The author of *All the King's Men* understood agrarianism not as a political program but as a spiritual corrective to the evils of modern life

Is It Time for the Robert Penn Warren Option?

Mary Cuff

The U.S. census of 1890 officially declared the American frontier closed. There was no longer a great line crossing the country, across which a young man seeking a new identity and new beginnings could "go west." And with that, perhaps the most influential aspect of the American experience—already romanticized and ritualized—passed forever into history and myth. Among American intellectuals, facing a new American century that would be the first not shaped by the frontier, this was a troubling reality. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the frontier had defined the American psyche, crafting a rugged, independent identity that made American democracy distinct from Old World traditions and political systems. Without this dynamic element, Turner feared, American culture could stagnate, endangering democracy itself: "Under the forms of the American democracy is there in reality evolving such a concentration of economic and social power in the hands of a comparatively few men as may make political democracy an appearance rather than a reality?"

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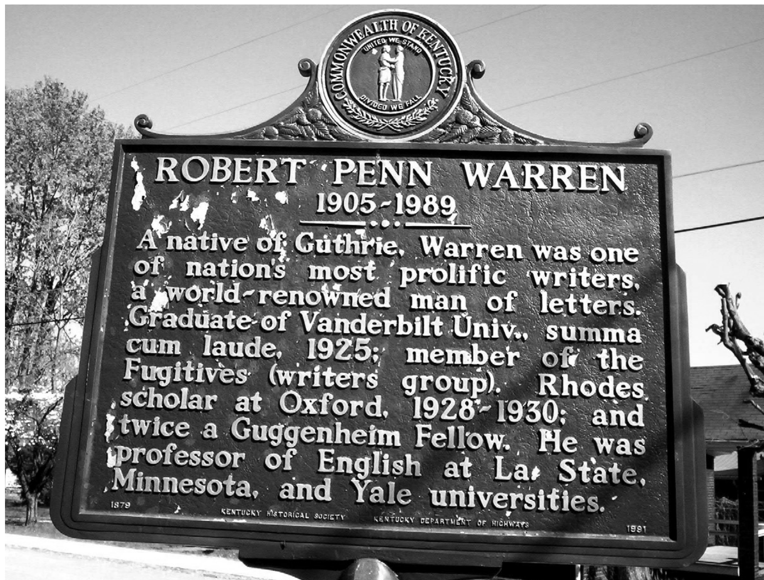
Like Turner, the Nashville Agrarians of the 1920s and '30s—most notably the poets John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Donald Davidson—were deeply concerned about the prospect of the closing of another monument of American experience: the society of the small, family-owned and -operated farm. The Agrarians believed this traditional society was deeply conducive to authentic human relationships and formed the basis of healthy individualism, property ownership, and democracy. In their 1930 manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, they protested the destruction of America's agrarian culture: for them, the very soul of American democracy, the humanity of society, and healthy individualism were in danger of being swept away by a dehumanizing, socially flattening technocracy.

Agrarianism is of only casual interest for many Americans today, when it is not discounted as irrelevant, impractical, even elitist. The Nashville Agrarians, if the average reader has heard of them at all, are at best remembered as nostalgic or at worst as proponents of the Lost Cause and tacit racial segregation. As for modern advocates of agrarianism and its corollary, localism, the charge remains that the social diagnosis might be sound but that the proposed solution is untenable. Adrian Vermeule voiced this complaint well in his *American Affairs* review of Patrick Deneen's 2018 book, *Why Liberalism Failed*. Faced with the crushing conformity demanded by a society crafted by industrial and technological liberalism, retreat to localized, intentional communities—agrarian or not—dangerously assumes that same society's forbearance. This criticism is commonly leveled against the various Benedict Option–style solutions to the dehumanizing anthropology of the modern state, and it is a critique for which most conservatives have not found a satisfactory answer.

Even on an individual level, only the most privileged people in contemporary America can quit their jobs and their urban or suburban lifestyles to become gentlemen farmers living off the land. Almost as financially impractical for most families—and especially larger and younger ones often saddled with college debt—are the various attempts at modified agrarianism: the "crunchy con" lifestyles celebrated by Rod Dreher that eschew mass-produced goods as much as possible, resulting in dizzying price tags for everyday items, and that prohibit luxuries. For many people, the impracticality of this lifestyle is joined with the concern that it neglects the poor among us. In a 2018 essay for the *Globe and Mail*, the Canadian novelist and essayist Randy Boyagoda warned that neo-agrarian proposals risk shutting out the poor by channeling spending instead toward "meta-monasticism in neighbourhoods where you and your fellow churchgoers build the gates yourself."

