makes of Bogan Murdock, an analysis that parallels Warren’s own later analysis quoted in the text. Sarrett tells Murdock: “You...represent to me the special disease of our time, the abstract passion for power, a vanity springing from an awareness of the emptiness and unreality of the self which can only attempt to become real and human by the oppression of people who manage to retain some shreds of reality and humanity.” (AHG, 250) After this encounter, Slim first becomes Sue’s lover, and later in the novel, her murderer. 12. Dante, *The Divine Comedy 2: Purgatory*, Canto III, line 135, trans. Dorothy Sayers (New York, 1955). See *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* (Athens, Ga., 1990), 186-87.