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When Is an Agrarian Not an Agrarian?
A Reading of Robert Penn Warren's "The Briar Patch"

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Critics have tended to fall into one of two camps on the matter of Robert Penn Warren's participation in the Southern Agrarian movement. They have either agreed with Hugh Ruppersburg that "Agrarianism is...the essential premise on which [Warren's] American explorations have rested" (30), or with Paul Conkin that "never" did Warren "ever write a single essay in which he committed himself, philosophically, to any version of Agrarian ideology" (105). As a result, his literary output has often either been read as a direct expression of Southern Agrarianism, or exonerated from any connection to it. I propose that Warren's relationship to Agrarianism was much more complex and conflicted than either of these positions allows, and that this is evident even in the essays he explicitly contributed to the movement. In this article, I will discuss the most famous of these essays – "The Briar Patch."

The Backdrop

Between 1910 and 1930, a group of intellectuals formed at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, around the poets Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom, and later Allen Tate. At that time, faculty members lived on campus and relations

between students and faculty went well beyond the classroom.¹ The membership of the circle varied over time as faculty members, visiting writers, students, and friends came and went, and by 1923 included Robert Penn Warren, known throughout his life to his friends as “Red,” who was then sixteen years old. From 1922 to 1925, this group of friends published a poetry magazine called *The Fugitive*. By the late 1920s, however, the key members of the group began to have much more political concerns and to be preoccupied with the plight of the South.

During the 1920s, the South was in the throes of modernization. After Reconstruction, much of the region was desperately poor. The economy was based on increasingly unprofitable one-crop farming, there was a large surplus labor force (both black and white) lacking skills and education, and rural communities were plagued by poor nutrition and a number of diseases. On this background, businessmen began to promote the Yankee notion of hard work and material success to create what became known as the “New South,” a term coined in 1886 by the journalist Henry W. Grady at a speech before the New England Club of New York City (Harris 2). As opposed to the Old South, which had been based on agriculture and slavery, the New South would be a beacon of industrialized progress. Proponents championed rapid change and material advancement, sponsoring the building of railroads and encouraging farmers to think of themselves as businessmen and to learn about science. However, many southerners were afraid that they would lose their identity and traditions, and feared the proliferation of the squalid slums seen in the southern mill towns. They were right to worry. In his influential

¹ Warren has described how vibrant and exciting he found Vanderbilt when he was an undergraduate, with its various writing clubs, some of which were “informal” and held in the homes of teachers: “we’d read each other’s poems and booze a little, crack corn, and talk poetry” (Stitt 235).

book *Origins of the New South 1877-1913*, published in 1951, C. Vann Woodward described how, in contrast to the hopeful vision of progress, the New South was in actuality headed by an elite group of businessmen allied with northern interests, who dominated southern politics and society to the detriment of poor white and especially black southerners (185).

Although Grady's picture of the New South continued to presuppose white supremacy over blacks (Harris 2), modernization also threatened established power structures and, in particular, white southerners were worried about losing social and political supremacy. After the Civil War, in the terms of the economic historian Jay R. Mandle, wealthy white plantation owners had managed to re-entrench the plantation system by exploiting the "obstacles confronted by the former slaves in their search for nonplantation employment opportunities" (7). In many cases, African Americans were "compelled to supply their labor to the planters at low wages, thereby providing the workers essential for continued plantation viability" (7). As Mandle has argued, "the continuation of the southern plantation economy meant that the persistence of the differential economic experience which has characterized the white and black populations in the United States was allowed to continue and draw new life" (16). This context was crucial to southern resistance to industrialization. As Richard Godden has contended, "mechanization appeared redundant in the context of a large and 'bound' labor force. Indeed, machinery would only disrupt a social and political order founded on the owner's capacity to pay low across the board" (121).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century has come to be known as "the nadir" of race relations in America, because in contrast to what James W. Loewen has