Thus, even for those who sympathize deeply with the agrarian diagnosis of modern society's ills—the social alienation and dehumanization triggered by sprawling urbanism, industrialism, and the dominance of technology—there is often the sense that agrarianism is unhelpful as a solution in the twenty-first century. Modern agrarians face essentially the same critique that plagued the original Twelve Southerners: retreat to economically outmoded agrarian sanctums is a realistic option only for elites, leaving behind the Americans hardest hit by the social fragmentation of modern culture.

For one of the Nashville Agrarians, the poet, novelist, and critic Robert Penn Warren, the criticisms became inescapable shortly after the movement began. Throughout the '30s, Warren helped to promote the cause beyond its initial manifesto in a series of articles for the agrarian and distributist-leaning *American Review*, culminating in a contribution to a second manifesto, in 1936, that briefly united Southern Agrarians with American and English Distributists: *Who Owns America: A New Declaration of Independence*.



For Warren, a sense of place, of home, of localism, had to precede a return to traditional society and rejection of technocracy

Just a decade after the Nashville Agrarians made their debut, America entered a world war that was fought and won by intense industrialization. While agrarian communities had been under siege even earlier, in the postwar economy industrialism was triumphant, carried along by the massive wheels of production so necessary for the war effort. Reacting to the magnitude of the cultural fallout of the war, Warren later reflected that the '40s had made agrarianism seem no longer tenable: "You felt that all your work was irrelevant to this unmasking of this brute force in the world—that the de-humanizing forces had won. And you had no more relevance in such discussions except a sort of quarreling with people over the third highball."

The landscape of America had changed, and so many readers of Warren, and those interested in agrarianism, assumed that he had put the movement behind him. Today most readers know Warren merely as the author of a political novel, *All the King's Men*, and of influential literature textbooks written with Cleanth Brooks.

By the mid-'50s, however, Warren found himself mulling over agrarianism again, attempting, as he said, to understand what it signified. In his reevaluation of the movement, Warren did not focus on the elements that might appear to be essential: farms or the rural landscape—elements that frustrate practically minded conservatives today. In fact, in a very late interview, Warren argued that " 'agrarianism' is just a word. It did not describe in any basic fashion to my mind what the thing was about. It was like a tent with a menagerie, with fifty kinds of animals under it."

For Warren, looking back on what had united the various beasts in that tent, the dominant concern had been

> the disintegration of the notion of the individual in that society we're living in . . . and the relation of that to democracy. It's the machine of power in this so-called democratic state; the machines disintegrate individuals, so you have no individual sense of responsibility and no awareness that the individual has a past and a place. He's simply the voting machine; he's everything you pull the lever on if there's any voting at all.

He proposed that the agrarian program had been “trying to find a notion of democracy” that saved individuals and society from such a fate. Warren’s reaffirmation of agrarianism in these terms can be a valuable model for conservatives today who approve of the agrarian diagnosis yet remain unconvinced by recent popular and popularizing versions of its solutions.

The original Southern Agrarians often proposed economic or political programs that met with the same charges of vagueness and impracticability as those of their intellectual descendants today. But after *I’ll Take My Stand*, Warren adopted a completely literary approach. While most of the contributions to *Who Owns America?* focused on broad social and economic agendas, Warren wrote “Literature as Symptom,” an essay analyzing the difficulty facing modern authors who found themselves stripped of an organic relation to society. Attacking the propagandistic tendencies of Marxist writers, Warren also cautioned regionalists against slipping into feeble nostalgia and becoming merely “local color.”

As he explained in the ’50s, he viewed his literary agrarianism as nothing less than “a fifth column” to support the moral compass of society. Literature as fifth column was especially important because, Warren insisted, “we couldn’t step out and take over the powers of the state” to legislate a morally ordered society, nor could he and his fellow Agrarians—university men themselves—rely on the academy to be the moral agent it should have been in society. Today these same obstacles remain for any conservative desirous of social and political reform.

Warren’s literary approach paralleled that of the Agrarians’ British compatriot, the distributist Hilaire Belloc, who concluded at the end of his sweeping cultural and economic assessment *The Crisis of Civilization* (1937) that third-way economists and social critics could not hope to enact any meaningful reform before the hearts and minds of the populace at large were converted away from the easy acceptance of a fragmented, isolating social structure that ensured facile comfort. Belloc argued that the two most powerful tools for this conversion of culture were history and literature, since narrative could capture the national imagination and shape opinion more powerfully than economic argumentation. This strategy is not typically emphasized today by agrarian social critics, who are eager to produce tangible results quickly. Rather than advocate literature and history as fundamental players in the long game of any realistic return to a more humane society, most writers skip straight to action, and thus leave themselves open to the criticism that intentional communities cannot survive the intolerance of unconverted mainstream thought.

