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***“An Exciting Spiral”:
Robert Penn Warren on Race and Community¹***

STEVEN D. EALY

“The Southern people are not actually united on anything these days—except the Negro question,” Donald Davidson wrote to Allen Tate in October 1929.² Davidson and Tate had been discussing the possible subjects and authors to be included in a symposium defending the rural South against the industrial North, and against those Southerners who sought to bring about a “New South” through industrialization.³ In any such defense of the South, the “Negro question” would be a crucial issue, especially if Davidson’s sense of a Southern consensus on race were correct.

Among the names under consideration was that of Robert Penn Warren, who had been a “Fugitive” along with Tate and Davidson during his student days at Vanderbilt University.⁴ On an early table of contents prepared by Tate, Warren’s name appeared next to two topics, “The Southern Way of Life” and “Religion and Aristocracy in the South.” Tate wanted Warren to write on “The Southern Way of Life.”⁵ Warren himself wrote to Davidson on the issue, clearly stating his preference: “The one I would like to write, and the one I had in mind, is the essay on the Negro.”⁶ When Davidson finally agreed to give Warren the assignment on race, he wrote to Warren that “It’s Up To You, Red, to prove that Negroes are country folks . . . ‘born and bred in a briar-patch.’”⁷

Warren wrote and submitted his essay while a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. In later years Warren was critical of “The Briar Patch,”⁸ characterizing it as “a cogent and humane defense of segregation.”⁹ When Davidson read Warren’s article, however, he was “shocked,” claiming “The Briar Patch” had “progressive implications” and that “the ideas advanced about the negro don’t seem to chime with our ideas as I understand them.”¹⁰

Two assumptions supported Warren’s argument in “The Briar Patch.” First, regardless of how blacks came to America, or how oppressed they were once brought to America, America is the contemporary home of the descendants of the slaves. Both blacks and whites must come to terms with the implications of this fact. Second, blacks and whites share a basic interest in how society develops, and their fates are inextricably linked together.

Warren maintained that the current problems confronted by Southern blacks date to the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Although Warren did not use this language, his understanding of blacks in the aftermath of the Civil War was shaped by the belief that slavery kept blacks in perpetual childhood. With emancipation, perpetual

children were immediately granted the rights of adults. At the conclusion of Reconstruction blacks had freedoms they knew not how to exercise, and which would be taken from them in the post-Reconstruction era.

The negro was as little equipped to establish himself in [the post-Reconstruction South] as he would have been to live again, with spear and breech-clout, in the Sudan or Bantu country. The necessities of life had always found their way to his back or skillet without the least thought on his part . . . He did not know how to make a living, or, if he did, he did not know how to take thought for the morrow. (*ITMS*, 247)

The brief ascension to political power during Reconstruction “did little to remedy the negro’s defects in preparation.” What training he received during this period perhaps made matters worse, for “it was a training in corruption, oppression, and rancor.” This period in which blacks were “used as an instrument of oppression solved nothing.” Even worse, however, this period of political ascension “sadly mortgaged his best immediate capital . . . the confidence of the Southern white man with whom he had to live” (*ITMS*, 248).

Between two “extremes of prejudice”¹¹ stood “a more realistic view that the hope and safety of everyone concerned rested in the education of the negro” (*ITMS*, 249). Warren acknowledged that this would be a very slow road to travel, not only because of racial prejudice, but also because the South had traditionally spent little on education in general. The major question Warren addressed in his discussion of education was the type of education that blacks should receive. In simplified terms, the argument was between academic and vocational education: “For what is the negro to be educated? It is a question that must be answered unless one believes that the capacity to read and write, as some believed concerning the franchise, carries with it a blind magic to insure success” (*ITMS*, 249).

Warren came down squarely on the side of vocational education,¹² quoting Booker T. Washington on the issue. Warren characterized Washington as recognizing that most blacks would have to live off of their own labor, and “that little was to be gained by only attempting to create a small group of intellectual aristocrats in the race” (*ITMS*, 250). Warren maintained that vocational training remained the most urgent need in black education.

In his argument for vocational education for blacks, Warren made two important points that deserve special emphasis. First, Warren maintained that the argument for vocational education he had just made “applies equally well to the problem of white illiteracy in the South and elsewhere” (*ITMS*, 251). Warren’s position on vocational education for blacks was therefore a specific application of a more general argument he would make relating to the appropriate type of education for American society in general. Second, Warren’s argument for vocational education, which was directed toward the mass of southern blacks, was not intended to deny the importance of higher education for blacks. Warren asserted that “everyone recognizes that there is a need for negroes in the professions, especially medicine and teaching” (*ITMS*, 251). Note that here Warren omitted the law, which might be seen as the crucial profession for blacks, given his emphasis on equality before the law later in this essay.