called “the textbooks’ archetypal story line of constant progress” (24), in this period race relations actually deteriorated. Rayford W. Logan, the originator of the term, argued that “the nadir was reached...precisely because of the efforts made to improve” the position of African Americans in the years after the Civil War (52).² Four-fifths of the black US population still lived in the South in the 1920s, and so the racial mix was very different from that of the North (Roland 21).³ African Americans were also still widely considered to be inferior to whites. Although one-third of all land was farmed by African Americans (Casper 27), they were at the bottom of the social and economic ladder across the South. The advent of the Great Depression put further pressure on deteriorating race relations, as menial jobs formerly thought to be unfit for white men became more desirable (Loewen 42). During the nadir period, African Americans lost many of the legal gains they had made during Reconstruction, as individual southern states changed their constitutions to erase the rights granted to African Americans after the Civil War, including the right to vote and hold public office (Loewen 7, 33).⁴ As W. E. B. Du Bois put it, this period saw “the legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro” (31).

Racial segregation became the norm in southern states after the Supreme Court upheld its legality in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*⁵ decision (Estes 5). By the 1920s, Jim

² Logan originally stated that the “last decade of the nineteenth century and the opening of the twentieth century marked the nadir of the Negro’s status in American society” (52). Loewen has subsequently persuasively argued that the nadir of race relations in America ran from 1880 to about 1940 (25).

³ There were 278 African Americans per 1000 population in the South in 1920, and 247 African Americans per 1000 population in the South in 1930 (Couch 438).

⁴ The fifteenth amendment to the US Constitution, prohibiting federal and state governments from denying a citizen the right to vote based on their “race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” was ratified on February 3, 1870. However, new state constitutions effectively disenfranchised black voters in the South by incorporating obstacles such as literacy tests and poll taxes. The first state to pass a new Constitution was Mississippi in 1890, but all of the other southern and border states had done so by 1907.

⁵ *Homer A. Plessy v. John H. Ferguson*. 163 US 537. US Supreme Ct. 1896.

Crow laws were in full force, and blacks and whites were segregated in all public places. Although many southerners saw this as a restoration of former race relations, it is important to note that segregation was unequivocally new. During slavery, whites and blacks lived closely together, often in the same homes, and using the same shops, churches and other facilities (Vann Woodward, *Jim Crow* 14).⁶ As Du Bois argued, this meant they were often “in close contact and sympathy” (101) and that “there were bonds of intimacy, affection and sometimes blood relationship, between the races” (110).⁷

Under Jim Crow, African Americans were not only segregated but also frequently assailed with violence. Membership in the second wave of the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist terrorist group that first emerged in the 1860s during Reconstruction in order to reaffirm white superiority, flourished during the poverty-stricken 1920s in the South, peaking in 1924 at six million (Stewart 108). Lynchings reached an all-time high.⁸ The legal system was also frequently used to subjugate the black population. Nonetheless, in the 1920s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) fearlessly pursued the end of segregation, publicized and lobbied against the violent activities of the Klan, and tried to push through a federal anti-lynching law (Jonas 22). In summary, it is an understatement to say that this was a period of severe racial tension.

⁶ Vann Woodward stresses the inaccuracy of the assumption that “things have ‘always been that way,’” and details the “relative recency of the Jim Crow laws” (xi-xii).

⁷ Toni Morrison has also wryly suggested that African Americans were able to tolerate segregationist rhetoric because they “knew that for three hundred years black people lived in segregationists’ houses, were all up in their food, in the intimate lives of their family and understood that our presence was not repellent but in fact sought after as long as they could control us” (165).

⁸ The NAACP calculated that between 1889 and 1922, 3436 Americans were lynched, with the majority being African American men (Estes 6).

I'll Take My Stand

In 1930, the Southern Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* was published, a book of essays by twelve contributors (ten from Vanderbilt), including Davidson, Ransom, Tate, and Warren. The authors were a diverse group. Conkin has underlined the lack of unity in *I'll Take My Stand*, arguing that it is impossible to read it as one work (33, 70). While there are important differences between the essays, I concur with Paul V. Murphy that the manifesto is much more cohesive than Conkin allows (29). Importantly, all of the authors subscribed to the “Statement of Principles” that opened the collection. This statement outlined the Agrarians as “consolidated by a set of principles which could be stated with a good deal of particularity” (xx), most prominently that “all tend to support a southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian versus Industrial” (xix).

