
THE LEGACY OF THE CIVIL WAR: THE DISPARATE VIEWS OF ROBERT PENN WARREN AND ALLEN TATE

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The two Nashville Agrarians Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate were born in the border state of Kentucky and shared a common cultural heritage. Both emphasized the relationship of the writer to time, place, and traditions from the past. Both believed that the ordinary persons must have myths to live by and that the writer should supply those myths. However, they differed widely in how they interpreted the Civil War.

Robert Penn Warren in his *Legacy of the Civil War* gives us his reason for studying history: "The asking and the answering which history provides may help us to understand, even to frame, the logic of experience to which we shall submit. History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future" (100). This statement, at first glance, is logical and respectful of the lessons that history may teach us about the Civil War. Upon examination, Warren's views turn out to be somewhat more ambiguous. According to Warren the proximate antecedents of the conflict had their genesis in the 1830s. In the North, the Abolitionist movement showed an overzealous righteousness and irresponsibility in its agitation against the South (*Legacy* 20-34). In the South, "the possibility of criticism - criticism from the inside - was over" and "the stage was set for trouble" when members of the Virginia legislature in the 1830s committed themselves to an ideology of "slavery as a positive good" (35-36). Warren develops this thesis in a way that suggests that the war resulted solely from the ideological stands assumed by each side.

Warren's chief target in his characterization of the North is the Abolitionist movement, and he describes Abolitionism in terms of its most violent fringe, even though the movement ranged from violent fanatics like John Brown to responsible leaders such as Frederick Douglass, from New England religionists like William Lloyd Garrison to transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, from Sojourner Truth to Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Significantly, there is little difference in Warren's approach toward Abolitionism in *Legacy* in the 1960s and that in his first published prose work, *John Brown: Making of a Martyr* (1929).

Warren mitigates the harshness of his attack on the Abolitionists by acknowledging that the Abolitionists labored for a just cause, and often "nobly." "But who can fail to be disturbed and chastened by the picture of the joyful mustering of the darker forces of our nature in that just cause?" (*Legacy* 23). While pursuing the "iniquitous" slave system, the Abolitionists also, at the same time, refused to criticize the "Lords of the Loom" who, in their New England textile mills, mercilessly exploited women and children and reduced them to abject poverty and squalor. In this respect, Warren's argument is similar to the one developed by slavery ideologues in the antebellum South (Fitzhugh, Ruffin) to claim a superior morality for slavery as against New England capitalism.

Warren's treatment of the consequences of the Civil War focuses on "false myths" which developed to justify the roles of the two opponents in the conflict. The North, Warren says, while it reclaimed "the Confederate States for the Union . . . made them more Southern . . ." (14). The North's victory in the Civil War confirmed its ideological

stance of moral superiority with what Warren calls "The Treasury of Virtue" (59). The South, in its defeat, justified the Confederacy with "The Great Alibi." Once the War was over the Confederacy became a "City of the Soul" (56). By the Great Alibi "The South explains, condones, and transmutes everything. . . . He [the Southerner] turns defeat into victory, defects into virtues. . . . If the Southerner, with his Great Alibi, feels trapped by history, the Northerner, with his Treasury of Virtue, feels redeemed by history, automatically redeemed. . . . [With] an indulgence . . . for all sins past, present, and future, freely given by the hand of history" (59).

Warren sees both post-war apologies as rationalizations that have prevented a self-critical examination of our real history and have allowed self-serving myths to substitute for reality. They are among the psychological costs of the Civil War that "condition in a thousand ways the temper of American life today" (54-65). These false myths continue to echo "in the drama we now live . . . the present momentous crisis of our history, when our national existence may be at stake, makes us demand that we learn -- if, alas, anything -- from that great crisis of our national past" (101). Warren makes his reference specific when he likens the U.S. stance of moral superiority toward the Soviet Union in the Cold War as similar to the North's antebellum intransigent attitude of moral superiority toward the South.

