CHAPTER III

METAPHORS OF THE MODERN WORLD IN AT HEAVEN'S GATE
III

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Technically and thematically, At Heaven's Gate is Warren's ambitious creative effort. Technically speaking, it uses a multiple point of view plus the narrator's commentary which is juxtaposed with Ashby Windham's personal and confessional account of his quest for salvation. The shifting point of view places the reader in direct contact with the modern world and those who operate it ruthlessly for their own ends. In this world managerial manipulation and financial monopoly not only have an upper hand but are depicted as compulsive forces which destroy the self. Whether this world is organically integrated with the agrarian, poverty-stricken world of Ashby Windham is debatable. In his "Introduction" to All The King's Men, Warren refers to this earlier novel (At Heaven's Gate) and says:

This now impulse was, I suppose, a continuation of the experience of writing At Heaven's Gate, just as that novel had been, in a way, a continuation of Proud Flesh. Despite important contrasts, there were some
points of essential similarity between my business man hero, Bogan Murdock, in *At Heaven's Gate*, and the politician hero of the play. And even some of the contrasts between them were contrasts in terms of the same thematic considerations. For example, if Bogan Murdock was supposed to embody, in one of his dimensions, the desiccating abstraction of power, to be a violator of nature, a usurer of Dante's Seventh Circle, 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, as I have already said, discovers his own emptiness. But beyond such considerations, the effort of *At Heaven's Gate* had whetted my desire to compose a highly documented picture of the modern world—at least, as the modern world manifested itself in the only region I knew well enough to write about.

The above citation suggests the theme of *At Heaven's Gate* and its origin in Dante's Seventh Circle. In a footnote to the above citation Warren says that "it was this Circle that provided, with some liberties of interpretation and extension, the basic scheme and metaphor for the whole novel. All of

1. Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction." *All the King's Men*, p. VII.
the main characters are violators of nature." At Heaven's Gate may be construed as Warren's highly documented picture of the modern world. We may say, by extension, that the modern world is largely the creation of men who create a parallel world in which the values of the visible world are absent. Instead of values that are associated with the agrarian world, we have a ruthless self-aggrandizement and self-assertion in the modern world.

In At Heaven's Gate the modern world is the world of Bogan Murdock, proprietor of Mayers and Murdock, a financial organization, which has branches in New Orleans, Memphis Atlanta, St. Louis and Chicago. Factually speaking, this is the world of American big cities of the '20's and the '30's. In terms of plot, this world is connected with the Southern Agrarian world of Ashby Windham, and Gym Calhoun, Uncle Lew, and Aunt Ursula, in a tenuous way. Ashby Windham's mother was a cousin of Private Porsum, the loyalist turned confessor, who blows up the credibility of Bogan Murdock's empire. Jerry Calhoun, son of Gym Calhoun, who enters Bogan Murdock's empire to thrive financially in a big way, becomes its scapegoat and victim,

2. Warren, Footnote in "Introduction." All the Kings's Men. p. VII.
and is bailed out of jail by the good offices of Duckfoot Blake, the economic adviser to Bogan Murdock.

In *At Heaven's Gate* Sue Murdock, the daughter of Bogan Murdock seems to be the focal point of the narrative. Brought up in an uncongenial and unhealthy atmosphere, by a powermonger father, who hates poverty and hides his hatred under the mask of civility and a mother of no individuality and responsibility who is "in the powerful grip of secret, insidious, and suicidal vices, which drained her life of all meaning and the world around her of all reality," Sue develops a few mental squints as she grows. To her the only remedy for her inward disorders seems to be a permanent estrangement from her parents. The drastic steps she takes the unexpected and unwanted twists in her life, her sudden and sad end are the inevitable result of her sustained efforts to cut off her ties with the past. Her decision to marry Jerry Calhoun, a graduate student of Geology, a famous football player, is the result of her inexorable desire to leave her father.

Jerry Calhoun is another character who longs to cut off his ties with the past. Disgusted with poverty,

displeased with a waspish, club-footed misanthrope Uncle Lew and "bland and dirty" great-aunt Ursula, disenchanted with his "clumsy, inert, dirt" farmer father, he desires to dissociate himself from everything connected with the past which now appears to him "ugly, monotonous, fumbling and dirty, like the play of some stupid, snotty child" (52). His academic achievement and fame as a football player attract the attention of the business magnate, Bogan Murdock. He accepts the proposal of Murdock without any second thought as his world seems to offer an escape to him from his ugly world. He discards his world — a world that is entirely different from Murdock's— and whirs into the new world like a fly fascinated by the spider's cobweb. Rejecting a graduate fellowship, he accepts the job of selling bonds in Murdock's firm.