The Agrarians were afraid that the South was becoming “an undistinguished replica of the usual industrial community” (xxi). In the “Statement of Principles” and in the individual essays, the authors criticized industrialization and endorsed the traditional values they saw as embodied by “the agrarian life of the older South” (xxvi). They condemned the privileging of profit and vulgar wealth, the rise of materialism and meaningless consumption, the savagery of economic competition, the separation of ownership from the control of property, the destruction of the dignity of labor, the ravaging of local communities, and the exploitation of nature.

The collection is unashamedly ideological and conservative. The Agrarians championed the order and stability of an agrarian society over the dramatic changes that industrialization would bring; they looked to the history and traditions of the old South; they were skeptical of equality, particularly with regard to African Americans; and they prioritized individual freedom over industrial or governmental organization. The Agrarians saw the traditional southern way of life as under threat from “progressivists” (Ransom 8) bent on modernizing and industrializing the South. In the “Statement of Principles” they dismissed the social reasons for desiring progress in the poverty-stricken South as “absurd,” because the “responsibility of men is for their own welfare and that of their neighbors; not for the hypothetical welfare of some fabulous creature called society” (xxviii). In case readers were in danger of thinking that the Agrarians’ criticism of the “economic evils” (xxiii) of industrialism was redolent of Marxism, they were quick to dismiss those who “rely on the...militancy of labor, to bring about a fairer division of the spoils” as “apologists” whose remedies were “homeopathic” (xxiii).

More specifically, many scholars have seen the Agrarians as part of the long tradition of southern anti-statist conservatism. The postbellum tension between the North and the South focused on industrialization and the New South “carpet-baggers” was exacerbated in 1925 by the national ridicule and derision directed at the South as a result of the Scopes evolution trial in Tennessee.⁹ Northern journalists such as H. L. Mencken portrayed southerners as “backward,” “yokels,” “morons,” and “hill-billies” (Tompkins 35-51). Many scholars have cited the publicity surrounding the Scopes trial as the

⁹ The State of Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes. TN Crim. Ct. 1925. The trial concerned a high school teacher accused of violating Tennessee’s Butler Act, which made it illegal to teach evolution in state-funded schools.

galvanizing force behind the Agrarian manifesto (Szczesniul 13). The book was a self-conscious defense of the South, with the title referencing “Dixie,” the Confederate anthem. As Ransom put it in his contribution, the Agrarians were “reconstructed but unregenerate” (1). After a trip to visit his Vanderbilt friends in 1929, Warren wrote to Tate that “I spent a few days in the midst of the Nashville brothers and they are on fire with crusading zeal and the determination to lynch carpet-baggers” (*Letters: Vol One* 167).

One way in which *I'll Take My Stand* can be seen to represent southern conservatism is in its vitriolic critique of capitalism. Murphy calls the book radical conservatism, arguing that the Twelve Southerners “were frankly reactionary and seriously proposed returning to an economy dominated by subsistence agriculture” (49). Alexander Karanikas has argued that “so broadly conceived was their disaffection from the national or American culture that only such inclusive terms as ‘the reactionary view’ or ‘ultraconservative’ can adequately frame their range of interest” (viii). Overall, while scholars may debate the exact place of Southern Agrarianism in the history of conservatism in America, there is more or less consensus that it was a profoundly conservative movement.

“The Briar Patch”

While *I'll Take My Stand* was in the planning stages, Robert Penn Warren was living in England, studying at Oxford University on a Rhodes scholarship (1928-1930). His friends had not forgotten him though, and assigned him the task of writing on the role

of African Americans in the Agrarian scheme for the upcoming collection. Davidson and Tate had agreed that this would be an essential part of the collection, because the “Southern people are not actually united on anything these days – except the Negro question” (237). Ransom wrote to Warren in January of 1930 suggesting the topic would be right for him (Warren papers).¹⁰ Davidson agreed, and wrote to Warren shortly afterwards that it was “up to you, Red, to prove that negroes are country folks – ‘bawn and bred in a briar-patch’” (Warren papers).¹¹ Upon agreeing to contribute an essay to the manifesto, Warren told Davidson, “The one I would like to write, and the one I had in mind, is the essay on the negro” (*Letters: Vol One* 179), confirming his interest in the topic. Warren grasped the difficult task he had in hand, however, writing to Tate in 1930 that the “negro is a delicate subject and one which could be most easily attacked; consequently, for my own good and the good of others, I can’t afford to pull a boner in dealing with it” (*Letters: Vol One* 185). Nonetheless, he told Davidson and Ransom the same year that “if we were sensitive to public opinion we should not have engaged to participate in this enterprise” (*Letters: Vol One* 189).