Warren thought that the theoretical argument for black higher education was undermined “if at the same time a separate negro community or group is not built up

which is capable of absorbing and profiting from those members who have received this higher education” (*ITMS*, 251). Without a strong black community in the South capable of supporting a professional infrastructure, educated blacks would “leave the South to seek [their] fortune elsewhere.” Such an eventuality would have two serious consequences, according to Warren: the loss of black role models in the South and a loss of understanding of the southern situation on the part of a relocated black leadership.¹³

At this point Warren began a more general discussion of the requirements for the development of strong black communities. He approached this topic through a discussion of why educated blacks have moved from the South, and noted that the most common reasons for this movement were a lack of opportunity and discrimination. Warren collapsed these two issues into the single question of equality. While acknowledging that equality is a complicated question, Warren thought it could be untangled.

Warren, either optimistically or naively, wrote, “The simplest issue, and probably the one on which most people would agree, is that of equal right before the law” (*ITMS*, 252). Justice before the law, so often unavailable to the black, “is the least he can demand for himself or others can demand for him.” Warren bemoaned the existence of both racial and economic discrimination, but suggested that racial justice might prove to be more achievable than class justice. Warren then underlined the broader social importance of racial equality before the law, without spelling out the implications of his comment. “The matter of political right carries repercussions which affect almost every relation of the two races,” he wrote, but then concluded by merely reiterating “the least that can be desired in behalf of the negro is that any regulation shall apply equitably to both him and the white man” (*ITMS*, 252).

Beyond this strict legal equality, other aspects of equality “are more subtle and confused” (*ITMS*, 252). The lack of opportunity for educated blacks, for example, could mean two different things (or, as Warren noted, it can mean both). Does the black professional “simply regret . . . that his negro clientele will be small and many of its members too poor to pay him a living commensurate to his talents and training? Or does he protest the fact that the white man will seek out another white man—a man whose professional abilities may possibly be inferior” to his own? (*ITMS*, 253). The same alternative positions present themselves when we raise the question of social discrimination: “Does he simply want to spend the night in a hotel as comfortable as the one from which he is turned away, or does he want to spend the night in that same hotel?” (*ITMS*, 254). Warren’s questions foreshadow the civil rights debate that would dominate national politics three decades later.

Warren accepted as the reasonable answer to both of these sets of questions the first alternative, the alternative that recognized the doctrine of “separate but equal.” Warren’s solution to lack of opportunity and social discrimination was the development of an economically independent black community, “a race group that will support and demand such services as [the black professional] can offer” (*ITMS*, 253). Warren recognized that this approach would be seen as treason by both black and white “radicals” who demanded complete social equality immediately. For these radicals, “to simply look forward to a negro society which can take care of all the activities and needs of its members is a feeble compromise” (*ITMS*, 254). At this point Warren again quoted Booker T. Washington in support of his position.

The question of industrial development stood at the heart of agrarian concerns, if not at the heart of Warren's essay. The agrarians of *I'll Take My Stand* were motivated both by their opposition to the "industrial gospel" (*ITMS*, xx) and by their belief that "the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations" (*ITMS*, xxix). Applying both the positive and negative elements of the agrarian position to the question of black society, Warren offered a two-fold argument: industrial development was not a panacea for the black community and agriculture provided the surest means to black self-sufficiency.

As characterized by Warren, the advocates of the "New South" argued that the development of industry is "the factor which would make the Southern negro's economic independence possible" and will "strike off the shackles and lift the negro from his state of serfdom, ignorance, and degradation" (*ITMS*, 255). Pointing to the black experience in the North, Warren suggested that the belief that industrial development will lead to black self-sufficiency entailed an "exorbitant act of faith" in industrialism, a faith not warranted by the black experience in northern industry.¹⁴ Northern blacks, rather than achieving economic independence, had been ignored until they were needed to replace striking white workers. "It is an old situation in the North where the negro, cut off from the protection of unions in time of peace, made an ideal scab in time of trouble" (*ITMS*, 256). There was no reason to believe that as the South industrialized, blacks as "a race of potential scabs" would not be used to keep white workers in line. There was also no reason to believe that blacks would benefit from this industrialization.

Warren thought that efforts toward industrialization and the development of organized labor in the South would encounter white resistance at two levels. At the elite level there was a native and "naïve distrust of most types of organization" (*ITMS*, 257). This distrust applied to both labor and capital, but would certainly fuel opposition to the development of a strong labor movement. Equally important was the attitude of "poor whites" who saw themselves threatened if blacks become economically independent. The danger from the white lower classes stemmed from the willingness on the part of these whites to use violence against individual blacks who were seen as potential threats (*ITMS*, 258-59).

Warren wrote that the only way to avoid racial violence under the conditions of increased industrialization in the South was through the recognition that "the fates of the 'poor white' and the negro are linked in a single tether. The well-being and adjustment of one depends on that of the other" (*ITMS*, 259). White labor could attempt to retard the development of black labor through intimidation or violence. Or white labor could learn "that color has nothing to do with the true laying of a brick and that the comfort of all involved in the process depends on his recognition and acceptance of the fact" (*ITMS*, 260).

Unless white labor learned this lesson industry would play black labor off against white labor to the detriment of both. A peaceful solution to changing labor conditions brought about by industrial expansion "will demand tact on the part of the employer, judgment and patience on the part of both the negro and white workman, effective legislation, and the understanding by the ordinary citizen" (*ITMS*, 260). Warren did not answer the crucial question of whether Southern reserves of tact, judgment, patience and understanding were adequate to handle the inevitable stresses created by industrial growth.

