

Final Written Report

Professional Development Grant

“Revolutionary Subjects

in Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*”

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This final report addresses the results of a professional enhancement project funded by an ATU Professional Development Grant. This report follows the instructions provided in the Guidelines for Professional Development Grants.

A. Title Page (see above)

B. Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Abstract of conference paper presented:

In a 1956 interview, Robert Penn Warren commented on the books that were “especially meaningful” for him, among them Henry Thomas Buckle’s 19th century *History of Civilization in England*. According to Warren, Buckle’s thesis was that “History is all explained by geography”: “Buckle was my Marx. That is, he gave you one answer to everything, and the same dead-sure certainty.” Warren adds that he was “somewhat inoculated against Marx and his one-answer system when he and the Depression hit me”: “I am not being frivolous about Marx; but when I began to hear some of my friends talk about him in 1930, I thought, ‘Here we go again, boys.’ I had previously got hold of one key to the universe. Buckle. And somewhere along the way I had lost the notion that there was ever going to be just one key.” Later in the same interview, he admits that any kind of criticism, including “a Marxist analysis,” is good if it “gives a deeper insight into the nature of the thing” and avoids insisting on “*one, single, correct . . . complete*” kind of criticism (31). In a later 1960s interview, commenting on his own generation of southern writers, he claimed, “I never heard the word ‘Marx’ used except in Hart, Schaffner and Marx until after I left college. This was a strange contradiction; every Southern freshman, literarily inclined, knew *The Waste Land* by

heart in 1922. We sat up all night reading Baudelaire, but Marx and Freud were only ugly rumors” (88). But soon thereafter his “insular world ended” amid the “immense” poverty of the South and the “exciting” possibility of “improving one’s lot” (88), issues that resonate throughout *All the King’s Men*.

I want to offer here a Marxist reading of that novel that goes beyond a one-answer system. The novel is a labyrinth of political complexities: from the right-wing wealth of Jack Burden’s literally insular family and class; to the populist, pragmatic, and ultimately corrupt politics of Willie Stark; as well as the antithetical moralities embodied in Cass Mastern’s Calvinist original sin and ineluctable damnation; or even Hugh Miller’s “clean hands, pure heart” recusal from politics. In simplistic terms, the novel poses questions about who has the right to wealth, and to the power and freedom that wealth bestows. But, ultimately, class in this novel can be read as a structure producing “specific forms of the political subject [irreducible] to expressions of a moral program” (Patrick McGee, *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western*, 50). Furthermore, class conflict is transmuted from the amorphous, relatively faceless mass (the Depression-era “hicks”) onto the central male characters, Jack Burden and Willie Stark, blending class conflict with a crisis of gender identity. According to McGee’s Marxist reading of Western films, the Great Depression transformed gendered social identity, specifically concepts of masculinity. On the one hand are the men unable to act on their own (like Jack), and on the other hand men who can act, but are morally repulsive, crude, and reliant on force and extortion (like Willie). One possibly radical opposition would be between a “masculine” radical individualism and a “feminine” collective interest. Is Burden’s final stepping “into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of

Time” (438) a revolutionary act or not? Rather than being some transcendent ideal self, can he transform both himself and his environment through a material process within history? And the issue behind that question is whether or not the group of “hicks” behind Stark are figured as an internally diverse, multiple social subject who can do likewise.

C. Brief Review of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

I attended the American Literature Association conference in San Francisco, CA, and presented my paper there. I flew out of Little Rock on May 23, 2012, and returned on May 28, 2012.

D. Summary of Experiences

My primary teaching area within literature is modern and southern American. I am the primary teacher of Modern American Literature, a required course for all our majors, and the only teacher of our course on southern literature. Not only did I manage to get positive feedback on my paper, I was also able to attend numerous other panels relevant to my teaching and scholarship.

E. Conclusions and Recommendations

I am working on a publishable-length essay of which this paper is a part. I have published on Warren before, but this approach is significantly different from my previous work on this text. I presented another section of that essay-in-progress at the 2011 ALA. Without the funds I received from the ATU Professional Grant, I would not have been able to attend these conferences.