In the nineteen-page essay “The Briar Patch,” Warren delivered a patronizing, romanticized, and markedly prejudiced depiction of African Americans, arguing that they were more suited to staying in the South than going to seek equality and opportunity in the North, because the “negro has always been a creature of the small town and farm...by temperament and capacity” (260). This is what “his good nature and easy ways incline him to as an ordinary function of his being” (260-1). The title of the essay, prompted by

¹⁰ “Of course we have been counting on you as one of the faithful...Haven’t you a burning message on the subject of ruralism as the salvation of the negro?”

¹¹ In the original letter, one can see that Davidson originally wrote “negroes are country animals” – “animals” has been crossed out and replaced with “folks.”

Davidson's initial letter, referenced Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus tales, set on an antebellum plantation, which are now widely considered to be racist and to contain a defense of slavery. In his 1931 review of *I'll Take My Stand*, the African American poet and literary critic Sterling Brown was scathing about the entire collection, but in particular "The Briar Patch," in which "Mr. Warren, with all the metaphysics of his breed, and using all the connotations of the title – tells the world about the Negro's place in that world" (282). Warren denied that the industrialization of the South would improve the prospects of black southerners, proposing that it could make them worse and citing "the race riots which have occurred in the North since the days of the war" (256) as evidence for this. He repeated the notion that when African Americans were, for a short period during Reconstruction, elected to political positions in the South, they were merely manipulated by white northerners and that while sometimes they "got an office out of it all and smoked cigars," their terms were marked by "corruption, oppression, and rancor" (248). Loewen has demonstrated that this was a fabrication disseminated by those invested in white supremacy (39).

In "The Briar Patch," Warren also argued that "the general matter of so-called higher education for the negro in the South is a small factor" (251) and that African Americans should be concentrating on vocational training, quoting Booker T. Washington, who "realized the immediate need of his race" (250), to support this idea. Ironically, in the words of Conkin, he "took Booker T. Washington's arguments and diverted them from industrial progress to agricultural achievements" (73). As Anthony Szczeniul has pointed out, Warren's citation of Washington, despite the fact that a third of a century had passed since the latter's "Atlanta Compromise" speech (1895), is

significant (35). In 1903, Du Bois published his well-known critique and dismissal of the speech and of Washington's "programme of...conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (25). He noted that Washington's speech pleased, in particular, southern conservatives, who viewed it as "a generously conceived working basis for mutual understanding" (26), while among "his own people...Mr. Washington has encountered the strongest and most lasting opposition" (27). Du Bois also pointed out that opposition to higher education for African Americans was a classic form of racism: "we daily hear that an education that encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than breadwinning, is the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black" (58-9). More recently, Mandle has argued that lack of education for black people was "both a consequence and a cause" (56) of the southern agricultural system, in which black poverty was "structural, an inherent aspect" (43). Notably, Du Bois is not mentioned by Warren, despite the national prominence of *The Souls of Black Folk* (Hubbard 2), the fact that Warren did "a good deal of preliminary reading" (*Letters: Vol One* 189)¹² in preparation for writing his essay and had certainly read Du Bois before¹³ and that he appears to be writing back to Du Bois in a number of ways. Michael Kreyling has seen Du Bois as a "phantom" presence in the essay, and Warren's refusal to name him as "directed amnesia" (272-3).

"The Briar Patch" is permeated with the assumptions about racial difference and

¹² Warren was clearly reading black literature at this time, because he mentioned Paul Robeson's biography in the first draft of the essay (Warren papers). Interestingly, the reason this reference was taken out of the essay by Davidson during editing is that Warren gave Robeson's wife the title "Mrs." (O'Brien 17).