The world created by Murdock is one of the three worlds presented in *At Heaven's Gate*. The emperor of this world, Murdock, is a business tycoon. Politeness and not power is the invisible whip with which he controls everyone without using a word of command. He manipulates everything including politeness. As his daughter says, "he is the politest man in the world" and his politeness is "just a way of making people do things" (6). He is a sweet despot and
cunningly exercises his power on all who come to him so that they fall under his fatal spell, willingly.

With an ambition to achieve pure power, Murdock sets out to claw his way to the top making innocent people like Jerry, Private Porsum and many more as rungs on the ladder of success. He uses their emotions and feelings to achieve his ends. He manipulates even human relationships to his advantage. Through manipulation of securities, which, he admits, are "decidedly illegal," he acquires power. As Sue says, "He doesn't say things. He doesn't have to. He just doesn't say a word, and people do what he wants" (104). Murdock manipulates Jerry by corrupting him in a subtle way showing keen interest in his dress and address, and showering affection on him till he surrenders himself fully. Allowing himself to be moulded in Murdock's image, he becomes Murdock's man. Murdock's narration of Sue's childhood, her strange behaviour, his failure to set her right and his confession that he has failed to be a good father to Sue and his faith in Jerry's ability to do what he has failed to do move him. He feels a little gush of pity for Murdock when he says, "you will succeed where I failed. You understand her. I'm sure. And you can help her to come to terms with herself. To overcome this restlessness, this
unhappiness, this recklessness" (109-110). Jerry who hated poverty even as a child and who enters Murdock's empire to thrive in every way, takes tips from the "eccentric economist." Duckfoot Blake and accepts his advice as a gospel and thinks that he would be a success. Though Sue is "a slice of Eve's flesh" (112) though she scares him with her reckless attitude and though she is highly impulsive, whimsical, unpredictable and irresponsible, he agrees to marry her. But their relationship does not last long. The entire blame, perhaps, need not be thrown on Sue. "Discovering that the freedom of decision is her own" (96), she expresses her intention to marry Jerry, the day he takes her to his place casually to see his folk. Basically honest, she loves him. The moment she realizes the true nature of Jerry, a puppet in her father's hands, she deserts him. When her brother asks her why she jilted Jerry, she recklessly answers, "Because I wanted to." She tells her mother "Yes, I know — he (Murdock) couldn't run me — like he runs you, like he runs everybody — and he thought Jerry could, and he runs Jerry — and it'd be the same thing... he thinks he can make Jerry run me, like—he tries to make you talk to me because he won't. And he won't run me. Not if he runs the whole world" (177). She quits Jerry and walks out of her father's house too.
When Jerry's father is forced to leave his ancestral house and when he comes to know that Murdock is responsible for the foreclosure, he goes to him straight. "He was full of things to tell people" (8) but fails to communicate properly like Percy Munn in *Night Rider*. "He wanted to say something, but he did not know what it was he had to say, as though he were a table, a tree, some natural object with a vitality locked deeply within it, an object about which people moved and spoke, and which observed, eyelessly, and knew, and suffered with the numb, obscure germination within it" (279). Jerry wakes to reality only when he is imprisoned "for fooling round at that bank, for fooling with folks' money" (367) and when he is made the scapegoat for crimes he never committed. Only when his father rushes to his rescue, he realizes the truth. Recognizing Murdock as a monster, he goes back home accepting the loving care of his humble father. Sue repudiates home, past and tradition. But it is ironic that she should play the role of Cordelia. Reference to *King Lear* is symbolic and suggestive, however distorted it is. Sue wants pure and absolute love for herself as herself. Having no external goals and internal discipline, she drifts from man to man restlessly, failing to find "the full unreserved commitment of love" in them.
Sue's second lover, Slim Sarret, a self-centered "esthete" with no interest in financial affairs, is a creator of another world as against the world of Murdock. "The studio was the center of his world. It was the spot to which he retired to relish his triumphs, and it was the garden of his secret anguish" (200). His art and artifice are his wealth and power and with his magnetic personality he draws a number of people into his world. Like Murdock, he is a manipulator and destroyer too. He takes meticulous care, prepares every situation carefully, and like a director, plans everything including the seduction of Alice Smythe by Malloy, in his studio. Though he arranges parties in his studio, he never drinks. He derives vicarious pleasure by getting...a peculiar and profound stimulation from its effect on other people, from the mounting noise, the sudden, aimless laughter, the self-appreciated wit, the refractions and distortions of personality, the twisted glimpses and unveiling, the flashing eyes and moist lips" (205). Though Sue's flight from Jerry lands her in Slim's studio, she has no intention of inviting him into her life. The tears he sheds for her sake, his seemingly sincere advice to her 'to learn to be alone' and to "learn never to make up a picture of herself" (155) to suit other people, draw her to him.
Slim says "Very few people, strictly speaking, can be sincere. It can be achieved only by people who are intelligent enough to have a considerable degree of self-knowledge" (161). But it is obvious that he is not one of the few who have self-knowledge. Assuming sincerity, saying "I simply wanted you to know what I am" (168), he gives a fabricated and picturesque narration of his dead father, a barge captain blown up on a tugboat. Though he asserts that an artist, a poet, never feels the need to make up anything, constantly he makes up everything. Sue feels "...a kind of timidity, a sense of being left out" (238) in the beginning, but she succeeds in living in a timeless world without any past or future. Slim's sweet words and compassionate concern fail to make a mark on her but the defiance he hurls at Murdock in Sue's room impresses her. His diagnostic utterance, "...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" (250), is music to her ears and she becomes his mistress that night. Slim's analysis of Murdock is sound, but he never tries to see himself in terms of that analysis.
The unexpected arrival of Billie Constantidopeles, a painter—friend of Slim, and his casual but shocking information about Slim's father, a vacuum salesman from Georgia, who is very much alive, exposes the falsity of Slim, when she comes to know that, "He is a liar just like a channel catfish ain't a canary. He swims in a lie, and he is in the lie and the lie is in him and if you could hook him and pull him out he'd hang there with his gills puffing and his eyes popping and not know what to make of it" (303). She walks out of the stinking liar's studio and shuts her door on the cunning homo-sexual.