Warren is the agrarian author for those who have little patience with the movement’s proposals but who recognize the significance of its cultural diagnosis. Throughout his literary corpus, Warren’s dominant concern is to awaken the individual hearts and minds of modern men and women and convert them toward the mentality, rather than the lifestyle, that underpins agrarianism. In his literary approach to the core agrarian values (although decidedly not in his outlook on American history), Warren mirrors Frederick Jackson Turner as he faced the unstoppable reality of the loss of the frontier. In his day, Turner sought to capture and preserve the essence of the frontier even as it physically vanished from the landscape. Rather than attempt to re-create an artificial, physical, “intentional” frontier, Turner turned inward, asking,

> What ideals persist from this democratic experience of the West; and have they acquired sufficient momentum to sustain themselves under conditions so radically unlike those in the days of their

> origin? . . . The free lands are gone. The material forces that gave vitality to Western democracy are passing away. It is to the realm of the spirit, to the domain of ideals and legislation, that we must look for Western influence upon democracy in our own days.

As Turner did before him, Warren also turned to the realm of the spirit and to ideals (if not legislation) to seek the agrarian landscape that he could not physically save. Thus, literary representations of the land and the agrarian past could serve as the locus for values that needed to be preserved as the family farms closed and America moved into factories and offices, cul-de-sacs and apartment complexes.

Adept in multiple genres as he was, from novels to plays, short lyrics to book-length poems—in addition to his very accessible nonfiction essays and books on topics ranging from historical biography to the civil rights movement—Warren's dominant themes always center on the importance of past and place for the individual. Fundamental to this project was Warren's worry over the health of democracy in America, since a mechanized democracy of detached, isolated beings was no democracy at all. In each case, however, Warren scrupulously took his own advice about avoiding sentimentalism or nostalgia: he remained focused on the modern individual's isolation and alienation, as well as the necessary search for identity through revisiting, reevaluating, and reestablishing one's broken connection to human community through past and place. Warren chose protagonists who are not members of a healthy local community, as in Wendell Berry's fictitious setting of Port William. Rather than portray communities as they could be in a world more accepting of agrarian principles, Warren focused on isolated moderns and their individual struggles to redeem the time and restore the human bond in a world that does not give them the luxury of returning to an agrarian context.

One particularly telling instance of Warren's analysis of the modern individual's pastlessness and placelessness comes in the poem "Original Sin: A Short Story." The poem follows an unnamed rural Nebraskan who has moved to the urban North in an attempt to rise above his rural roots. Tellingly, the would-be urbane, modern man dedicates his studies to axioms—truths that do not need history—and has "moved often and rarely left an address." He is motivated by a desire for "a sense of cleansing and hope," forward-looking and unattached. But he is followed by some sort of nightmare that "acts like the old hound that used to snuffle your door and moan." He connects this strange nightmare to his personal past, represented by his grandfather, and to his place of origin, Omaha, but it turns out that it has followed him to Harvard Yard, too—perhaps "grandpa's will paid the ticket."

The snuffling nightmare has stalked him as he has moved from place to place, and when he ignores it, it "wander[s] the dark house / Like a mother who rises at night to seek a childhood picture; / Or it goes to the backyard and stands like an old horse cold in the pasture." This haunting presence is associated with agrarian and familial memories: images the protagonist can ignore, but which do not go away. Ultimately, this presence is his own human nature. Warren often invoked the doctrine of original sin as a shorthand for our flawed human nature that, when acknowledged, allows human beings to recognize and enter into authentic communion with each other. The nightmare of the protagonist's own unacknowledged nature, here associated with the abandoned past and sense of place, is a rebuke to the modern man who has allowed himself to become placeless and thus dehumanized. Essentially, "Original Sin: A Short Story" is about a modern man who relies on progress

and mobility to free him from the stain of the past, but who has in truth alienated himself from his own complex nature as a human being.

Warren's novels are populated with similar characters: men and women who have in some way or other been alienated from the past and a sense of place. As each novel grapples with various dramatic situations, the core preoccupation is the crisis of these isolated moderns: an examination of the fracturing of society and of individuals' humanity that results from alienation. At the end of novels as diverse as the political drama *All the King's Men*, the more familial and regional *A Place to Come To*, and the historical *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War*, characters reckon with the past and the place that has haunted them throughout the story. For Warren, it is only by accepting the lessons of the past and the ties of place—with all of the good and the bad that they contain—that modern individuals have any hope of holding on to their humanity and to authentic human connection, and it is only through these that a healthy democracy can be maintained. In today's society, where historical monuments are ripped down and traditional modes of human behavior are sacrificed on the altar of scientific progress and obscured by the wild optimism of the Future, Warren's reminder of the enduring relevance of past and place serves as both a rebuke and a way forward. It is a way that anyone, regardless of socioeconomic condition or job flexibility, can follow.