¹³ In Warren's biography of the abolitionist John Brown, he cites Du Bois's biography of Brown (448).

white superiority that underlay segregation. Warren depicted segregation as the permanent order of things – “Let the Negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree” (264) – later describing the essay as “a cogent and humane defense of segregation” (*Who Speaks?* 11). He argued that it was understandable for African Americans to desire equality, but that this issue was “subtle and confused” (252). He thought it reasonable for African Americans to desire hotels, concerts, and restaurants as good as those enjoyed by white people, but not the same ones. The “negro radical” wishing for the latter was “suffering from a failure to rationalize his position, from the lack of a sense of reality, and from a defect in self-respect” (254). Ironically, this argument itself suffered from “the lack of a sense of reality” because black businesses equal to white businesses did not exist. In fact, they were explicitly prevented from existing by the lack of education and opportunity available to prospective black business owners and the entrenched poverty of their black clientele. As Mandle has argued, the South’s agrarian economy “was distinctly inhospitable to nurturing black business” (18).

Warren cited Washington’s famous statement, “We can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all the things essential to mutual progress,” and went further (one might say too far) in imagining Washington addressing African Americans desiring to use the same facilities as white Americans as follows: “you may respect yourself as a man, but you do not properly respect yourself as a negro” (254). Du Bois’s criticism of Washington’s use of the term “self-respect” could also apply to Warren here: “He insists on...self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run” (31). In short, Warren treats the idea of true equality as absurd. As Szczesiul has suggested, when

talking about the “negro radical,” Warren may very well have had in mind the organization Du Bois helped to found in 1909, the NAACP, which in the 1920s was vigorously campaigning for the end of Jim Crow (Szczesniul 35). “The Briar Patch” has little sympathy for this campaign. In addition, although Warren portrayed slavery as a lamentable part of history, he played down the multiple and specific horrors inflicted on African Americans, arguing that poor whites were “just as much the victim of the slave system as the negro” (258).

Warren’s essay fits with the conservative themes of the collection in many ways. Like the other contributors, he depicted farming as a panacea for both blacks and whites. The essay contains an Arcadian vision of an ordered segregated rural society in which individuals happily keep to themselves, tending their own farms. “The Briar Patch” is suspicious of technology, scornful of materialism, skeptical of progress, dismissive of true racial equality, and committed to the South and its history. David Farber has demonstrated clear links between conservatism and segregation (21), and it is also easy to draw parallels between Warren’s defense of segregation and the paternalistic arguments made in defense of slavery during the antebellum period, in particular with regard to his evocation of the northern race riots to show the superiority of the southern system in which African Americans supposedly received “protection” (260).

It is worth noting, however, that Davidson was actually shocked by the essay, telling Tate that it had “progressive implications,” and wondering whether Warren even wrote it (251). He was angry that the essay “goes off on a tangent to discuss the negro problem in general (which I take it, is not our main concern in the book)” (251). In fact,

the essay was almost left out of the collection.¹⁴ This is presumably because at the heart of Warren's essay are two relatively progressive assumptions, highlighted by S. D. Ealy: that regardless of the past, America is the contemporary home of African Americans, and both black and white southerners must accept this fact; and that black and white Americans share an interest in how society develops, and their fates are thus inextricably linked (121). Interestingly, these are both points made by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (103). As Conkin has argued, "The Briar Patch" "did not adhere to Southern racial norms and might offend the very Southerners they wanted to enlist in the agrarian cause" (72). Warren acknowledged that the reasons African Americans were migrating North in great numbers were inequality and "lack of opportunity" (252) in the South. He asserted that, "At present the negro frequently fails to get justice, and justice from the law is the least he can demand for himself or others can demand for him" (252). In this he advocated, among other things, "effective legislation" (260), which runs contrary to the generally anti-statist message of the collection. In the essay, Warren used the words "oppressed for centuries," "discrimination," and "prejudice" (248) to describe the way in which African Americans were treated in the South. He recognized the existence of "violence, such as lynching, which sometimes falls to the negro's lot" (259). Furthermore, Warren argued that "economic independence of the [African American] race" (253) is a goal that both blacks and whites should be pursuing, and that any white man who would seek to obstruct the self-fulfillment of blacks "does not properly respect himself as a man" (260).

