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*Raised in the Briar Patch:
Misreading Warren's Essay on Race*

LEVERETT BUTTS

A few months ago, I was dismayed to find myself in agreement with something I had read in *The Southern Partisan*. My father holds this magazine in the same reverence devout Christians hold the Good Book. For me, however, the magazine stands for everything I am not. It seems little more to me than a thinly veiled propaganda rag for Dixie Republicans and Neo-conservatives. I find it overly opinionated, narrow-minded, and not a little racist. For *The Southern Partisan*, ironically, there are no shades of grey, only black and white.

Because of my bias against his favorite periodical, my father doesn't think I appreciate my Southern roots. He's been trying for years to instill in me an abiding reverence for the South and all those glorious souls who died for the ideals of liberty and states' rights during The War of Northern Aggression. He's tried everything. He bought me a subscription to *The Southern Partisan*. He secretly enlisted me into The Sons of Confederate Veterans. He even bought me a little Confederate uniform in case I ever decided to go to a SCV meeting, and I cannot begin to count the number of times I have found my father standing in the doorway with some book proffered to me as if he were Moses offering God's tablets to the Israelites.

"Here, son," he'd say jiggling the book a little. "I thought you might like this." I'd diligently take the book, Thomas Nelson Page's *The Old South* or *By Valor and Arms* by James Street, maybe a biography of Bill Arp or *On the Plantation* by Joel Chandler Harris.

So when I decided to get my doctorate in Southern literature, I thought my father would be tickled pink. And he was, until I told him I was going to write my dissertation on Robert Penn Warren.

"Who?" he asked.

“Robert Penn Warren,” I said. “*All the King’s Men*? Won the Pulitzer prize a couple times? The First Poet Laureate?” No dice.

A few months later, though, Dad rang me up out of a dead sleep at about 12:30 at night.

“That Warren fella, was he one of the Agrarians?”

“Yeah,” I replied, “once upon a time.”

“Now I might like him,” I could practically hear my father nodding his head.

“Why’s that?” I asked through a yawn.

“*The Southern Partisan* just had an article on the Agrarians.” This was my father’s whole basis for approval of my dissertation subject. If Robert Penn Warren was all right with *The Southern Partisan*, Robert Penn Warren was perfectly okay with Dad.

So the next time I saw him, he handed me the Agrarian issue.

“I thought it might help on your dissertation,” he said as, once again, he stood in a doorway offering me literature.

It did indeed have the promised article (actually several) about the Agrarians, and it was here that I first heard of Warren’s essay “The Briar Patch.” In “Why the Agrarians?” P. J. Byrnes attempts to debunk ten myths about the group. Myth number nine claims that “The Briar Patch” was a defense of segregation and that Warren later recanted it. Byrnes, however, claims that the essay:

was not an apology for segregation though Warren said as much in *The Partisan Review*. He also said he hadn’t read the piece since he wrote it decades earlier. Had he re-read his own essay, he probably would have recognized his contribution as a fair-minded and moderate analysis, even by latter-day standards.¹

After reading this, I asked one of my professors about Warren’s essay.

“What you have to remember,” he told me, “is that Warren was a product of his times. The essay was written in the 1920’s, so it can be offensive to our modern sensibilities. When you read it, you have to take this into consideration.”

¹ P. J. Byrnes, “Why the Agrarians?” *Southern Partisan*, Fourth Quarter 1997, 15.

With these two ringing endorsements, I must admit that I was a little doubtful when I found *I'll Take My Stand*, the collection of essays for which Warren had written "The Briar Patch," at the top of my comps list. It was after reading Warren's essay, though, that I reluctantly had to agree with *The Southern Partisan*.

The Partisan Review was not the only place Warren recanted his Agrarian essay. In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* he concedes that "The Briar Patch" was "a cogent and humane defense of segregation." However, Warren also claims that he felt "some vague discomfort, like the discomfort you feel when your poem doesn't quite come off, when you've had to fake, or twist, or pad it."²

There may be a perfectly good reason for Warren feeling as if he had faked, twisted, or padded his essay. In 1929, when Donald Davidson, editor of *I'll Take My Stand*, approached Warren about contributing an essay on race, Warren had been away from the South for five years and had lost touch with the political and sociological changes occurring there.

