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Divorcing Robert Penn Warren from the South

PAUL MURPHY

History was the shaping imperative of much of Robert Penn Warren's thought and work. He understood the vagaries of history and memory – he was a potent historical iconoclast himself, a piercing and unflagging critic of romantic reconstructions of human history (even if he somewhat paradoxically placed great store in creating functional “myths” out of the materials of history). One of the healthier functions of the past, he argued, is its intimation of mortality – “it tells us that we, too, shall soon be part of the past.”³ It reminds us that life is short and the hour may well be late, thus spurring us on to achievement. Warren enjoined the reader to “earn a place in the story” by creating the future: “*That* is the promise the past makes to us.”⁴ The injunction reminds us that Warren, who as an adolescent dreamed of a military career, was not immune to the call of glory and evidently contemplated his place in history. (It also, of course, embodies Warren's fundamental conviction regarding history, which is that it sets the terms of the future but does not dictate it.)

Given Warren's stance toward history, he may well have expected that, despite his Pulitzer prizes and distinguished offices, his place in the American intellectual tradition would not be secure fifteen years after his death. Warren's importance in the nation's literary tradition and the tradition of Southern arts and letters *is* secure, as it was even while he was alive, but his larger place in American intellectual history is not. Much of the judgment of Warren's place in that history will depend on whether he is only slotted with other Southern writers. His ultimate status depends, ironically, on how thoroughly he is divorced from the South, the place that occupied the center of almost all of his work. Warren would have appreciated the irony.

In his fine study of Warren's deep investment in an American (as opposed to Southern) *mythos*, Hugh Ruppersburg notes, “Agrarianism is the fundamental

³ Robert Penn Warren, “The Use of the Past,” in Robert Penn Warren, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989), 52-53.

⁴ “Use of the Past,” 53.

philosophical stance of Warren's career, the essential premise on which his American explorations have rested, including his eloquent studies of the civil rights movement."⁵ The first step in divorcing Warren from the South is to note that this particular claim is mistaken. Pragmatism and not Agrarianism was the fundamental philosophical stance of Warren's career. Work needs to be done on just how and when Warren became a pragmatist, but he clearly was one by the time of *All the King's Men* (1946). He was a pragmatist in the tradition of William James and thus internalized a radical skepticism about the world, a philosophical pluralism, and an essential relativism. He did not believe in Absolutes nor did he believe in Ideals; any faith in God that he might have achieved was hard-earned and a quixotic assertion of the will to believe, as it was for James. The essential indebtedness of *All the King's Men* to William James as much as the Southern rogue Huey Long is a matter of record.⁶ The novel was about ideas, not about Southern politics and surely not about the South itself.

Nor was Warren intellectually loyal to Agrarianism as it was originally conceived. Indeed, at the time that Agrarianism was born, in the discussions surrounding the 1930 symposium *I'll Take My Stand*, Warren was at Oxford. He contributed a moderate defense of segregation to the volume. It was indebted to Booker T. Washington, became an embarrassment to him later in life, and was not essential to any of the Agrarian themes. Indeed, with his friend and classmate Allen Tate, who *was* essential to Agrarianism, Warren strenuously objected to the defensive Southernism evoked by the book's title, thinking that it distorted the ideas contained therein. Agrarianism in 1930 was a cultural critique of modern, industrialized America with which Warren surely agreed but offered an explanation of modern ills to which he was undoubtedly indifferent. The Agrarians traced the problems of modern culture to industrial capitalism. Radical in attacking the dominant American cults of modernity and progress—exemplified in the 1920s by a faith in capitalism and the business civilization it spawned (almost impervious to criticism in the years before the crash of 1929, which were the years in which the Agrarians formulated their ideas)—the authors of *I'll Take My Stand* ("Twelve Southerners" on the title page) were conservative in seeking to preserve the face-to-face and traditionally organized culture of the specifically agrarian South – the farm and small town. Several of the Agrarians, including Tate and John Crowe Ransom, went on to formulate a political economy of sorts. Warren did not. Rather, he wrote poetry and criticism, edited his ground-breaking textbooks and the *Southern Review* with Cleanth Brooks, and pondered questions of power, politics, and idealism as fascism reared its head in Europe (and, after a fashion, in Louisiana). Many of his fellow Twelve Southerners followed out the logic of their Agrarian commitments in the 1930s until it dwindled in significance or began to be reworked in fundamental ways. Warren became a pragmatist.