Tate also sees the beginnings of the Civil War in the agitation carried on by Abolitionists who first attained national prominence in the 1830s. Abolitionists, he explains in *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928), were "people in New England who wanted to destroy democracy and civil liberties in America by freeing the slaves." They weren't very intelligent, Tate says, but they thought they were doing what God had told them to do (25). Tate continues this tone with such statements as, "The institution of slavery was a positive good [because] it had become a necessary element in a stable society, and only in a society of fixed classes can men be free" (39). Blacks in the antebellum South benefited from slavery: the slaveowner, because of his benevolence, protected the slave. "The White man was in every sense responsible for the Black. . . . The Black man, 'free,' would have been exploited" (39). Tate depicts Stonewall Jackson the orphan who, through piety and identification with the code of the Southern professional soldier, was the South's greatest hero. He was also, to complete the idealization, a benevolent slaveholder who loved and cared for his Negroes (53).

The North's stance of moral superiority over the South Tate saw continuing to the present day, as he revealed in his *New Republic* review of Avery Craven's *Edmund Ruffin, Southerner* (1932). Tate says there, "While the Eastern politicians were talking a romantic Union, and Emerson an irresponsible freedom and individualism, Ruffin, Rhett, Calhoun, and George Fitzhugh of Virginia, ignored in their time, were issuing a realistic warning to the 'American system' that is valid today." (26) The ideologues of slavery whom Tate had long warned that the South could be forced to fight a war for its independence in order to preserve the slave system and its way of life. In his review, as in other writings, Tate identifies with the most extreme Southern "fireaters" who opposed all efforts to compromise the "irrepressible conflict." Like them, he saw no room for Southern compromise.

The historical significance of the Civil War was an other issue on which Warren and Tate differed. For Warren the "American experiment" had been tested and the country united by an ordeal of fire. If the fledgling nation was to fulfill the promise of the founding fathers, slavery had to go (*Legacy* 7). In *Jefferson Davis* Tate is sure that the Civil War was not fought over slavery. Early in the Davis biography Tate interjects his conviction that "The issue [of the Civil War] was class rule and religion" on the Southern side which he favored, versus "democracy and science" on the Northern side which he abhorred (*Davis* 87). He expands his view in the book's epilogue: "The South was the last stronghold of European civilization in the western hemisphere, a conservative check upon the restless expansiveness of the industrial North, and the South had to go" (301).

The sharp differences of interpretation between Warren and Tate extend to post-war Reconstruction as well. For Warren, the victory of the North "catapulted American society from what had been in considerable part an agrarian handicraft society into the society of Big Technology and Big Business" (*Legacy* 8). With the paralyzing controversy over slavery resolved, the pragmatic predilections of the American character, already inherent in American experience, enabled the release of "enormous energies, new drives and know-how for the sudden and massive occupation of the Continent" (10-11). Tate views the rise of Big Business industrial capitalism, the flourishing of a science, and the expansion of popular democracy as leading to a decadent society which has lost its moral bearings. Industrialism was responsible for the decline in influence of traditional Christianity and the abandonment of absolute moral standards. He focuses his attack on positivism in science and humanism in religion, which he describes in much the same terms as the religious right today describe "secular humanism" ("Religion" 158).

The American stance of self-righteousness in today's world arena Warren sees as one of the most pernicious products of the North's Treasury of Virtue: "Righteousness is our first refuge and our strength -- even when we have acted on the grounds of calculated self-interest, and have got caught red-handed, and have to admit, a couple of days later, to a great bumbling horse-apple of a lie. In such a case, the effect of the conviction of virtue is to make us lie automatically and awkwardly, with no élan of artistry and no forethought; and then in trying to justify the lie, lie to ourselves and transmute the lie into a kind of superior truth" (75). Tate also deprecates the mantle of morality used by the United States to justify its policies in the world arena. He objects that the moral decadence of American society precludes a stance of moral superiority.

Warren sees racism as the most serious fruit of both "The Treasury of Virtue" and "The Great Alibi." Why, he asks, after listing the appalling costs of the Civil War in lives and treasure, did not passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishing slavery win real freedom for the Negro? He finds the answer in Northern attitudes toward the Negro as much as in the South's. He points out that Northern whites, from the top to the bottom of society, before and during the Civil War, never envisioned Negro equality as a sequel to abolishing slavery, or the abolition of slavery as a war aim. During the war itself there were glaring instances of racism and oppressions of the Negro by the Federal military and in Northern civilian life (*Legacy* 62-63).