More importantly, though, as Joseph Blotner points out in his biography of Warren, Davidson, as Warren well knew, was an inflexible segregationist, and his instructions to Warren were explicit: "It's up to you, Red [. . .] to prove that Negroes are country folks . . . 'born and bred in a briar patch.'" When he submitted his essay to Davidson, Warren also sent a note permitting the editor to take a "free hand" in making changes or "point[ing] up certain arguments."³ Blotner tells us that Davidson found the essay to be too liberal and invoked Warren's permission to edit and/or revise it to fit with the other essays.⁴

Ironically, later critics (including, apparently, Warren himself) have considered "The Briar Patch" too conservative and criticized it primarily on two counts: that it exhibits blatant racism by claiming that the best occupation for blacks is working the land and, more importantly, that it defends segregation. It is truly a shame that

² Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 11.

³ Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 106.

⁴ Blotner, 112-113.

these critics have not read the essay more closely (especially Warren who, as a New Critic, should have known better).

Perhaps the weakest criticism of Warren's essay is that it claims that the best place for blacks is in the country working the land. For example, Leonard Casper, in *Robert Penn Warren: The Dark and Bloody Ground* (the first book-length study of Warren's oeuvre), claims that Warren's essay, while encouraging "each man to be himself, rather than try to pass as someone else," rigidly defines the "Negro's destiny forever as fieldhand or tenant farmer."⁵

To attack Warren's essay on these grounds implies a misreading of the entire collection. One must remember that the central thesis of *I'll Take My Stand* is that everyone is better off working the land. One need only read the "Statement of Principles" to see this: Industrialism, it claims, "has enslaved our human energies to a degree now clearly felt to be burdensome." Agrarianism, in contrast, is the belief "that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers."⁶ If this is true, then it should come as no surprise that Warren, in his essay on the role of Southern blacks in an agrarian society, would claim that the best place for them is the fields. After all, the other eleven contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* had already done a more than adequate job of arguing that the best place for whites in an agrarian society is also the fields.

Besides, it is simply not true that Warren advocates fieldwork for all people of color. While Warren does make the claim that many negroes are better off working the land in an agrarian society, he clearly acknowledges a need for professional people of color: "[. . .]everyone recognizes," Warren writes, "that there is a need for negroes in the professions, especially medicine and teaching."⁷ However, he agrees with Booker T. Washington that "[. . .]little is

⁵ Leonard Casper, *Robert Penn Warren: The Dark and Bloody Ground* (Seattle: U. of Washington Press, 1960), 28 and 184.

⁶ Donald Davidson et al., "Introduction: Statement of Principles," *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, ed. Donald Davidson, Louisiana paperback ed. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1977), xxxix and xlvi.

⁷ Robert Penn Warren, "The Briar Patch," in Davidson et al., *I'll Take My Stand*, 251; hereafter cited by page number in the text.

to be gained by *only* attempting to create a small group of intellectual aristocrats in the race.” In order for more highly educated blacks to prosper in the 1920’s South, the black community must be “capable of absorbing and profiting from those members who have received this higher education.”⁸ As with their illiterate white counterparts, then, most people of color within an agrarian community will require vocational and agricultural education if they are to support the businesses of their more highly educated brethren.

The second criticism, that of defending segregation, seems much more difficult to contest when one considers the amount of evidence for it amassed so far. Charles Bohner refers to Warren’s essay as literally “a defense of segregation” and claims that Warren’s long essay, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*, constitutes a complete reversal of the position he put forward in “The Briar Patch.”⁹ As recently as 2000, in fact, T.R Hummer has argued that Warren’s essay represents “a pallid expression of the old separate-but-equal doctrine that would keep African Americans on the farm and ‘in their place.’”¹⁰ Similarly, in his 2002 book, Anthony Szczesiul maintains that the essay is “pro-segregation” and that reading it as anything else is simply an attempt to “read forward in anticipation of his conversion to an integrationist position.”¹¹ The harshest criticism of Warren’s essay, though, comes from James Justus’s *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, perhaps the seminal work in Warren scholarship. Here Justus claims that There is no cutting edge in his essay, no visible respect for human finiteness or joy for human individuality, no evidence of the searing clash within man of ethical alternatives, and only the most simplistic sense of the “inscrutability of the natural world.” There is. In short, no human drama that plays so prominent a part in almost every other of Warren’s essays.¹²

⁸ Warren, “The Briar Patch,” 250-251.