Warren concluded his discussion of industrialization by adding that there was one final lesson that must be learned by the white laborer if these changes in the labor market were to occur peacefully: "What the white workman must learn . . . is that he may respect himself as a white man, but if he fails to concede the negro equal protection, he does not properly respect himself as a man" (*ITMS*, 260). Warren was not optimistic that this lesson would be learned easily.

Having dealt with industrialism and the demands that it would place on Southern society, Warren then turned to a defense of rural life as offering blacks the best opportunity for economic independence and development of strong communal structures. Warren argued that, by "temperament and capacity," the southern black belonged in the small town or on the farm. A return to rural life would provide the blacks with "the status of a human being who is likely to find in agriculture and domestic pursuits the happiness that his good nature and easy ways incline him to as an ordinary function of his being" (*ITMS*, 260-61).

Warren argued that a move toward the land would provide the "readiest and probably surest way for the greater number of the negroes to establish themselves" (*ITMS*, 261). In addition to providing for financial independence, such a move would save blacks from the "formalized and impersonal" group relations of the city (*ITMS*, 262). There was more opportunity for contact between the races in a rural setting, and this contact allowed for the development of personal relations that transcended race.¹⁵ Warren in fact maintained that "the rural life provides the most satisfactory relationship of the two races which can be found at present" (*ITMS*, 262).

The movement of blacks into agriculture, however, again raised "the difficulty of competition between the two races" (*ITMS*, 263), which again raised the question of racial violence. Warren thought that in a rural setting the issue was "more readily ponderable," but he offered no plan to deal with the type of violence he had emphasized in talking about urban competition. Warren seemed to think of rural whites as having more patience, prudence, and good will toward blacks than their urban counterparts. In fact, racial violence in the South was as likely to be found in rural areas and small towns as in urban industrialized areas.¹⁶

Ultimately Warren set forth a challenge to Southern whites, and this challenge was, intentionally or unintentionally, aimed directly at his agrarian brothers: "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" (*ITMS*, 263).

In keeping with the theme of the symposium, Warren proposed that that place is the agrarian society, and he identified a number of issues that needed to be addressed if the movement of blacks into agriculture was to be successful. Agricultural education was a necessity, and blacks had to "receive equal consideration" in cooperative and protective efforts (*ITMS*, 264). More generally, the conditions necessary for the development of the black community had to be recognized and respected. Whites had to understand that the black community "must have such roots as the white society owns" (*ITMS*, 264). Warren concluded with the claim that "the chief problem for all alike is the restoration of society at large to a balance and security which the industrial regime is far from promising to achieve" (*ITMS*, 264).

What are we to make of Warren's argument in "The Briar Patch"? Or, to put it in slightly different terms, whose interpretation of the essay is correct, the later Warren's, which sees a defense of segregation, or Donald Davidson's, which sees a threat to the "Southern way of life"? This is one occasion on which the proper response is that both interpretations are correct. Warren's essay is not so much an argument for segregation as it is an acceptance of segregation as a given within which action must take place. Warren certainly accepted the outlines of the segregated society that already existed as the basis for his analysis: "Let the negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree" (*ITMS*, 264). Warren accepted the distinction between political discrimination and social discrimination as delineated by the Supreme Court, and therefore he accepted the doctrine of "separate but equal" as a legitimate rule for social life. As Warren said later, he saw no possibility of the system of segregation being ended. "The image of the South I carried in my head was one of massive immobility in all ways, in both its virtues and vices—it was an image of the unchangeable human condition, beautiful, sad, tragic" (*WSFN*, 12).

That stated, it must be immediately noted that Warren did not simply accept all discriminatory acts as inevitable and legitimate. Warren argued for the absolute importance of equal treatment before the law for blacks, for the importance of black self-sufficiency and control of their own communities. Warren recognized the human equality of blacks, and not just legal equality, when he argued that "this negro community must have such roots as the white society owns" (*ITMS*, 264). Warren argued that in the marketplace, color was not important for success but that ability and performance were the keys to economic success. He challenged white laborers to show respect for themselves as men by acknowledging the legal equality of blacks and eschewing violence. He challenged the white intellectual who sought to defend the "Southern way of life" to "find a place for the negro in his scheme." The essay, in passing, also stressed that legal equality "carries repercussions which affect almost every relation of the two races" without delineating those repercussions (*ITMS*, 252). While it would be pushing the point to argue that "The Briar Patch" was a direct attack on the "Southern way of life" when it came to race relations, it would also be a mistake to read the essay as an unthinking defense of segregation. I concur with the nuanced conclusion of Louis Rubin, Jr., that "The Briar Patch" was "implicitly disruptive of the southern racial status quo."¹⁷

II

Warren challenged the defender of the agrarian life to "find a place for the negro in his scheme." I have shown how Warren met his own challenge in the preceding section of this paper. In this section I will briefly survey the treatment of race in the other contributions to *I'll Take My Stand* in order to situate Warren's argument within the context of the entire symposium. Whether one treats *I'll Take My Stand* as a set of practical proposals for political and social reform or as an expression of moral and artistic vision, it is legitimate to ask if agrarianism has anything of importance to say regarding race relations and racial justice.