Stewart has argued that "One must be careful to avoid underestimating just how

¹⁴ Davidson wanted to reject the essay, as did Frank Owsley. It was left in only after pressure from Tate, who stood up for his friend (Conkin 72).

far Warren *had* gone when he insisted on respect for the rights and dignity of the Negro as an individual, and one must recognize that the essay is everywhere suffused with a quiet humanity and decency” (165). It would be a mistake to overstate (as Stewart and many other critics do) this “humanity,” a word Warren usually insisted on when asked to comment on “The Briar Patch” in later life. It is important to note also that while the majority of critics have agreed with Warren’s later claim that no one could have imagined anything other than segregation at the time,¹⁵ this is clearly not true. If no one had been able to imagine an end to it, it never would have ended. As I have already mentioned, segregation was actually relatively new. Du Bois advocated an end to segregation in *The Souls of Black Folk*, stressing that this “radical and more uncompromising drawing of the color line” (111) was psychologically damaging to both races. W. T. Couch’s 1934 essay “The Negro in the South,” which could be read as a reply to “The Briar Patch,”¹⁶ is a good example of the fact that it was also possible for a white southerner to imagine the South without segregation. He argued that many of segregation’s “distinctions and discriminations are obviously absurd and pointless” and “have no excuse whatever for existence among a civilized people” (471). Szczesiul has persuasively demonstrated that most critics have elided the racial politics of “The Briar Patch,” ignoring the essay,

¹⁵ Marshall Walker, for example, argues that the essay is “the most humane possible expression of practical sympathy for the Negro within the structure in which both he and the Negro had been raised” (34-5).

¹⁶ In particular, Couch quarrels with the idea that farming is “an ideal occupation for the Negro, whereas industrial occupation in cities would bring him nothing but disaster” (442). He states that this is based on two presumptions – that African Americans are simple, ignorant people, and that farming is a simple job for ignorant people – both of which are incorrect: “all Negroes have not been content to remain simple, child-like, ignorant, and fixed in their status. In addition, farming has never been a simple, easy, natural process. It has always been one of the most difficult and complicated of all occupations” (442). Couch concludes: “That large numbers of Negro tenants and owners should have had the courage and resolution to break with their past and migrate to cities, especially that they should migrate in such large numbers to northern cities, is just one more sign that even the most untutored of the race are not totally unaware of their own best interests” (452).

treating it as unimportant, or glossing over its racist implications (28-9). He argues that many of the “humane concessions” to African Americans in the essay are simply ploys to make the continuation of segregation seem more plausible, and that it fits comfortably alongside the other essays in *I’ll Take My Stand* (34). However, this understates the degree to which Warren’s essay differs from the others, particularly on matters of race.

Race relations are not mentioned in the “Statement of Principles,” despite the fact that the “genuine humanism” (xxvi) of the old agrarian South that is idealized in the collection was based on the slave system, and the subject of race comes up only incidentally in the other contributions; however, when it is touched upon it is usually in a more shockingly racist way than in Warren’s essay. Ransom, for example, proposed that slavery “was a feature monstrous enough in theory, but, more often than not, humane in practice; and it is impossible to believe that its abolition alone could have effected any great revolution in society” (14). As Conkin has argued, “Ransom evaded the issue, but his hierarchical society clearly suggested Negro subordination” (80). Ealy has suggested that “an insight into the Agrarians’ view of the contemporary race question can be gleaned” (129) from Frank Owsley’s essay, in which he proposed that there was an explanation for slavery “which the North has never grasped – in fact, never can grasp until the negro race covers the North as thickly as it does the lower South” (68). Owsley argued that after independence, “Negroes had come into the Southern Colonies in such numbers that people feared for the integrity of the white race. For the negroes were cannibals and barbarians and therefore dangerous...free blacks were considered a menace too great to be hazarded. Even if no race wars occurred, there was a dread of being submerged and absorbed by the black race” (77). As Conkin has demonstrated, “it is clear

that in 1930, Owsley, [Andrew] Lytle, and Davidson already took an inflexible stand on segregation and supported this by a belief in some degree of Negro inferiority” (80).