⁹ Charles H. Bohner, *Robert Penn Warren*, (New York: Twayne, 1964), 34-35.

¹⁰ T. R. Hummer, “Christ, Start Again: Robert Penn Warren, a Poet of the South?” *The Legacy of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. David Madden (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2000), 40.

¹¹ Anthony Szczesiul, *Racial Politics in Robert Penn Warren’s Poetry*, (Tallahassee: UP of Florida, 2002), 29.

¹² James H. Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1981), 139.

It is with Justus, though, that a subtle change in critics' responses to "The Briar Patch" begins to take shape. Rather than castigating Warren for failure to take a stronger stand on the race issue. Critics begin to explain the discrepancies between Warren's ideas in this controversial essay and those expressed in such later works as *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?*

The most common apology for Warren's essay is that he had no choice, and, as we shall see, this argument does have some merit. If segregation seemed the only solution to the race problem available to the South in 1929 and for the foreseeable future, this argument runs, then Warren shouldn't be blamed for writing an essay that supported it. Justus argues that in the 1920's Warren "assumes segregation as the *sine qua non* of southern society, and for this reason 'The Briar Patch' is not a relevant statement, or even a relevant speculation on the status of the Negro and his chances for improvement."¹³ This idea receives some support from Warren himself when he claims in a 1957 interview that "[. . .] there wasn't a power under heaven that could have changed segregation in 1929—the South wasn't ready for it, the North wasn't ready for it, the Negro wasn't."¹⁴ Warren further cements this reading of his essay in a 1969 interview when he claims that segregation was

part of that fatalism that was deeply engrained in the Southern mind. Nobody—except Negroes—saw anything except some system of what the sociologists then called super- and subordination based on and modified by all sorts of legal guarantees of "separate but equal." This is what the Supreme Court saw. This is the way the world was. [. . .] It's a question of trying to rationalize the inevitable—what seemed to be the inevitable—structure of the world.¹⁵

More recent critics have decided to consider the segregation issue academic and have chosen, instead, to focus on more positive aspects of the essay. In *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren*,

¹³ Justus, 139.

¹⁴ Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walter, "Warren on the Art of Fiction," *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weaks (Athens, GA: U. of Georgia Press, 1990), 33.

¹⁵ Marshall Walker, "Robert Penn Warren: An Interview," *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, 158.

for example, William Bedford Clark praises Warren's recognition "that it was the black American's responsibility to carve out his place in American life, not merely the white man's burden," for such recognition illustrates that "[f]or Warren, even at this early stage in his career as a student of American democracy, it was clear that the black man was first and last a human being."¹⁶ Randy Hendricks, while admitting that the essay presents problems for modern sensibilities, argues that "The Briar Patch," when compared to his later writings on race, can serve as an illustration of "Warren's emotional, intellectual, and artistic growth."¹⁷

Admittedly, much of Warren's essay does seem to defend segregation. But even here, as Steven D. Ealy¹⁸ discusses in his article "'An Exciting Spiral': Robert Penn Warren on Race and Community," Warren's segregation is a far cry from the rusty water fountains, dingy restrooms, and sub-par schools modern Americans traditionally associate with segregation. Warren begins his description of a segregated South by positing that blacks may be satisfied with separate facilities, but only if they are truly equal in quality:

[The black man] has money in his pocket, but he is turned away from the white man's restaurant. At the hotel he is denied the bed which he is ready to pay for. He must be content with a poor seat at the concert—if he is fortunate enough to get one at all. The restrictions confront him at every turn of his ordinary life. But his answer to [the following] question might do something to clear both his and the white man's mind. 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? ("The Briar Patch," 253-254)

Warren then quotes Booker T. Washington, a former slave and African American political leader, to suggest that many blacks *would* be satisfied with the former choice: "We can be as separate as the

¹⁶ William Bedford Clark, *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1991), 29.