Accepting the truth that we all have a past and a place, and that these are aspects of our human identity we ignore at our peril, is essential to Warren's internalized agrarianism and his entire literary project. Thus, at the conclusion to *All the King's Men*, Warren requires his narrator, Jack Burden, to come face to face with his personal and familial past and embrace the humanity—fallen, flawed, and full of dignity—that it contains. He must also acknowledge the lasting spiritual significance of his familial place—his father's house—upon his own identity. In doing so, he reaffirms concrete, personal relationships with people, with history, and with the land itself, anchoring himself in a world gone mad. As Burden reflects near the novel's ending, "I could now accept the past which I had before felt was tainted and horrible. I could accept the past now because I could accept her [his mother] and be at peace with her and with myself." He ends the novel with his childhood sweetheart, affirming that "if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other, and . . . if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future."

Importantly for those of us who cannot move to an intentional-living community, none of Warren's novels end with the protagonist in his ancestral home or an agrarian setting, ready to plow a field or milk a cow. For Warren, such an ending would be unreal, given the modern world he and his characters—and we, his readers—face. None of Warren's protagonists have the option to physically go home and make a life there. This is nowhere more obvious than in his novel *Flood: A Romance of Our Time*, where the ancestral home of all of the characters, Fiddlersburg, has been slated for flooding by the impersonal modernizing force of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

In "Literature as Symptom," Warren had emphasized that the true regional writer "connects the idea of property, that is, real property as opposed to abstract property, with his idea of the relation of man to place, for ownership gives a man a stake in a place and helps to define his, for the regional writer, organic relation to society." In *Flood*, this idea plays out dramatically, at times violently. Not only does the dam threaten the characters' sense of place, but the main char-

acter, Brad Tolliver, is a modern man who, like that Nebraskan in "Original Sin," has fled the tensions of home and sought meaning and identity in success and a cosmopolitan lifestyle, in this case in Hollywood. Tolliver returns to Fiddlersburg briefly to scout the possibility of exploiting the town's cataclysmic death for a movie, only to come face to face with the reality that his placeless and pastless existence has stripped him of a real sense of identity.

Examining the role of past and place as completely as possible, Warren rips open Tolliver's strained family relationships and family history: his father, a genuinely unlovable fellow, had bought the ancestral home of the town's founding family in a desperate attempt to cement for himself and his family a sense of belonging, and the dispossessed last heir of that family had, in turn, married Brad's sister to restake his claim to the property. Part of Tolliver's character arc lies in discovering that this squabbling over a house is not petty but reveals a deeply human need. Similarly, the TVA's decision to flood an old town is more than simply an inconvenience for the people to be relocated. Place and past are intertwined and inescapable in the novel, and for each character there is a pressing need to reconcile with both—or else be swept away in alienation and exile more complete than the flood that will forever submerge the town. *Flood* becomes, then, a key text of Warren's internalized agrarianism, since the characters can no longer stake their sense of place to a physical ancestral home, but must nevertheless internalize the truths about human nature and social relationships revealed by the need for a concrete, particular place and past.

Never sentimental about either past or place, even as he asserts their lasting importance for the individual, Warren takes pains to represent the truth of a past that is less than ideal and a place that is less than perfect. For him, the past is not a golden age to return to but a guidepost:

> The past is always a rebuke to the present; it's bound to be one, one way or another: it's your great rebuke. It's a better rebuke than any dream of the future. It's a better rebuke because you can see what some of the costs were, what frail virtues were achieved in the past by frail men. . . . The drama of the past that corrects us is the drama of our struggles to be human, or our struggles to define the values of our forebears in the face of their difficulties.

Warren's great, if underappreciated, contribution as an agrarian author is that his novels and poems can speak to most of us facing the harsh reality that technocracy, materialism, and urban isolation will only get worse before mainstream thought wakes up to the reality of modernity's degraded society. Warren did not give his literature the luxury of retreat to a better place denied to most Americans; instead, his internalized agrarianism seeks to preserve the deepest values of traditional, local communities in a world that has left that lifestyle behind. By focusing on characters damaged by the modern world, Warren could dramatically enact the conversion of heart and mind that Belloc insisted was prior to any broad social or legislative change. Warren's converted characters internalize agrarianism's humane perspective and thus preserve themselves from dehumanization even though the world around them has not changed. They have been freed, and thus cannot be so easily exploited by the impersonal machine of power that is attempting to usurp American democracy. Warren's internalized agrarianism—the Robert Penn Warren Option—and its interaction with the stark realities of the modern world can serve as a way forward for those of us who would otherwise view agrarianism as untenable and outmoded.