The tone of Owsley’s essay contrasts sharply with Warren’s sympathetic and pragmatic consideration of the problems facing African Americans. It seems likely that the reason “The Briar Patch” shocked Davidson is that Warren attempted (however unsuccessfully) to consider “the Negro question” seriously from the point of view of African Americans – the problems facing them in the wake of Reconstruction and the way in which these could be addressed by the Agrarian scheme to create a society that functions for everyone, black and white – and that this was far from what Davidson had in mind. Intriguingly, despite Joseph Frank’s assertion that as “a member of the Southern Agrarian group Mr. Warren had fought the Marxists all through the thirties” (180), Warren’s essay also differs from the others in another aspect. He devoted a significant portion of “The Briar Patch” to advocating the need for African Americans to unionize in order to “bargain effectively” (256) when industrialization came to the South, which contradicts the castigation of organized labor in the “Statement of Principles.” In addition, there is much sympathy in the essay for the “poor white” population, which Warren describes as linked to the black population “in a single tether” (259). While this deemphasized the brutal specificity of segregation for African Americans, it also recognized the degree to which classism and lack of economic power played a role in the problems they (and, indeed, “poor whites”) faced. This stands in direct contrast to the hierarchical, class-based societies endorsed in many of the other essays, particularly Ransom’s.

Between his graduation from Vanderbilt in 1925 and his time in Oxford, Warren

had mostly been living away from the South, at Berkeley on a fellowship and later at Yale, although he spent long periods in the South, usually staying with Tate and his family, and was in regular contact with his Agrarian friends (Conkin 59). It seems significant that Warren was not living in the South when he wrote “The Briar Patch,” and was thus removed from what Stewart has called “the eve of battle tension” (164) that the others felt. Warren later proposed that in 1929 “I had been out of the South for a long time – in a sense, in flight from the South – and at least half of me was oriented toward Greenwich Village and the Left Bank and not toward the Cumberland Valley in Tennessee” (“Faulkner” 1). Although this statement benefits from hindsight, it is intriguing that Warren chose to speak of his young self as divided as a result of his travels. In parts of “The Briar Patch,” Warren appears to address himself to the other Agrarians, rather than speaking as one of them; for example, “If the Southern white man feels that the agrarian life has a certain irreplaceable value in his society, and if he hopes to maintain its integrity in the face of industrialism or its dignity in the face of agricultural depression, he must find a place for the negro in his scheme” (263). When arguing the case for African American unionization, he states, “Not infrequently in the South one meets a conservative temper which carries a naïve distrust of most types of organization” (257), but that the safety of everyone in the South lies “in a timely strategic adjustment of his position rather than in a tactical defense, however stubborn, of point after point. Not many generations ago the South made just such an error in the conduct of a war” (258). This is a serious warning, and again finds Warren appearing to stand apart from the others, not so much considering how African Americans will fit into the Agrarian plan as instructing the Agrarians on the adjustments they will need to make in

order to make room for them.

Interestingly, Warren hated the Dixie-derived title *I'll Take My Stand*, arguing that “it seems to me to inject an entirely false note into our purpose” (*Letters: Vol One* 187).¹⁷ Tate agreed, but Davidson and the others ignored their protestations. Warren and Tate noted in an indignant letter to Davidson and Ransom that “the disagreement seems to imply a fundamental misunderstanding between them and Brothers Tate and Warren in regard to the scope, if not the nature, of the project” (*Letters: Vol One* 189). As Conkin has pointed out, it was never clear “how much Warren was committed to the Agrarian cause” (59). He was interested in Agrarianism, expressing his “approval of the general scheme” (*Letters: Vol One* 167) in a letter to Tate in 1929 and stating that he was “for the Symposium idea” in a letter to Davidson in early 1930 (*Letters: Vol One* 179), but had never been part of the original discussions that led to the formation of the group. It is worth considering that Warren was younger than the others, and had been very much in awe of Ransom and Davidson in particular, who were established poets and lecturers when he was an undergraduate. Warren had been greatly influenced by these men while at Vanderbilt, and must have been flattered when they asked him to contribute to *I'll Take My Stand*, so it is possible that on some level he wanted to please them.¹⁸ He wrote to Tate in May of 1930 that Davidson “seems to have, or courteously professes to have, a touching faith in my ability to bring the thing off” (*Letters: Vol One* 185). Upon

¹⁷ Warren wrote Tate initially that “I think that the title, ‘I’ll Take My Stand,’ is the god-damnedest thing I ever heard of; for the love of God block it if you can” (*Letters: Vol One* 185). Warren and Tate preferred the title *Tracts Against Communism*.