¹⁷ Randy Hendricks, *Lonelier Than God: Robert Penn Warren and the Southern Exile*, (Athens, GA: U. of Georgia Press, 2000), 91.

¹⁸ *rWp: An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies*, Vol. 2 (2002): 101-122.

fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (254). Indeed, over twenty-five years later, in *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*, Warren implies that such a solution may well have worked had separate facilities been truly equal, when he asks an unnamed African American what Negroes want:

“Opportunity,” [he] says. “It’s opportunity a man wants.”
 For what? I ask.
 “Just to get along and make out. You know like anybody.”
 “About education, now. If you got good schools, as good
 as anybody’s, would that satisfy you?”
 [. . .]
 “It might have satisfied once. But”—and he shakes his
 head—“not now. That doctrine won’t grip now.”¹⁹

And therein lies the crux of the segregation problem. As far back as 1929, Warren explains that the only way segregation has a chance of working is by making sure separate facilities are of equal quality (“as good as anybody’s,” as he will put it in the mid-1950’s). Sadly, though, as the Supreme Court found in *Brown v. Board of Education*, society found itself inadequate to the task of providing equality through separation. Warren even warns of this in “The Briar Patch” when he blames the race riots in the North on the lack of Negro labor organizations and the Negro’s lower standard of living, which is due to unequal legal and societal facilities (256). “What the white workman must learn,” Warren claims, “is that he may respect himself as a white man, but, if he fails to concede to the negro equal protection, he does not properly respect himself as a man” (260).

The fact is, though, that Warren was not nearly the segregationist later critics accused him of being when he wrote “The Briar Patch.” Warren idolized his maternal grandfather, Gabriel Thomas Penn, a Confederate veteran who didn’t “[believe] in slavery.”²⁰ Gabriel Penn also “deplored segregation, simply because he felt it stupid and restrictive of his own freedom.”²¹ It seems unlikely, then, that

¹⁹ Robert Penn Warren, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (New York: Random House, 1956), 33.

²⁰ *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 11.

Warren would be supportive of something his hero considered wrong.

Indeed, when read closely, “The Briar Patch” implies that the best solution for the race problem is not equal segregation but full integration. “It will be a happy day for the South,” Warren writes, “when no court discriminates in its dealings between the negro and the white man, just as it will be a happy day for the nation when no court discriminates between the rich man and the poor man; and the first may be a more practicable ideal than the second” (252). Warren also seems to call for the integration of workers’ unions when he blames racial tensions and black scabs on union policies restricting Negroes from joining. “There is no good reason why,” Warren writes, “[the Negro] should fight the white man’s battles if at the same time there is no proper provision for him in the system” (257).

Warren even envisions, in words almost prophetic, a world in which complete integration has come to pass:

The millennium which [the desegregationist] contemplates would come to pass when the white man and the black man regularly sat down to the same table and when the white woman filed her divorce action through a negro attorney with no thought in the mind of any party to these various transactions that the business was, to say the least, a little eccentric. (254)

That Warren considers this dream millennial should come as no surprise when one considers when these words were written. In the late 1920’s, even partial integration would seem well nigh impossible, and history has proven Warren’s words. The essay was written in the early twentieth century, and it wasn’t until the late twentieth century, the 1960’s, that the integration movement really took off. In fact, the middle school in which my wife teaches wasn’t integrated until the 1970’s. More surprisingly, Nebraskan schools are presently approving legislation to re-segregate schools along three racial lines. Add to these developments incidents such as the Rodney

²¹ Robert Penn Warren, *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1980), 11.

King fiasco in the 1990's and the allegations of discrimination during the Hurricane Katrina rescue efforts last year and we see that even in the early twenty-first century, the nation is struggling with issues of race. Apparently, then, Warren was correct in describing complete integration as a millennial concern.