The "Statement of Principles" (*ITMS*, xix-xxx) that opens the collection perhaps sets the tone for the entire work. It states that the essays included in the collection "all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or

prevailing way” (*ITMS*, xix). While the racial mores of the South might be thought to be a part of the “Southern way of life” the agrarians intend to defend, there is no mention of race relations in the “Statement of Principles” at all. The only use of the word “race” in this “Statement” occurs in its final paragraph:

For, in conclusion, this much is clear: If a community, or a section, or a race, or an age, is groaning under industrialism, and well aware that it is an evil dispensation, it must find the way to throw it off. To think that this cannot be done is pusillanimous. And if the whole community, section, race, or age thinks it cannot be done, then it has simply lost its political genius and doomed itself to impotence. (*ITMS*, xxx)

The agrarians saw industrialism as the great enemy to the good life, in part, because of its impact on labor. The “Statement of Principles” says this: “The first principle of a good labor is that it must be effective, but the second principle is that it must be enjoyed. Labor is one of the largest items in the human career; it is a modest demand to ask that it may partake of happiness.” (*ITMS*, xxii) Labor that can be “enjoyed” and that can lead to “happiness” is thus a part of living a full human life. The final passage from the “Statement of Principles” quoted above invokes the image of Hebrews in bondage toiling under tyrannical pharaohs when it speaks of “a race groaning under industrialism.” John Crowe Ransom refers to “the new so-called industrial ‘slavery’ ” (*ITMS*, 23) in his essay, and he does not intend the phrase to be taken ironically. What is ironic is that a work motivated by a fierce desire to protect the traditions of personal and community liberty should take such a nonchalant attitude toward real slavery and its aftermath.

Except for Warren’s essay, those chapters that touch on race do so only incidentally, and in most cases they refer back to the history of slavery in the antebellum South. In his opening essay John Crowe Ransom wrote, “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” (*ITMS*, 14). Slavery was not crucial to the life of the Old South; if it were a vital part of that culture, however, it was not so bad.¹⁸

The most extensive discussion of slavery in *I’ll Take My Stand* besides that offered by Warren is found in Frank Owsley’s “The Irrepressible Conflict,” which treats race primarily in terms of the history of slavery and its abolition. Owsley agreed with Warren that efforts at colonization as a way to eliminate the racial problem generally had been opposed by blacks (*ITMS*, 78). Owsley argued that “Slavery was no simple question of ethics; it cut across the categories of human thought like a giant question mark. It was a moral, an economic, a religious, a social, a philosophical, and above all a political question” (*ITMS*, 76). The irrepressible conflict of his title, however, was not between the forces of slavery and the forces of freedom, but “between the industrial and commercial civilization of the North and the agrarian civilization of the South” (*ITMS*, 74). Despite an absence of focus on contemporary race relations, an insight into the agrarians’ view of the contemporary race question can be gleaned from Owsley’s essay. He wrote that there is 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” (*ITMS*, 68). Blacks were imported into the Southern Colonies in such numbers that whites feared for their racial integrity. The blacks brought into the colonies “were cannibals and

barbarians, and therefore dangerous Even if no race wars occurred, there was dread of being submerged and absorbed by the black race” (*ITMS*, 77).

This view of blacks as barbarians, and the attendant fear that it generated, appears to be the operative view of at least some of the agrarians. Andrew Lytle, in “The Hind Tit” (*ITMS*, 201-245), argued in similar fashion that long after the conclusion of the Civil War, the “menace of the free negro” helped to insure that farmers would give their allegiance to leaders who had left the countryside to enter industry and urban life (*ITMS*, 215). Ransom also alluded to the problem of the “professional demagogue” without explicitly raising the question of race (*ITMS*, 24).

The essay on education, written by John Gould Fletcher, paralleled Warren’s argument for vocational education for blacks. “Although there is no doubt that the negro could, if he wished, pass easily through the high school and college mill,” under present circumstances it would be a waste of time (*ITMS*, 119). Far better to support blacks at “Tuskegee and the Hampton Institute, which are adapted to the capacity of that race and produce far healthier and happier specimens of it than all the institutions of ‘higher learning’ than we can ever give them” (*ITMS*, 121).

Finally, in “Whither Southern Economy?” Herman Clarence Nixon pointed toward the need for agricultural education if blacks were to thrive. Nixon noted that agriculture, especially the production of cotton, had been the chief economic activity of Southern blacks since the end of the Civil War. These blacks (and those who exploit them) had been primarily responsible for “overemphasizing a commercialized cotton production and delaying a wholesome agricultural diversification” in the South (*ITMS*, 190). Nixon praised Booker T. Washington for “the persistency with which he urged his people to get more land and to keep it and to grow something besides cotton” (*ITMS*, 190).