⁵ Hugh Ruppersburg, *Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 30.

⁶ Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *All the King's Men*," in Robert Penn Warren, *A Robert Penn Warren Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 228.

In mitigation of this plea for the divorce of Warren from the South, one might point to his consistent use of Southern materials in his art, his identification with Southern letters, and, most importantly, the thematic content of his writing, linked as it is with themes of exile, division, honor, and the burden of the past. As Randy Hendricks recently (and convincingly) showed, the dominant motif of Warren's writing was the wanderer, or exile, whose tale reveals a "central conflict between an intrusive familial or regional identity on the one hand and an 'American' or metropolitan identity that courts his anonymity on the other."⁷ This motif links Warren with myriad other Southern writers and seems to have autobiographical resonance, as Warren himself left Louisiana State University, feeling somehow "squeezed out" of the South after the *Southern Review* was shut down by university officials and living his life thereafter in the North.⁸ The hero of his last novel, *A Place to Come To* (1977), Jediah Tewksbury, a small-town Southern prodigy whose disgust with the narrowness of his life there leads him to a near-permanent fleeing of it, seems to beg for an autobiographical gloss.

Yet, Warren identified with American letters generally as much as with Southern letters in particular and not just by taking figures like James and Reinhold Niebuhr for his intellectual guides. He despised certain features of the New England "American Renaissance" tradition, specifically the antinomian spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, but he admired the darker and more skeptical vision of Nathaniel Hawthorne and constructed a personal gallery of forebears that included Hawthorne, Herman Melville, John Greenleaf Whittier, Theodore Dreiser, and Joseph Conrad as well as Southerners such as Mark Twain and William Faulkner.

Warren did choose Southern materials, for they were what he knew, but was he a tortured Southern exile? His friend and colleague Allen Tate is often thought to be one. Tate authored the "Ode to the Confederate Dead," a stark modernist meditation on modern deracination figured in terms of a modern Southerner standing bereft and empty before an unspeaking Confederate headstone. This Southerner feels detached and inadequate; the dead do not speak to him and he does not live in heroic times. Following his own intellectual and poetic master, T. S. Eliot, Tate presented the modern man as deracinated, unable to integrate his ego with the cultural tradition and history of his people. And yet, even with Tate, who continued to be consumed with questions of Southern history and identity in much more explicit ways than Warren, one might ask how exactly he was exiled from the South. (Tate would, of course, have suggested that the mid-century South did not care for arts and letters, which resulted in poets such as himself and John Crowe Ransom heading North, but this is a different thing entirely.) Thomas A. Underwood's recent biography of Tate shows that Tate's personal life

⁷ Randy Hendricks, *Lonelier Than God: Robert Penn Warren and the Southern Exile* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 1.

⁸ Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weaks, eds., *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 272.

reflected the alienation depicted in his modernist writings, but the more one examines the biography the more one suspects the culprit here was Tate's family and not the South.⁹

Tate and Warren were artists – Southern artists living at a time when modernism was sweeping through Southern intellectual life (only shortly after it had started sweeping through Northern intellectual life). They lived through the heyday of the “idea of the South” – the myth of a coherent, unified Southern mind that flowered after the Civil War and became the cultural framework against which the writers of the Southern Renaissance, Tate and Warren not excepted, chafed.¹⁰ Southern exile (along with Christ-hauntedness and self-division) was a motif for Tate and Warren, one richly available in their intellectual milieu and well-suited for the exploration of the primary problematic of their modernist consciousness: the moral crisis engendered by the conditions of modern life, which included deracination and the loss of religious faith. Why not consider Warren an exemplary modernist, for that is what he was, only with a Southern accent? In Warren's work, the modernist hero finds redemption in knowledge, most often that gained through historical explanation or by somehow coming to terms with the past. Warren was a great moralist, and the knowledge his protagonists discover is often moral in nature – the recognition of guilt, the acceptance of responsibility. Jack Burden, the preeminent Warren hero, comes to understand the stultifying effects that a rigid and therefore false idealism had upon him. He felt condemned by these moral ideals and by his own past actions and decisions, but Warren has him discover that moral values must be adapted and revised in the face of the unique circumstances of a human life. There are no absolutes. History cannot be changed, but the future can be, for it is in flux and mutable. As Hendricks observes, “The unillusioned individual must finally come to trust himself and the values he makes for himself, and he must realize that life, like history, means the continuous revision of values” (85).