If, in 1929, integration seems impossible, then Warren is left with no other humane solution to the race problem than that of segregation, but segregation that is truly equal. However, even here he implies that rural societies may be the breeding ground for true integration:

All relations between groups in the city tend to become formalized and impersonal [he writes], and such is especially true in those of the two races. But the condition outside the city is somewhat different and infinitely more desirable. [. . .] The relation between the white owner and the negro owner is not so crudely apparent, but it does exist, as anyone who is familiar with a rural community in the South can testify. [. . .] 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. (262)

The best example of this mutually beneficial relationship between the races is found, according to Warren, in a rural agrarian culture. And it is this same rural agrarian culture that will ultimately provide a peaceful acceptance (and, by extension, integration) between both races.

Further evidence of Warren's subtle endorsement of integration lies in Donald Davidson's aforementioned reaction to this essay. Davidson wrote to Allen Tate that "the ideas advanced [by Warren's essay] about the negro don't seem to chime with our ideas as I understand them." So offensive does he find the ideas put forth there, that he almost suspects Warren of plagiarism: "I am almost inclined to doubt," he writes, "whether RED ACTUALLY WROTE

THIS ESSAY!”²² This seems to be a curiously strong reaction against an essay that, at least ostensibly, supports segregation. Both Blotner and Ealy report that Davidson, after consulting with the other contributors, decided to keep Warren’s essay, but not without some editorial tinkering. Ealy tells us that this tinkering primarily consisted of making clear that the strong black communities Warren discussed “were to be separate from the white communities.”²³ One must wonder how these ideas were expressed before Davidson emended them.

Warren claimed time and again that he never felt fully satisfied with his contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand*. As early as 1930, Warren complained that “[t]he essay doesn’t fill me with pride.”²⁴ As late as the 1980’s, Warren claims that he had not read the essay in several decades and intended never to read it again.²⁵ Could it be that, on some level, Warren felt his true feelings about race were not adequately communicated? It is no secret that Warren later came out against segregation in books such as *Segregation* and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* However, a close reading of “The Briar Patch” reveals a younger Warren subtly, perhaps even unconsciously, advocating integration in a world that in the 1920’s was not (and some might say still isn’t) ready to accept full equality.

I am driving through my hometown with my father. We do this every Sunday as kind of a bonding ritual. We talk about this or that and argue politics. Apparently, honoring Southern heritage also means belonging to the Radical Reconstruction Republican Party. As a Southern Democrat, it would seem, I don’t fit the bill. We both enjoy these trips immensely, though, and today is no different. He glances fleetingly at the book in my lap and asks what I’m reading. It’s *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Dad starts to purse his lips

²² *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, ed. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young (Athens: U. of Georgia Press, 1974), 251; quoted in Ealy, 102 and 114, note 21.

²³ Ealy, 115.

²⁴ Robert Penn Warren, *Selected Letters: Volume One, The Apprentice Years 1924-1934*, ed. William Bedford Clark (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2000), 186.

²⁵ Thomas L. Connelly, “Of Bookish Men and Fugitives,” *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, 384.

at the liberal fare his wayward son is pouring into his brain, and I prepare myself for the inevitable knee-jerk question: “What is it? Some kind of hate the South book?” But he surprises me instead.

“What’s it about?”

I tell him it’s about the civil rights movement. I add that Warren interviews all kinds of civil rights leaders in it and discusses the problems arising over the desegregation movement. Then I sit back and prepare to let the vitriol wash over me.

Again, my father surprises me.

“Segregation,” he says and shakes his head. “Worst thing to ever happen to the South. We might’ve been able to get along a lot easier if we hadn’t started that bullshit.”

I look at him dumbfounded.

“We’re all just people,” he says and shakes his head.

We travel in silence for a little more while I find myself re-evaluating my father. I begin to see that I have misread my father in the same way critics have misread “The Briar Patch.” Like Warren’s ideas about race, our private truths are hidden behind our public lies, and once in a great while, when our guard is down, our natures manage to peek out. Maybe my father is no different.

“You ever look at that *Southern Partisan* I gave you, the one about the Agrarians?” he asks as I look out my side view mirror.

I tell him I did and add that I’m writing a paper defending one of the articles in it.

“Good.” He smiles. “We’ll make a Southerner out of you yet.”