

Lacan's Mirror Stage as Symbolic Metaphor in All the King's Men

*The mirror would do well to reflect a little more
before returning our image to us.*

—Jacques Lacan

TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AFTER THE PUBLICATION of *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren told an interviewer that the Cass Mastern story serves "as a kind of mirror image for Jack [Burden]," that Burden's response to the contrast is instrumental in his development (Fisher 148). Given this statement, it is worth taking a closer look at Warren's use of mirror images which appear throughout *All the King's Men*. If, as some critics have pointed out, the prenatal imagery works as a metaphor for Jack Burden's eventual rebirth (Casper 122; Girault 30), then it is conceivable that the mirror imagery works as a symbolic metaphor for the protagonist's eventual growth and self-definition. By applying Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, we can better understand Jack Burden's emergence from an unresponsive, undefined human being into a more unified, responsive and ultimately responsible member of society.

Significantly, throughout most of the book, Jack Burden appears unaware of his own reflection. He acknowledges the glimmering gold-framed mirrors on Judge Irwin's walls but sees only the reflection of the "hot bright side light" which presumably fills, and therefore overpowers, any other potential images, including his own reflection (41). When Sadie Burke, unable to find answers in Jack Burden's expression, walks over to a mirror and studies her own face, she is seeking to reestablish her identity. Burden, on the other hand, tells us that he is unable to see what is in the mirror. Instead, he glimpses only the back of Sadie's head (143). Perhaps the most telling scene is when Burden observes Anne Stanton enter Slade's place through a reflection in the mirror over the bar. He watches "her image come through the image of the door" (240). On one level, the scene heightens our awareness of Burden's sense of unreality, his self-imposed idealism. On another level, he still does not see his own reflection. Yet self-reflection, the key to consciousness and conscious thought, is exactly what Lacan traces back to what he calls "the mirror stage" (Felman 61).

According to Lacan, when a child sees his image in a mirror for the first time, he perceives himself as whole ("Mirror" 500). Most children experience this awareness between the ages of six to eighteen months (502-03). In a moment of "jubilant assumption," the child at first perceives an ideal image of himself, the "imago" or what Lacan calls the Ideal-I (503). The anticipation is that of bodily unity, one which the child will come to identify with (Richardson 57). But the child soon discovers the contrasting size and inverted movements which destabilize the unity between himself and his image, even though the image becomes the first signifier of the self (Lacan, "Mirror" 504). The self now seems to exist in an exterior world, and the child will spend a lifetime attempting to resolve as "I" the difference between his inner world, the specular "I," and his outer world, the social "I" (506).

No matter that the child is jubilant at first. Its joy will soon turn to anxiety as it projects itself into history, toward the future, and toward a specular ideal with which it will never coincide until its death collapses difference, the future is erased, and it becomes precisely what it has become. (Latimer 501)

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Metaphorically, Jack Burden has never experienced the mirror stage. Having never perceived the primordial Ideal-I, he is unable to move on to the next stage, that of the social "I," which constitutes not only the acknowledgment of the Other (usually the mother) but also one's relationship to external objects, to society and to history.

The fetal imagery, for example the need to withdraw back into the womb, as in "The Great Sleep," or in scenes where Jack Burden is submerged in water, without sight or sound, oblivious to what goes on around him, signifies that he has not yet become a willing participant in life. Until his symbolic rebirth, he will be unable to recognize his own image.

By contrast, Willie Stark is intensely aware of his mirror image. Sitting at a drug-store fountain, Stark never takes his eyes from his own reflection, even while he talks to Burden. "The way it is it all suits me just fine," he said, and looked at the face in the mirror, which . . . was untroubled and pure like the face of a man who tops the last rise and looks down at the road running long and straight to the place where he is going" (64). Although politically naive at this point, Stark will nevertheless continue to recreate and redefine the image in the mirror, stopping occasionally to "polish up a gesture" (70). He is highly attuned to his place in the scheme of things.

Unlike Stark, Burden has distanced himself from the real world. He considers himself a "brass-bound Idealist" (30). "If you are an Idealist," he tells us, "it does not matter what you do or what goes on around you because it isn't real anyway" (30). With no reflected self-image, and no means to connect with objects outside himself, Burden is no more than a shadow on Plato's cave wall. For this reason, he experiences a world that is fragmented, divided, dreamlike and unreal. He is no more than "something slow happening inside the cold brain of a cow" (49).