History properly conceived becomes a source of redemption for Burden. The past, Warren declared at a reunion of the Fugitive poets in 1956, when “imaginatively conceived and historically conceived in the strictest readings of the researchers” is “always a rebuke to the present.” In the past, he argued, “you can see what some of the costs were, what frail virtues were achieved in the past by frail men.”¹¹ But Burden also returns to the place of his youth, which might lead one to associate redemption with his return from exile. The solution to deracination is to reconstruct the bonds of community, to return home, either physically or spiritually, as Jed Tewksbury does at the end of Warren's late novel. Attachment to the organic, Agrarian (if not quite agrarian)

⁹ Thomas A. Underwood, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ See Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); and Paul V. Murphy, “The Idea of the South,” in *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton and Peter W. Williams (New York: Scribner's, 2001), 2:497-506.

¹¹ Rob Roy Purdy, ed., *Fugitives' Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3-5, 1956* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1959), 208-210.

community becomes the agent of redemption. Warren did, indeed, in the voice of a caustic prophet, denounce the bland homogenization of modern American life, scorning a world of “communication without community, of the ad-man’s nauseating surrogate for family sense and community in the word *togetherness*.”¹² He valued the physical and social reality of community. However, none of this suggests he was an exile himself. Warren’s friend, fellow Southerner, and fellow Yale University faculty member, the historian C. Vann Woodward, observed in an essay entitled “Exile at Yale” that “I shared most of his exile in close and personal terms.”¹³ The essay is noteworthy, however, for how little evidence Woodward provides of exile in Warren’s life. After attending college at Vanderbilt University, he traveled to California and New Haven and further abroad, but he returned eagerly to the South and taught there for over ten years. As Woodward admitted, there was no compulsion in his decision to leave Louisiana State University in 1942 and his precise reasons for doing so are unclear. Woodward portrays Warren as happy and fulfilled – whether at home in Connecticut or Vermont or traveling in Italy.

Returning home (whether the home is the South or not) is not the answer to the moral crisis of modern man. Warren may have used it symbolically to suggest a resolution, but it is noteworthy that the original “place to come to” for Jed Tewksbury in *A Place to Come To* is the small South Dakota hometown of his deceased first wife, where a tombstone had been conveniently erected for his future use. In the novel, that town did not, in the end, become Jed’s final resting place nor did the awaiting gravestone signal the end of his spiritual odyssey, but the relations of a loving community anywhere, not just in the South, are to be interpreted as the desired alternative to modern deracination and shallow communication-without-community. The place does not provide the answer in Warren’s novels, however. Rather, it was William James’s “new name for some old ways of thinking” – pragmatism – that was the solution.¹⁴

Robert Penn Warren does not earn a mention in Louis Menand’s splendid recent account of pragmatism, *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), but it is useful to note that Menand locates the genesis of pragmatism – the belief, developed by figures such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and James, that ideas, as Menand puts it, are not “out there” to be discovered but rather tools to be used to accomplish things – in the Civil War. In Menand’s narrative, it is the moral and emotional crisis of the war that leads men such as Holmes and James to question absolutes and turn, as a hopeful alternative, to an experimental understanding of life.¹⁵ In

¹² Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (1961), in Robert Penn Warren, *A Robert Penn Warren Reader*, 304.

¹³ C. Vann Woodward, “Exile at Yale,” in *The Legacy of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. David Madden (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 28.

¹⁴ The phrase is James’s subtitle to *Pragmatism*. See William James, *Pragmatism*, ed. Bruce Kucklick (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), 1.

¹⁵ Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), xi.

The Legacy of the Civil War, which Warren published in 1961 to mark the centennial of the conflict, he, too, links pragmatism with the war. The essay is a moral reflection, and Warren's comments primarily comprised a moral evaluation of the war. He specifically chides those who countenanced war, suffering, and devastation out of a fanatical devotion to a "higher law." Warren lambasted the abolitionists, a favorite target of his since his youth, when he had written scornfully of John Brown.¹⁶ He went on to identify moral failings in both the North and South after the war: the South explained away its failings with the "Great Alibi" of the war; the North accumulated a "Treasury of Virtue" based upon the war's emancipatory consequences that allowed it to ignore its own flaws.