The third world, the world of Jason Sweetwater, just like the worlds of Murdock and Slim, is a truncated world, like Sue and Jerry, Sweetwater, a labour union leader, a vehement unionist, an out and out Marxist, denies his past and his father, who is "a simple-minded menace" (287). Proving his father's guess that his "son Jason is deeply spiritual" (290) to be false, he becomes a strong believer "in nothing except himself" (292) by the time he is eighteen. Feeling "a tingling, tumescent certainty of self, a swelling potentiality of power and excitement" (290), he leaves his father's place. Fifteen years later, he learns that his father's conviction that, "A man could not believe in himself
unless he believed in something else" (292) is right and that "something else" in his case is Marxism. "He believed in it fully, uncompromisingly, with all the directness of his simple, logical nature" (293).

Sweetwater knows that he is in love with Sue ever since he met her in Slim's studio. His love brings him close to her in her alienation. His analysis of Slim as the personification of lie and as one who "lives in a dream world" shows his capacity to distinguish and discriminate. Finding Sweetwater to be protecting, powerful and manly she hopes to take shelter in his ideological strength. As an idealist who is bent on reforming the world, he believes that, "marriage was a kind of prostitution which was worse than the other kind. It was worse because in the other kind of prostitution a body was sold for something, and he believed that marriage was a system by which love was sold for something. And he believed in love" (312). Being convinced that marriage is a bourgeois trap, he refuses to marry Sue, who is pregnant by him. To him everything else is secondary to his conviction and ideal. His very being depends upon "refusal to compromise" (314). Though he is in a way possessive, demands rights as a husband, loves Sue and likes to have his child, he refuses to enter into the
bond of marriage. His blind devotion to an ideal makes him inhuman and he refuses to do the minimum that is expected of him. Sue is at home with Sweetwater, though she grows restless, when he finds no time to spare for her under pressure of work. She becomes despondent at his decision never to marry. Sue, who recoils from her father's world, fails to find a world that suits her. After a long struggle, she finds the world of Sweetwater to be suitable. Very soon she realizes her mistake and comes to know that even this world does not suit her. She resorts to abortion and desperately tells Sweetwater: "You're just like my father, you don't like him but you ought to like him because 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, just yourself!" (320) Murdock's repeated requests produce no effect on Sue. Jerry's last attempt at reconciliation with Sue proves futile. Slim's efforts to rebuild his past intimacy with her end in a fiasco. Having been beaten and thrown out of Sue's room by Sweetwater, Slim comes back and strangles the delirious Sue to death, feeling "elegiac pity, for her, for himself, for everybody ... who struggles and errs and suffers and dies" (362).
Ashby Windham, a headstrong, semi-literate backwoods farmer, dominated by the desire to marry a damsel in distress, in a dire need for money commits sins in succession — he strikes his brother Jacob in anger when he pleads against selling their parental property; in a rampageous ride, he drives a mule into a gatepost and kills it; leaves the soil in search of livelihood; accepts the money sent by his brother. He commits a crime against nature by joining a timber crew and stripping the massy mountain of its trees. Killing the mule, chopping the trees, striking his brother and Sweetwater are crimes and naturally punishments follow in the form of disasters. He loses his job, finds it difficult to make both ends meet. His wife becomes sick and his only child dies. Ashby realizes that his sins visited his child and took it away from the world of pain and sin. He undergoes spiritual conversion and struggles to throw off his monstrosity and achieve wholeness. He starts down the river on a houseboat with some disciples, stopping at towns to preach the gospel of love, while searching for his brother. He earns peace and serenity through suffering. It is on his quest for peace that he enters the city and gets involved in a clash with the police and finds himself in jail.