This sense of unreality pervades much of his perception. His connection to life is internal rather than external. He is strongly influenced by his own imagery, the pictures in his head that often retain a dreamlike quality. Watching Anne Stanton floating in the lake water next to him, his imagination is captured by the image of "her face lying in the water, very smooth, with the eyes closed, under the dark greenish-purple sky, with the white gull passing over" (119). This image will continue to haunt him throughout his lifetime. Later, when he sees "that picture in [his] head" of Judge Irwin sitting in his study rewiring the old ballista, he becomes "sad and embarrassed." He exits leaving "a piece of Jack Burden in the dining room, with the ballista, for good and all" (122). Because the world is "full of things" he doesn't "want to know" (142), he does not attempt to understand the meaning of the pictures in his head. In order to live with each emotionally provocative image, he must cut away some part of himself and leave it behind. Similarly, when Burden is in the waiting room at the hospital, he chooses to bury his attention in "picture magazines" (378), rather than factual information. Pictures are malleable. One can make up one's own story to accompany them, or choose to see nothing beyond the immediate image.

For Burden, whose vision is imagistic, the world is not made up of people but of categorical stereotypes: the Boss, the Judge, the Scholarly Attorney, the Young Executive, the Count. He purposely distances himself from those to whom he might feel the closest emotional bond, all potential father figures: his true father, stepfathers, surrogate fathers. The world for Burden is no more than "an accumulation of items, odds and ends of things . . . a flux of things before his eyes (or behind his eyes) and one thing ha[s] nothing to do, in the end, with anything else" (189). People, too, are synecdochically described as odds and ends, bits and pieces of body parts rather than as whole. Burden refers to his mother's thumb, her forefinger, her eyelid, her eye, her eyebrow, her cheek all within two sentences (110) but denies the reader a sense

of her as a complete person. Even his own body is at times “odds and ends,” mere fragments of a whole human being.

I remember being surprised to discover that my legs worked perfectly . . . and were walking directly toward the hatrack, where my right arm . . . reached out to pick up the old Panama which hung there and put it on my head, and my legs then walked straight out the door . . . (268)

During his escape west, Burden lies on his bed, eyes closed, and sees “in the inward darkness as in mire the vast heave and contortion of numberless bodies, and limbs detached from bodies . . . ”(310). For Lacan, this fragmented body-image is yet another part of the mirror stage drama

whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality . . . (“Mirror” 505-06)

The anticipatory stage, in which a child perceives bodily unity as eventual fact, comes only after the child first realizes his reflection, “that point at which he desires to gratify himself in himself” (Lacan, *Concepts* 257). It would seem, therefore, that Jack Burden, on some level, continues to experience his body as a series of fragmented, disjointed parts, much in the same way an infant would.

This sense of fragmentation and incompleteness haunts all of Warren’s main protagonists and frequently the speakers of his poems (Justus 3). Modern man, fragmented by the actual and the ideal, and torn by an internal dualism, is a common theme in Warren’s work (Guttenberg 38; Young 46). In an attempt to make sense of a chaotic, hostile world, in which they feel alienated and incomplete, Warren’s central characters often adhere to a false myth. Jack Burden believes himself to be an Idealist. Adam Stanton believes in self-sacrifice and goodness. Willie Stark believes in power and success. But while Burden’s idealism may shield him from outer experience and ultimately from responsibility, it also leaves him disconnected and groundless.

Lacan sees the nature of the self as divided into the conscious and the unconscious. Warren’s term, however, is “self-division or sometimes, in a somewhat larger sense, the doubleness of life” (Eisinger 14). Concomitant with Burden’s own lack of self-integration is the way he perceives all others as incomplete and divided. He concludes that Adam Stanton and Willie Stark “were doomed to destroy each other” because both yearned toward and tried “to become the other, because each was incomplete with the terrible division of their age” (436). That is to say, “Adam’s rationalistic ‘tenderness’ with Willie’s empirical ‘tough-mindedness’” are the “characteristic division of their age” (Strout 165). Burden also perceives Tiny Duffy as Stark’s “other self” (98) and Ellis Burden as Judge Irwin’s “other self, his Damon, his Jonathan, his brother” (194). Only Anne Stanton, through the distortion of Burden’s Idealism, is seen as whole:

I ought to have guessed that a person like her—a person who you could tell had a deep inner certitude of self which comes from being all of one piece, of not being shreds and patches and old cogwheels held together with pieces of rusty barbed wire and spit and bits of string, like most of us—I ought to have guessed that that kind of a person would not be surprised into answering a question she didn’t want to answer. (207)

The “Other,” in Burden’s sense of the word, serves as a kind of alter ego, a positive or

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negative side which renders one whole, a binary opposite which extends one's self-definition and enhances one's dimensions. But the "Other" serves as a reflection of self as well, an unflattering mirror image comprised of characteristics which one does not acknowledge in one's own reflection. "For to turn to the Other is to meet the Self, [and] to face the Self is to encounter the Other" (Vauthier 183). Therefore, when Burden acknowledges Anne Stanton's reflection in the mirror in Slade's bar, he is, in a symbolic sense, recognizing a potential feminine side to his own nature. Anne and Adam Stanton both function as Jack Burden's "other selves."