¹⁸ Warren stressed the importance of these men to him in an interview in *Mid-South* in 1977: “For me, at least, the Fugitive group was one of the most important events in my life. It was the thing I looked forward to most in those days. There, I was treated like a man instead of a schoolboy” (16). William Bedford Clark has also argued that “Warren regarded [Ransom] as something of a father figure” (Warren, *Letters: Vol Two* 20).

submitting the essay to Davidson, Warren told him that “I tried to look at it as part of a book and not as an individual piece” (*Letters: Vol One* 187), implying that he purposefully allowed the views of the others to influence what he wrote. There is also the question of nostalgia. Conkin has argued that living away from the South “increased his affection for his old Fugitive friends” (59), and Warren said himself in 1956 at the Fugitives’ Reunion at Vanderbilt that he was drawn to Agrarianism because he was young, missing home, and feeling sentimental about the South (Purdy 208-9).

In fact, Warren later argued that he could not have written the essay after coming home to the South (Ellison and Walter 33). In 1965 he stated that “I never read that essay after it was published, and the reason was, I presume, that reading it would, I dimly sensed, make me uncomfortable. In fact, while writing it, I had experienced some vague discomfort” (*Who Speaks?* 10-11). He “uncomfortably suspected” that “no segregation was, in the end, humane” (12). It is obviously dangerous to accept that this retrospective statement tells the exact truth about Warren’s state of mind in 1930, and I want to avoid simply reading Warren’s later more liberal position into his early work and excusing the racist assumptions upheld by “The Briar Patch.”¹⁹ However, I do want to suggest that “The Briar Patch” is a much more complex and conflicted essay than has been appreciated to date – neither simply “racist” nor simply “humane.” Upon submission of the essay to Davidson in June of 1930, Warren wrote, “The essay doesn’t fill me with pride, but I hope that it will be harmless and will not look too shabby in the glittering array which I expect to see” (*Letters: Vol One* 186-7). This may simply constitute

¹⁹ Szczesiul argues that many critics do exactly this in their examinations of the essay (31). In the 1950s, Warren experienced a *volte-face* on the matter of race relations, and became an important advocate for integration, beginning with the publication of *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* in 1956.

modesty on Warren's part, but the word use is revealing. He is not proud of the essay, and he is anxious that it may do some sort of harm – to the overall message of the manifesto, to African Americans living in the South, or to his own psyche? In Joseph Blotner's biography of Warren, the latter is portrayed in his university years as emotionally fragile, worried that he will not be successful as a writer,²⁰ and depressed about an injury that significantly damaged one of his eyes (48-52). In a letter from 1924 he wrote that "I find every other aspect of my existence [apart from poetry] infinitely wearying or worse," and described "a sort of apathy that extends into every phase of my existence" (*Letters: Vol One* 18). Just a few years before "The Briar Patch," when Warren was nineteen, he tried to commit suicide, giving the reason as "a sort of ennui which had extended, and I almost said is extending, over a considerable period of time" (Blotner 49). In 1929, shortly before *I'll Take My Stand* was proposed, he wrote to Tate that he was "suffering a mental, moral and spiritual collapse" (*Letters: Vol One* 147). In my reading of the essay Warren contributed to the manifesto, the author emerges as someone unsure of who he was, at least in terms of his political identity, even at the moment he assumed the specific identity of "Southern Agrarian."

Note: A version of this paper was presented at the Robert Penn Warren Circle Meeting in Clarksville, Tennessee, on April 24, 2015.

²⁰ Warren told Tate in 1930 that "I don't have much faith, anyway, in my ability as a writer of fiction" (*Letters: Vol One* 185).

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