In the 1950s and afterward, Warren repeatedly characterized the individual's quest for moral meaning and an end to alienation, in both his fictional and non-fictional writings, as a quest for "identity," a term arising from social science but in vogue in the 1950s.¹⁷ Indeed, Warren's work deeply resonated with the increasingly popular existentialist philosophy of the day. As George Cotkin indicates in his recent history of existentialism in America, figures such as Melville, Abraham Lincoln, Holmes, and James – individuals familiar with the despair and doubt at the core of existentialism yet who, like existentialists, did not yield to nihilism – comprise a corps of intellectual precursors to the twentieth-century movement.¹⁸ These figures were central to Warren's private intellectual tradition. Warren, a public intellectual in the 1950s and 1960s who wrote fluidly in an existentialist vein, came to it through the path of these precursors. (Notably, Warren does not appear in Cotkin's history, even as fellow literary icons, such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Norman Mailer, receive extensive discussion.)

Warren's characters struggle to attain identity, a thing which is not given but which must be created. This is not to deny the importance of the past but to affirm the open-endedness of the future. As William Bedford Clark observed, "In the final analysis, Warren insists, we never cease being what we *were*, even in the process of becoming what we *are* and envisioning what we *might be*. To deny the continuity of past, present, and future is to gamble with the very notion of an integral self – a gamble the individual

¹⁶ See Robert Penn Warren, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (New York: Payson Clarke, 1929). For another attack on the idealism of the abolitionists, see Robert Penn Warren, *John Greenleaf Whittier's Poetry: An Appraisal and a Selection* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 15-20. It is noteworthy that when approached by friends to sign on to a statement in support of civil disobedience, in this case relating to the Algerian War, Warren refused on grounds similar to his critique of the abolitionists' antinomianism. See "On Civil Disobedience and the Algerian War," *Yale Review*, 50:3 (March 1961), 462-80.

¹⁷ Philip Gleason, "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History," *Journal of American History*, 69:4 (March 1983), 910-31. As James Justus observed, the obsessive theme of Warren's writing was the quest for identity. James Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 148.

¹⁸ George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), ch. 2.

(or a whole people) is fated to lose.”¹⁹ Put another way, they must, like Jack Burden, come to live in “Time,” the ever-changing flux of existence, in which values and the future must be created by each individual and each generation. For Warren, this is a moral stance, and its opposite was that embodied by Southerners like his old friend and mentor Donald Davidson, who could not accommodate the historical need to end segregation in the 1960s. In Warren’s view, as suggested in a 1969 interview, Davidson was frozen in opposition to change.²⁰ Southerners, Warren declared, are prone to fatalism: “Things could not be changed – things lay beyond any individual effort to change them.”²¹ For Warren, the individual who has attained “identity,” that is, one who stands autonomous and in a healthy relation to both society and the past, is accepting the challenges of “Time” rather than complacently resting in a frozen past. For Warren, thinking of the past as unchanging and authoritative – as determinative of one’s actions in the present – was as wrong-headed as the decision to be loyal to the imperatives of an ideal regardless of the consequences of that ideal. In both cases one was evading moral responsibility by holding such a loyalty to a frozen image. Warren believed segregation to be a form of Southern piety to one’s ancestors and their history. In the context of African-American challenges to segregation and inequality in the 1960s, Warren demanded that Southerners break free of a destructive piety to the South and recognize their own moral responsibility to reform Southern society. Ending segregation required Southerners to both revise their values and realize that they could revise their understanding of the past. “The past was fluid – until it became the past; and then the fluidity of historical interpretation sets in,” he averred.²²

For Warren, pragmatism was a moral theory, an ethical alternative to the ancestor worship so stultifying in Southerners. In *The Legacy of the Civil War*, he expressed his admiration for Lincoln who possessed an “ethic that demands scrutiny of motive, context, and consequences, particularly the consequences to others” (281). It was this ethic that Warren proffered as the best legacy of the Civil War, not “higher-law-ism” or the Great Alibi (the frozen past that morally incapacitates modern Southerners) or the Treasury of Virtue. Like Menand, he saw the war as generative of a superior, pragmatic moral ethic, akin to Max Weber’s “ethic of responsibility” (297). He returned to Weber in a later essay, “The Use of the Past,” quoting him as an answer to what he saw as a destructive American idealism. “There is an abysmal contrast between the conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic of ultimate ends – that is, in religious terms, ‘The Christian does rightly and leaves the result to the Lord’ – and conduct that follows the maxim of an ethic

¹⁹ William Bedford Clark, *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 98.