But more importantly, Willie Stark also serves as Burden's alter ego, his Other. Stark is a man of action, commitment (albeit frequently misguided), passion and involvement. He is grounded in fact and reality. He is the antithesis of Jack Burden. When Burden states to Stark that he does not know why he works for him, the latter retorts, "Boy . . . you work for me because I'm the way I am and you're the way you are. It is an arrangement founded on the nature of things" (192). In response to Burden's flippant "That's a hell of an explanation" (192), Stark retorts, "There ain't any explanations. Not of anything. All you can do is point at the nature of things" (192). Stark realizes that they need each other for balance. And Burden, who believes himself powerless in a chaotic world, tossed about like a ship in a storm, sees in Willie Stark a man capable of building a power base, of creating an identity, of carving a place for himself in the world. Because Stark is everything he is not, Burden must anchor himself to him in order that he too, on some level, can be, however tentatively, grounded in the real world. Further evidence of Jack Burden's doubleness can be seen in his narrative voice, the difference between what Simone Vauthier calls the narrator/narratee (172-92) and in Burden's self-alienation when he speaks of himself in the third person.

Only when Burden learns of Anne Stanton's affair with Stark, does his fragile idealism finally falter and crumble. Unable to accept or acknowledge his part in driving Anne into Stark's arms, Burden flees, attempting to escape both himself and reality. Stripped of his idealistic defenses, he slips even further into a fragmented state. His fantasies begin to center on dismemberment, "limbs detached from bodies, sweating and perhaps bleeding from inexhaustible wounds" (310). In order to survive, Burden must replace the failed myth with something he can believe in, which later gives rise to his theory of the Great Twitch. But the Great Twitch is born of a dream, "the dream of our age" (311), another metaphoric image Burden has created in his mind. If he can believe that the world functions mechanistically, then he can be absolved of all responsibility "for nothing was your fault or anybody's fault, for things are always as they are" (311). Burden goes on to tell us:

It was bracing because after the dream I felt that, in a way, Anne Stanton did not exist. The words *Anne Stanton* were simply a name for a peculiarly complicated piece of mechanism which should mean nothing whatsoever to Jack Burden, who himself was simply another rather complicated piece of mechanism. (311)

That Burden should adopt this theory is no surprise. Throughout the entire text, even while professing his "brass-bound Idealism," he repeatedly uses machine imagery in his narrative (Bohner 93). From as early as page one, we have been told that it is "the age of the internal combustion engine." The tramping of Willie's feet is "like a machine" which evolves into plungers that continue to pound away "until there wasn't any you, and afterward for a long time until the machine wore out or somebody switched off the juice" (70). Burden even goes so far as to refer to Anne's body as "an elaborate and cunning mechanism in which [they both] shared ownership" (286-87). Machine imagery and Burden's eventual belief in the Great Twitch are

symptomatic of his attempts to sever all connections with humanity. He returns from the West to bury himself in his office and to work on a tax bill. And although he attempts to distance himself from Stark and his "sinister" errands, he does follow through with the Boss's request to confront Judge Irwin with the incriminating evidence he has uncovered.

Burden's confrontation with the Judge becomes a major turning point in the book. From the moment he enters the front hall of the Judge's home, as he had earlier in the book, he is once again confronted by the mirrors. Yet this time, and for the first time, Burden acknowledges not only his image but "all the reflecting surfaces" (341), those surfaces which bind him to his father's history and ultimately to his own.