None of the other authors in *I’ll Take My Stand* sought to “find a place for the negro in his scheme.” As Louis Rubin observes, “Generally the black man in *I’ll Take My Stand* is viewed as a kind of peasant, an element in southern society fitted to be the hewer of wood and drawer of water, and one that can be accommodated within an Agrarian dispensation without too much adjustment.”¹⁹ Virginia Rock confirms that “most of them did not even discuss the Negro,” and concludes, “Those who did take cognizance of the race question in their essays would not have aroused the ire of Southern traditionalists” (Rock, 303).

Warren’s essay itself, however, did arouse the ire of Donald Davidson and other agrarian traditionalists. Warren’s essay “shocked” Davidson, who wrote to Tate, “It hardly seems worthy of Red, or worthy of the subject.”²⁰ Davidson complained that Warren’s essay was not “closely related to the main theme of our book” and “makes only two or three points that bear on our principles at all.” Davidson then came to the nub of his criticism: “It goes off on a tangent to discuss the negro problem in general (which I take it, is not our main concern in the book) Furthermore, the ideas advanced about the negro don’t seem to chime with our ideas as I understand them.”²¹ After polling Tate, Lyle Lanier, John Crowe Ransom, and Frank Owsley, Davidson made some editorial changes to the essay but it remained in the collection (Rock, 262-67).

For many reasons Davidson might have been upset by Warren’s essay. As Louis Rubin notes, “Only Warren’s essay faced the fact that the black man had much to gain, in the way of economic and educational opportunity, from the coming of industrialism.”²²

Warren also admitted the possibility that industrialism might make a contribution to the development of the South if it came “in the role of the citizen and not of the conqueror” (*ITMS*, 256). This softness on industrialism undoubtedly was one of the “progressive” strains of the essay that troubled Davidson. The central issue, however, was Warren’s discussion of “the negro problem in general” with its emphasis on the importance of strong black community life and equal treatment before the law. Among the changes favored by Davidson were modifications intended to make clear that the black communities Warren wrote of were to be separate from white communities (Rock, 266).²³ Perhaps Davidson would be inclined to agree with Paul Conkin’s observation that “The presence of this essay thus early revealed the one time bomb lurking beneath the seeming consensus in *I’ll Take My Stand*—race.”²⁴

III

In a 1957 interview conducted by Ralph Ellison, Warren reflected back on the writing of “The Briar Patch.” Warren wrote the essay at the same time he was working on a piece of fiction. He told Ellison, “I remember the jangle and wrangle of writing the essay and some kind of discomfort in it, some sense of evasion, I guess, in writing it, in contrast with the free feeling of writing the novelette *Prime Leaf*.”²⁵ Later in the interview Warren said, “If you are seriously trying to write fiction, you can’t allow yourself as much evasion as in trying to write essays.”²⁶

Warren told Ellison that in writing the essay he was “trying to prove something, trying to find out something, see something, feel something—exist.”²⁷ Warren continued this multi-faceted search throughout his life, for he returned to the themes of “The Briar Patch” on numerous occasions later in his career.²⁸ *Segregation: The Inner Conflict of the South* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* are two works of social criticism that move toward progressively less evasion on the matter of race and simultaneously spell out the implications of the argument already contained in “The Briar Patch.”

Segregation provides some insight into the evasions of “The Briar Patch.” In “The Briar Patch” Warren gave an incredibly optimistic reading of white attitudes toward blacks. He wrote that equal treatment under the law is “the simplest issue, and probably the one on which most people would agree” (*ITMS*, 252). He wrote that “the Southern white man ... wishes the negro well; he wishes to see crime, genial irresponsibility, ignorance, and oppression replaced by an informed and productive negro community” (*ITMS*, 264). The Warren who wrote those lines in 1930 shares something in common with the gentleman seated next to Warren on a flight out of Memphis in 1956.

“Folks could be more gen’rous and fair-thinking,” he says. “Like affable, you might say, and things would work out. If folks get affable and contig’ous, you might say, things sort of get worked out in time, but you get folks not being affable-like and stirring things up and it won’t work out. Folks on both sides the question.”

He asks me if I don’t agree, and I say, sure, I agree. Sure, if folks were just affable-like. (*Seg*, 6)

The Warren of 1956 knew and admitted something that the Warren of 1930 either knew or suspected, but would not admit in his essay: good country folks are not always affable-like. The burden of the argument of “The Briar Patch” would have been much

greater had Warren not evaded the knowledge of the dark side of human nature. The Warren of 1930 knew that violence was a tool that men often and too freely turned to to settle their differences. Such violence is at the center of “Prime Leaf,”²⁹ the novelette Warren was writing at the same time that he was writing “The Briar Patch.” The Warren of 1956 no longer covered his discussion of race with the optimistic patina of 1930. He had talked with blacks and whites throughout the South who acted out clichés in their daily lives—the cliché of fear and the cliché of hate (*Seg*, 9-11). By 1956 Warren not only knew of this fear and hate, however. He also wrote about it.