²⁰ Watkins, Hiers, and Weeks, eds., 159.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

²² Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 428.

of responsibility, in which case one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of his action,” Weber observed (35).

Pragmatism was a Northern thing, rooted in a Northern state of mind. As Warren observed in *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back*, a late essay replete with the themes of exile, return, history, and identity, “This was the state of mind that saw history not in terms of abstract, fixed principles but as a wavering flow of shifting values and contingencies, each to be confronted on the terms of its context.” Jefferson Davis viewed the Constitution as if it were equivalent to “the tablets that Moses delivered from Sinai”; Lincoln was able to see it “in some such evolutionary sense as that of Justice Holmes when Holmes wrote of the development of law.”²³ Warren’s characters repeatedly find redemption, and through this, personal reconciliation and the possibility of love, by gaining moral knowledge. The path to this knowledge is philosophical, not geographical. The exile’s return is ultimately accomplished through a new view of the world, which then allows a return to home and community.

In Warren’s version of pragmatism, historical research and introspection become the means by which the individual gains this new view of the world and achieves moral knowledge. For example, in *All the King’s Men*, Jack Burden was a failed graduate student in history and a persistent historian in his present life. As Jonathan Cullick recently showed, Warren repeatedly used biographical investigation as a fictional and non-fictional form, with narrators, sometimes himself, scrupulously sifting evidence, imaginatively re-entering historical sources, sometimes physically journeying to historical sites in search of connection.²⁴ Even as a frozen vision of the past was destructive, Warren relentlessly returned to the past in pursuit of knowledge; it became the ultimate path to understanding humanity in general and any particular human specifically. The true community of the past or the moral heroism of historical figures becomes a rebuke to the shoddy present. The past in which Warren had faith was that which was meticulously reconstructed with a historian’s care even as Warren realized that our narratives of the past are fabrications, designed (rightly so) to achieve particular ends. They must be retailored for current concerns. In this sense, the writing of history requires imagination, for he at times wrote of myth as necessary for the fusion of thought and feeling and could write of history as the “big myth we live.”²⁵

Warren was a moral critic for whom history became the medium of moral discovery. As such, there are many places to fit him into the intellectual history of the twentieth century. He belongs with the modernists who, inspired by the intellectual

²³ Robert Penn Warren, *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980), 62.

²⁴ Jonathan S. Cullick, *Making History: The Biographical Narratives of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), ch. 1.

²⁵ Robert Penn Warren, “John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony,” *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 11:1 (Jan. 1935), 96, 100; Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons: A Tale In Verse and Voices* (New York: Random House, 1953), xii.

revolutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, willfully (and bravely) cut themselves off intellectually from established values and traditions. He was a conservative modernist, critical of the society and culture that modernity created and harshly contemptuous of the idea of progress. He belongs in any history of conservatism that extends deeper than a study of the political thinkers of the Right who co-opted the term after 1945. (Indeed, Warren aligned himself against the conservative movement and Southern conservatism through these years.) He belongs with historicists of any bent, literary or otherwise. He also quite clearly belongs to the history of pragmatism and existentialism, even as the historians of these movements ignore him. Whether Warren occupies a place in American intellectual histories of the future depends in great measure on whether he is seen only as a Southerner obsessed with Southern problems. He was that, too. Yet, he was no Southern exile, nor were his most important intellectual inspirations Southern.

Despite all of the above, there is little reason to believe that a suit of divorce between Warren and the South will win at court. Warren cannot be understood apart from the South, for no person can be understood outside the relevant context, and the South provided the images, metaphors, language, and history through which Warren expressed his profoundly non-Southern and non-Agrarian philosophy. The divorce suit, Warren would assert, deserves to fail. He himself would surely have testified against it.

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