And without invitation I drew open the screen door, and entered into the shadowy gracious coolness of the hall, like the perfect depth of time, where the mirrors and the great hurricane glasses glittered like ice, and my image was caught as noiselessly as velvet or recollection in all the reflecting surfaces. (341)

From this point on, the Lacanian drama is played out to its natural conclusion. Once the mirror image has been acknowledged, the quest for unity and self-knowledge begins. It begins with the "jubilant" awareness of self, a narcissistic adoration of one's image such as Warren describes in "The Ballad of Billie Potts":

And the name and the face are you, and you
The name and the face, and the stream you gaze into
Will show the adoring face, show the lips that lift to you
As you lean with the implacable thirst of self,
As you lean to the image which is yourself,
To set lip to lip, fix eye on bulging eye,
To drink not of the stream but of your deep identity, . . .
(*Poems* 292)

With the mirror image comes the awareness of individual identity, and "this reflected, therefore alienated image becomes the ideal of eventual unity, the basis for all subsequent identification" (Richardson 57), or as Lacan saw it, the image becomes ego. For the ego, according to Lacan, "never ceases to be anything more than an object" (*Concepts* 57), "a false self" (Smith 216). Concomitant with this second stage, that of the imago (imaginary), is the awareness of the mother figure, or "I that is based upon an image borrowed from another" (Ver Eecke 114). In this moment of recognition the mirror stage ends and the emergence of the social "I" takes place (Lacan, "Mirror" 507). The experience then gives rise to desire, to be specific, the desire for the other, which in turn evolves into the classic Oedipus complex (507).

For Jack Burden, the Lacanian drama is condensed into but a few hours. From the moment he acknowledges his self-image, to the moment he indirectly brings about his real father's death, Burden is propelled along by a psychological script that has existed since the beginning of man's conscious awareness.

Lacan's interpretation of the Oedipus complex differs from Freud's contention that man's unconscious primordial desire is "an incestuous sexual love for the mother and a jealous, murderous impulse toward the father" (Felman 103). Contrary to Freud's theory, Lacan believes that the mother becomes the first object of the child's narcissistic attachment, initiating a "type of mirroring relationship that Lacan calls 'the Imaginary'" (*Concepts* 104). "I resisted and resented this," Burden tells us of his mother, "but I wanted to be loved by her and at the same time I was drawn by the force, for she was a vital and beautiful woman by whom I was drawn and by whom I

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was repelled, whom I condemned and of whom I was proud" (433). On the other side is the father "(or the father's name), a symbol of the Law of incest prohibition," the "first authoritative 'no'" (Felman 104). The father initiates the child's "first social imperative of renunciation, inaugurating, through this castration of the child's original desire, both the necessity of repression and the process of symbolic substitution of objects of desire, which Lacan calls 'the Symbolic'" (104). The Symbolic: "Father, Law, Language, the reality of death," is that "which Lacan designates as the Other" (105). Without this symbolic stage, the child cannot become an integrated, social human being who will accept his role in the course of history.

With the death of his father, Burden is free, as was Oedipus, to love his mother. Ironically, Burden does indeed reestablish his relationship with his mother, finding a love and warmth for her that had not existed for years. He reflects how "by killing [his] father, [he] had saved [his] mother's soul" (429). Moreover, by telling Burden of her love for the Judge, his mother not only gives him a "new picture of herself" but also "a new picture of the world" (432). She has, metaphorically speaking, given birth to him a second time.

Perhaps significant, in a Lacanian sense, is that Burden goes to his father's house seeking truth and finds it not through the father but through the mother. That is to say, through the Imaginary not the Symbolic, signifying the unconscious rather than the language-oriented conscious mind. For the mirror image, as Warren well knew, and is evident from this passage from "The Circus in the Attic," is a reflection of both:

the violent act caught like the very face of life between two mirrors, to be reflected, mirror within answering mirror, expiation and vengeance, vengeance and expiation, forever in opposite directions, forever toward the inwardness of self and forever toward the outwardness of the world, into twin infinities. (37)

What we have, then, is vengeance on the father for his laws and repression, expiation from the mother, object of desire, vengeance on the external world, expiation for the internal experience of self, the true "I," rather than the fiction of the ego.

Beginning with his awareness of his mirror image (significantly in his father's house) and the subsequent death of his father, Burden is then propelled along a tragic course which will lead him to self-knowledge and ultimately to self-definition. Like his symbolic mirror image, Cass Mastern, Burden learns "that the world is all of one piece" (188), that a single act, such as Mastern's affair with his friend's wife, can set up vibrations that will "spread infinitely and with ever increasing power and no man could know the end" (178).

Man can, as Warren has said, "return to his lost unity" ("Knowledge" 241). For the "ultimate unity of knowledge is the image of himself . . ." (242). For Lacan, the child eventually develops self-knowledge and identity in conjunction with history. Once Jack Burden is able to acknowledge his existence in connection with others, his part in the complicated web of life, he is free to recreate, to redefine, his place in society and subsequently in history, to "go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time" (439).

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