In “The Briar Patch” Warren evaded the question of social change. Warren was uncomfortable with the humane version of segregation the essay adopted but “it never crossed my mind that anybody could do anything about it” (*WSFN*, 12). Warren wrote “The Briar Patch” from an understanding of social dynamics that he would reject in *Segregation*. By 1956, Warren had learned that “the argument of mere social continuity and the justification by mere *mores*” always led to a view of the world “in which circumstances and values are frozen” (*Seg*, 55). The Warren of 1930 had looked at social structures and had seen “massive immobility” (*WSFN*, 12), but the Warren of 1956 had learned that “the essence of individuality is the willingness to accept the rub which the flux of things provokes, to accept one’s fate in time” (*Seg*, 55). Social splits can only be healed when the split within the individual has been healed. The possibility of social change can only be grasped by starting at the level of individual change.

In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren acknowledged that “the individual is conditioned by systems,” but he pushed the matter further. First, the individual is influenced not by one system but “by many kinds of systems intermeshing and overlaying one another.” These systems may push in different and competing ways. But beyond this, Warren pointed to man himself as a limitation on this social conditioning and as the catalyst for change. “Unless we assume some purely mechanistic structure of the world,” Warren wrote, “we count on the more or less free play of the individual mind, critical and creative, as an agent in the change of conditioning” (*WSFN*, 187).³⁰ Under these circumstances, the “moral rub” experienced by the individual can lead to a change in individual behavior and ultimately to changes in social structures.

In “The Briar Patch,” Warren had been evasive concerning the Southern past. In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren wrote, “the humaneness [of “The Briar Patch”] was self-conscious because even then, thirty-five years ago, I uncomfortably suspected . . . that no segregation was, in the end, humane” (*WSFN*, 12). The Warren of 1965 argued that the discovery of the dead bodies of slain civil rights workers was not really shocking to Southerners “because, deep down and unacknowledged in his guts, the Southerner knows that that event, evil as it is, is implicit in the structure of the society in which he lives” (*WSFN*, 425). Increasingly Warren came to see the violent history of Southern segregation as a reflection of the inner split within Southern whites.

While “The Briar Patch” contained many evasions, the essay acknowledged that there is a reciprocal relationship between one’s self-understanding and one’s understanding of others. Just as the split between men is a reflection of the split within the individual man, the manner in which one treats others is a reflection of how one understands oneself. In “The Briar Patch” Warren argued that if the white man “fails to concede the negro equal protection, he does not properly respect himself as a man”

(ITMS, 260). In the self-interview that concludes *Segregation*, the same point is made forcefully:

Q: You mean they ought to let the South work out a way to live with the Negro?

A: I don't think the problem is to learn to live with the Negro.

Q: What is it, then?

A: It is to learn to live with ourselves.

Q: What do you mean?

A: I don't think you can live with yourself when you are humiliating the man next to you.

(*Seg*, 63)

The “self-division” that Warren explored in *Segregation* is the result of “some failure to find identity” (*Seg*, 54). “Identity,” in turn, became one of the major lines of investigation followed by Warren in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren’s exploration of identity in these writings involved not just the attempt to understand black identity, but the discovery of his own identity. Warren interviewed the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker, then Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, for *Who Speaks for the Negro?* “After our interview,” Warren reported, “Mr. Walker asked me why I was mixed up in this project. I said that I wanted to find out about things, including my own feelings” (*WSFN*, 232).³¹

Among the list of reasons given in his surprisingly inarticulate response to Ralph Ellison, Warren said that in writing “The Briar Patch” he had been seeking to “exist.” Warren meant that he had been trying to discover his own feelings through understanding the place of blacks in Southern society even in 1930. Warren holds out the hope for himself that he might come to understand himself through his history. He also holds out this hope for his fellow white Southerners. “Discovering his past, the Southerner might find himself, and the courage to be himself” (*WSFN*, 232).³²

Warren concluded *Who Speaks for the Negro?* with a discussion of the temptations to sentimentality in addressing black demands for justice. Interestingly, most of these temptations have increased in visibility in the last three decades. The first temptation is the assumption that justice is a matter of feelings. Warren argued that the recognition of the split within oneself between an understanding of justice and a feeling to act contrariwise is “the ground fact of our moral life” (*WSFN*, 432). This is the experience Warren called the “moral rub” in *Segregation*, and this recognition of moral conflict can lead to action that in turn can modify our feelings.

A second form of sentimentality, according to Warren, is “the notion of a ‘debt’ to the Negro—the idea that society owes ‘back wages’ for slavery” (*WSFN*, 434). Warren found the logic of this argument “spurious” and the notion “fraught with mischief.” The calculation of “the ‘debts’ of history” takes one into the world of fantasy, in Warren’s view. The basis for any aid should not be the payment of historical debts, but the “status of citizenship potential” of the recipients, for otherwise such aid would “unman and demean the Negro” (*WSFN*, 435).³³

A third form of sentimentality Warren uncovered held that “the Negro—*qua* Negro—is intrinsically ‘better’” (*WSFN*, 436). Often this view is an inversion of the white racist understanding of black inferiority, but it can also grow out of the idea of the Noble Savage. Warren argued that the trouble with this view was that “it doesn’t recognize the Negro as a man. It recognizes him only as a Negro” (*WSFN*, 439). In response to this Warren returned to the core of moral individualism discussed earlier and argued that “we

had better stick to the old principle that if any man, black or white, isn't content to pass up a notion of group superiority, moral or any other kind, and to be regarded and judged as an individual man, with individual virtues and defects, there is something wrong with him" (*WSFN*, 440).