Warren's _At Heaven's Gate_ seems to demonstrate in a non-discursive way what he discursively put later in _Democracy and Poetry_. "... any true self is not only the result of a vital relation with a community but is also a development in time, and if there is no past there can be no self."  

Perhaps, to indicate the malaise of "Technetronic Age," Warren presents three worlds created by men in _At Heaven's Gate_. A world created by a human being is bound to be defective and so are the three worlds in the novel.

The central figure Sue, with whom all the other characters of the novel are associated in one way or other, longs to be liberated from her father's lop-sided world, where the husband remains a stranger to his wife, where parents scarcely love their children, where true and natural love finds no place. Unable to live long in that diseased world, which infects even the healthy souls, Sue strives to search for a suitable world but fails to find a world that suits her. The second world seems to be self-sufficient and its creator Slim seems to offer solace to her love-lorn soul. The world of Slim built with the bricks of falsity comes to a shambles, once the truth is out. Realizing this world to be worse than the earlier one, Sue continues her search.

5. Ibid. p. 42.
The world of Sweetwater offers some solace to her. But even he fails to answer Sue's cry of love. The desperate Sue, shaken to the core, resorts to abortion and meets her pathetic end, when her former lover Slim Sarret strangles her.

Finding the long drift of "American democracy toward the abolition of the self," Warren, perhaps as a warning presents in At Heaven's Gate the "Technetronic" society with all its essential aimlessness and moral emptiness which is bound to make men mere machines without souls or selves. It is manipulated by men, who are monsters and in no way human.

Critics may not disagree with the statement of Richard Law that "If At Heaven's Gate fails as a text for most of its readers, it succeeds as an exercise for the artist." Warren, creates the perspective in At Heaven's Gate with which All the King's Men can be judged. I do not think the word "text" in the citation has a post-structural connotation. It may just mean a literary construct with a

coherent meaning. It must be granted that like World Enough and Time, At Heaven's Gate is an ambitious and tremendous creative venture. From the epigraph and Warren's gloss on it, it is clear that the three metaphors of the modern world we have in the novel place it near the theme of The Waste Land. But in Warren's novel, the title of which is ironically suggestive, we have a juxtaposition of metaphors to suggest that Murdock, Slim Sarret, and Sweetwater are violators of nature and destroy themselves. Sue Murdock, in spite of her innocence and purity of thought, is not Faulkner's Caddy. She could not get out of the three worlds and turn a new leaf in her life. Although this is not a flaw by itself, it stands in the way of any affirmative meaning emerging from the text. It may also be argued that Jerry is a precursor to Jack Burden because the rejuvenation of Jerry consists in accepting his father, and by extension, in rejecting the metaphors of the modern world. It is in this sense that At Heaven's Gate dramatizes The Waste Land theme, not in terms of myth, but in terms of metaphoric suggestivity. This emphasizes that Warren is presenting men and women in a human frame which highlights human limitations. A lack of proper understanding of human limitations makes us hover at the heaven's gate with a dubious sense of our own humanity.