Warren proposes these facts to explain why the half-hearted post-war "Reconstruction" culminated in the Northern conspiracy with the white Southern landowners in what he calls "The Big Sell-Out of 1876," the deal "to make Hayes President in return for the end of any Reconstruction whatsoever in the South" (67). With this deal, the North handed back political control in the South to the same landholding class which had been so decisively defeated in the Civil War itself. The legacy of these events has continued their negative consequences into the latter years of the twentieth century as a heavy burden on democracy and the economy, not only in the South, but in the nation as a whole.

Tate was so attached to "the good" in slavery, resulting from the humanity and benevolence of the master class of the Civil War to be "in many ways worse than the old" ("Sanctuary" 151). The defeat of the Confederacy was followed by the "terrors of Reconstruction" (*Davis* 299). Southern whites turned to frequent lynchings of Negroes after the war because "Negroes had been stirred to violence by the Northern whites" (42). He asserts further that "for society as a whole the modern [economic] system is probably inferior to that of slavery . . ." (4). Tate nowhere connects the South of his day (the 1920s to the 1950s) to the Southern landowners' post-emancipation success in maintaining racism and white supremacy by defrauding blacks of the political rights granted them by the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments to the constitution.

Warren and Tate both grew up in Kentucky small-towns where the Negro's inferiority was taken for granted. In the 1950s the open rebellion of masses of black people in the South against segregation, discrimination, and oppression which was to explode into the Civil Rights movement was already gathering steam. Warren made it a point to expand his horizons on the issue of white racism, and black reactions to it, and published *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), for which he interviewed Negro leaders in all walks of life.

Tate's attitude toward Negroes continued to assume "natural" genetic superiority of the white race over black people, but Tate was defensive about publicly expressing it after the biographies. He carefully avoided publicly addressing the morally disturbing legacy of slavery and the conditions which followed the failed Reconstruction. His views did not change, however. In a *Sewanee Review* editorial in 1945, Tate still insisted that the place of Negroes in Southern society was solely a question for the [white] South to decide. He opposed "federal intervention" to protect the Negro's civil rights as "not . . . satisfactory to anybody" (659-660). He never later reconsidered his racial attitudes. When the Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis biographies were reprinted in the 1950s and 1960s there were no revisions, repudiations, or corrections of their blatant racial content. Furthermore, although Southern literary history included outstanding literature by black writers of poetry, short stories, and novels from the 1920s through the 1960s, Tate, who was never humble about his literary gifts, did not write criticism of black poets or novelists.

Why Tate chose the self-defeating course of championing the "lost cause" of the Confederacy is not impossible to understand. In his university days at Vanderbilt, as one of the Fugitive poets, Tate already seemed willing to accept a role as poet-martyr (J.L. Stewart 318). He affected the pose of the aloof aristocrat. He never was interested in understanding the "common people." One could not imagine him traveling through the South as Warren did in 1956, button-holing white and Negro Southerners from all stations in life and recording their views for *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South*. Tate's championing of the lost cause was linked in his mind with his religious seekings. Perhaps Tate was trying to defend himself against the world he found so uncongenial and was preoccupied with searching for a reason to believe in a personal God who ordered the lives of men and society. His strong identification with his Southern roots led him to invent his own reality which contained the God he prayed for and a society that had an exalted place for the poet. In his biographies and other writings he sought to reinforce his self-image of a temperamental kinship with the haughty lords of medieval Europe and the "aristocrats" of antebellum society. He saw both societies as led by natural aristocracies that included poets in an honored place.

Warren, like Tate, was and is critical about what he sees as the moral deficiencies of his society. He believes these deficiencies are due to the human reluctance to understand or face its own capacity for rationalization and self-deception about the uncomfortable evil of one's own soul. He does not exempt himself from this self-criticism, and seems to carry an inexplicable burden of guilt about himself. He believes the road to redemption is an individual and solitary matter that requires the recognition of self-complicity in the evil of the world.

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