Finally, the twin sentimentalities say blacks will redeem American society from its spiritual bankruptcy or whites, through philanthropy, will somehow redeem the blacks. We can perhaps assist or deter others at the margins, but Warren concluded, "in the end, everybody has to redeem himself" (*WSFN*, 442).

As Warren strove to understand the identity of the American black, he ultimately pushed beyond that limited identity to see it merge with the question of what it means to be a human being. Warren quoted Robert Watson, a student at Southern University in Baton Rouge, to that effect. "What am I struggling for? I'm struggling for the heights of a man. Regardless. I think that if I reach the heights of a man in a limited all-Negro society, I have not reached the heights of a man by world standards" (*WSFN*, 364).³⁴

In a similar vein, Warren came to see the word "integration" in terms of the split within the individual that is the foundation of the split between men. Although James Baldwin presented an apocalyptic vision of personal and racial integration (*WSFN*, 282), Warren's model for integration as human wholeness was Whitney M. Young. Young had begun to connect the necessity of "making a living" with "the act of living." Young had come to see work as an element of human fulfillment, and not just an instrumental means to a greater end. If this assessment is correct, Warren wrote,

Young is up to more than an attack on segregation and poverty, up to more than a program of integrating the Negro into American society. He is attacking, instinctively, perhaps, the great dehumanizing force of our society: the fragmentation of the individual through the fragmentation of function and the draining away of opportunity for significant moral responsibility—the fragmentation of community through the fragmentation of the individual. In the end, then, the integration of the Negro into American society would be, if I read Young aright, a correlative of the integration of the personality, white or black. (*WSFN*, 171)

This vision of the integrated personality as the foundation for moral responsibility was the key to Warren's hopes that the racial split in American society could be healed. A truly integrated society will be a reflection of truly integrated individuals. Warren's final understanding of racial justice may appear as outmoded today, as the views he articulated in "The Briar Patch" seemed during the civil rights decade of the 1960's. Ironically, Warren's earlier vision of a segregated society based on group identity may find more acceptance in today's multicultural environment than does his later view, based on moral individualism and a commitment to equal treatment of individuals without regard to race. Once again, perhaps, Robert Penn Warren is ahead of the pack.

[Place these endnotes as footnotes on their respective pages.—Eds.]

¹Portions of this essay appeared in an abbreviated form in “‘A Place for the Negro’ in the Agrarian Scheme: Robert Penn Warren’s Contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand*,” *Political Science Reviewer* 30 (2001), 120-37, and are reproduced here with the kind permission of Dr. George Carey, the editor of *PSR*.

²*The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 237. Lyle Lanier, another of the contributors to *I’ll Take My Stand*, made an even stronger statement in a letter to Tate. Race, wrote Lanier, “is the only real issue on which Southerners can be differentiated from people in other sections” and was the only issue “on which any real unanimity of thought and action can be secured from Southern people at present.” Quoted in Virginia J. Rock, “The Making and Meaning of *I’ll Take My Stand*: A Study in Utopian-Conservatism, 1925-1939” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1961), published by University Microfilms, 1961, 266. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Rock.

³Donald Davidson, “‘I’ll Take My Stand’: A History,” *American Review* 5 (Summer, 1935), 301-304.

⁴Paul Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 19-22, 58-61. For the classic account of the Fugitives, see Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959).

⁵*The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, 232-33.

⁶*Selected Letters of Robert Penn Warren, Volume One: The Apprentice Years, 1924-1934*, ed. William Bedford Clark (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 179. Hereafter cited as *Selected Letters*.

⁷Quoted in Conkin, p. 72. Warren expressed his concern about his ability to write the essay without “pulling a boner” in a letter to Tate (*Selected Letters*, 185).

⁸Robert Penn Warren, “The Briar Patch,” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, by Twelve Southerners (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930; Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 246-64. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *ITMS*. All page references are to the Harper Torchbooks edition.

⁹Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 11. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *WSFN*.

¹⁰*The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, 251.

¹¹The extremes were those who believed that “the immediate franchise carried with it a magic which would insure its success as a cure-all and fix-all for the negro’s fate” and “the group in the South whose prejudice would keep the negroes forever as a dead and inarticulate mass in the commonwealth” (*ITMS*, 248).

¹²Note that Warren thought this issue was of far broader application than just for blacks. He wrote, “In the lowest terms the matter is something like this: are most negroes to be taught to read and write, and then turned back on society with only that talent as a guaranty of their safety or prosperity? Are some others, far fewer in number, to be taught their little French and less Latin, and then sent packing about their business? If the answer is yes, it will be a repetition of the major fallacy in American education and of one of America’s favorite superstitions” (*ITMS*, 250).

¹³Again note that Warren emphasized the similarity of blacks to others, rather than differences. He wrote, “Moreover, the leader himself loses his comprehension of the actual situation; distance simplifies the scene of which he was once a part, and his efforts to solve its problems are transferred into a realm of abstractions. The case is not dissimilar to that of the immigrant labor leader or organizer who has in the past left the life he understood and come to this country whose life he did not wholly understand. Both have shown a tendency toward the doctrinaire” (*ITMS*, 251-52). Warren was thinking of W.E.B. DuBois in writing this. See William Bedford Clark, *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 29.

¹⁴While Warren did not have this “exorbitant faith” in industrialism, note that he was not as totally critical as were some of his agrarian compatriots. He wrote, “Possibly industrialism in the South can make some contribution to the negro’s development, just as to the development of the section, but it will do so only if it grows under discipline and is absorbed into the terms of the life it meets. It must enter in the role of the citizen and not of the conqueror—not even the role of the beneficent conqueror” (*ITMS*, 255-56).

¹⁵“But in all cases—owner, cropper, hand—there is the important aspect of a certain personal contact; there is all the difference in the world between thinking of a man as simply a negro or a white man and thinking of him as a person, knowing something of his character and his habits, and depending in any fashion on his reliability” (*ITMS*, 262).

¹⁶See the chapter entitled “The Grid of Violence” in Pete Daniel, *Standing at the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 50-71. Donald G. Nieman, ed., *Black Freedom/White Violence 1865-1900* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), collects more than twenty studies on racial violence. As a young child Warren had heard of a local lynching, so he knew directly of small-town racial violence (*WSFN*, 11-12).

¹⁷Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University State Press, 1978), 233. For the reflections of a contemporary agrarian thinker on race, see Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1989). While Berry does not discuss Warren his concerns parallel those of Warren (see especially 115-29).

¹⁸Compare the argument of Frank Owsley: “Without slavery the economic and social life of the South would have not been radically different. Perhaps the plantation life would not have been as pronounced without it, yet the South would long have remained agricultural—as it still is after sixty-five years of ‘freedom’! Certainly the South would have developed its political philosophy very much as it did” (*ITMS*, 76-77).

¹⁹Rubin, 232.

²⁰*The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, 251.

²¹*Ibid.*, 251. Davidson bemoaned the “progressive implications” of Warren’s piece and then continues, “I simply can’t understand what Red is after here. It doesn’t sound like Red at all—at least not the Red Warren I know. The very language, the catchwords, somehow don’t fit. I am almost inclined to doubt whether RED ACTUALLY WROTE THIS ESSAY!” This letter, dated July 21, 1930, has been severely edited as printed in *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*; for a more complete version that contains specific examples of Davidson’s concerns, see Rock, 263-64.

²²Rubin, 233.

²³Rock concludes that, "In point of view as well as style, the published essay appears to be Warren's" (Rock, 267).

²⁴Conkin, 72-73. If the argument I have made is correct, the question that must be addressed is what is the basis for Warren's later antipathy to the essay? In a number of places (*WSFN*, 10, for example) Warren states that he had not reread "The Briar Patch" since sending it to Davidson from Oxford. My suspicion is that what Warren remembered in later years was not the specific argument he made in "The Briar Patch" but the general atmosphere of casual racism that he was a part of during that period. For an example, see Warren's comments in a 1932 letter to Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon (*Selected Letters*, 217).

²⁵"Warren on the Art of Fiction," in *Talking With Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Floyd C. Watkins et al (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 33. The title for this essay is taken from Ellison's characterization of Warren's writings on race in this interview (32).

²⁶"Warren on the Art of Fiction," 33.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

²⁸Racial identity and race relations are major concerns in two of Warren's novels, *Band of Angels* (Random House, 1955) and *Flood* (Random House, 1964), and in a book-length poem, *Brother to Dragons*. He also dealt with these questions in three works of social criticism, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict of the South* (New York: Random House, 1956), *The Legacy of the Civil War* (Random House, 1961), and *Who Speaks for the Negro? Segregation* is hereafter cited parenthetically as *Seg*.

²⁹"Prime Leaf" tells a story of destruction and murder set during the tobacco wars of early twentieth century Kentucky. Robert Penn Warren, *Prime Leaf*, in *A Robert Penn Warren Reader* (New York: Random House, 1987), 3-55. This story was originally published in *American Caravan IV* (1931), and included in a collection of Warren's shorter fiction, *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories* (1947).

³⁰Warren contrasted James Forman, who "thinks of changing systems," with Ronnie Moore, who talks of "changing minds and hearts."

³¹Warren continued the narrative: "'It is very courageous of you,' he said. I said that that notion had never crossed my mind. That was true, and yet at the same time, at hearing his words, there had been, deep down in me, a cold flash of rage."

³²In "The Briar Patch" Warren had argued, "The rehabilitation of the white man's confidence for the negro is part of the Southern white man's story since 1880" (*ITMS*, 248). On the importance of history in the creation of the self, see my paper, "On the Creation of the Self in the Thought of Robert Penn Warren," *Modern Age*, 43 (Summer 2001), 202-210.

³³Warren also raised the question of what debt the Nigerian government, for example, owes to contemporary American blacks, since black Nigerians captured and sold the ancestors of contemporary black Americans into slavery.

³⁴This recognition of a standard of human excellence that transcends race or other artificial categories provided the foundation for the sympathetic relationship between Warren and the writer Ralph Ellison. See *WSFN*, 325-54, especially 347-53.