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Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 64, Numbers 1-2, Winter-Spring 2011, pp.  
25-57 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2011.0023>

Mississippi  
Quarterly

The Journal  
Of Southern Culture



Center for Southern Studies, Center  
for the Study of Southern Culture,  
Johns Hopkins University

Vol. 64, Nos. 1-2 Winter-Spring  
2011

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## Choosing Sides during the Culture Wars of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s: Robert Penn Warren, the Weight of Agrarianism, and the Popular Audience

IN 1946, ROBERT PENN WARREN ACQUIRED HIS FIRST LITERARY AGENT, Helen Strauss, who was savvy, well-read, and admittedly aware of her client's professional reputation as a foremost figure among the Fugitives, New Critics, and Agrarians. Warren had just published the widely acclaimed *All the King's Men* and was facing a significant shift in his literary identity, from that of a writer appreciated primarily in academic circles to an author whose writing extended itself to popular audiences and popularizing accolades such as the Pulitzer Prize. In her autobiography, *A Talent for Luck* (1979), Strauss reveals that after adding Warren to her client list she had second thoughts about her bold strategies for promoting his work; in particular, she had misgivings about placing his short stories in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, even though in 1947 that publication offered to pay \$5000 for an abridgement of his novella "The Circus in the Attic":

Warren, associated with Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon and the Kenyon school of criticism, had been respected as editor, essayist and a leader in that too convenient, heterogeneous grouping known as the New Criticism for over a decade in the pages of scholarly and prestigious little magazines. A Rhodes Scholar from Kentucky, who had attended Vanderbilt, he was associated with the Fugitive Group of poets in Nashville—Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Merrill Moore—and had encouraged . . . the best of a generation of new Southern-born authors in the pages of *The Southern Review*. . . . *Cosmopolitan* seemed a big jump . . . and for no good reason except a certain ignorance of that circuit, I did not know if this commercial leap would sit well with Warren's peers, or with Warren himself. (129)

Strauss's concise summation of Warren's career as well as of the friends and colleagues who had been major influences from his Vanderbilt years to the late 1940s is as notable for whom it includes (Caroline Gordon, for

example, as the only woman on the list) as for what it omits.<sup>1</sup> Patently one of Warren's most devoted fans and having also become a good friend, Strauss prominently mentions most major aspects of Warren's career up to the moment of their first meeting: his active undergraduate membership in the Vanderbilt Fugitive group and his later role as a mature scholar in helping develop and promote the New Criticism in venues such as the *Southern Review*. What Strauss neglects to mention at this point in her reminiscence is an aspect of her client's career that remains to this day a contested area of Warren studies: his role, along with other southern Agrarians, in producing the 1930 Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. Yet, these were the very associations from Warren's early career that would speak most emphatically against the perceived commercialism of his publishing agenda in the mid- to late 1940s.

Regardless of Strauss's apprehensions, any hesitation Warren may have shown in publishing with *Cosmopolitan* would have little to do with his former Fugitive status. His membership during the 1920s in that close brotherhood and his ardent commitment to literary modernism, particularly of the Eliotian variety, would indeed have mandated a more elitist response to such a middlebrow publishing venue. But by 1946, the trajectory of Warren's creative development had borne him anxiously away from much of that modernist influence and would carry him even further away over the remaining decades of his career. His New Critical status would prove similarly moot; his adherence to the New Criticism developed essentially from pragmatic pedagogy and then to a democratizing impulse when, as an assistant professor and then associate professor at Louisiana State University from 1934 to 1942, Warren realized that his students could not read their assignments with any real understanding of their literary content. Insisting that the skillful reading of literature could and should be taught to all university students whether they attended the elite universities like Vanderbilt or the large

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon, of course, did not belong to the Fugitive Group although she was more aware than most of their early literary activities. Her 10 February 1923 review of *The Fugitive*, which appeared in the *Chattanooga News*, for which she wrote book reviews, voiced positive sentiments of the little magazine that were shared by other more prestigious reviewers such as H. L. Mencken, Christopher Morley, and Louis Untermeyer. Included under the byline "Carolyn Gordon," it was titled "U.S. Best Poets Here in Tennessee" (Waldron 30). Her fateful meeting with her future husband, Allen Tate, occurred in the summer of the next year.

state universities like LSU, Warren and his colleague Cleanth Brooks, in gestures both pedagogical and practical, incorporated models of New Critical close readings in textbooks such as *An Approach to Literature* (1936) and *Understanding Poetry* (1938).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Strauss's fears of what the former Fugitives and New Critics would think were ultimately beside the point—although the views held by Agrarians were another matter. Warren, of course, accepted *Cosmopolitan's* offer, even agreeing to the abridgment of "The Circus in the Attic" for the magazine's purposes, and commented to his new agent that "he did not know that such money existed for a short story" (Strauss 130). Yet, sanguine though he may have seemed at the prospect of this "commercial leap" and others to follow, two stories that appeared soon after the successful popular publication of *All the King's Men*—"The Circus in the Attic" and "The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger"—reveal a Warren who revels in New Critical ambiguity and irony and restates his wary stance on literary modernism, but ambivalently reassesses his bond to Agrarianism, which at that time remained the most weighty of the forces from Warren's past that argued against his entry into this new phase of his career.

### 1.

Despite her disclaimer of having "a certain ignorance" of the circuit of writers and thinkers with which Warren kept company, Strauss does write perceptively in her memoir of elements of Warren's professional and personal lives as well as knowledgeably and appreciatively of his literary output. These insights and others might, in fact, lend credence to Strauss's assumption that encouraging Warren to plunge into a sea of popular readership by way of such venues as glossy magazines, book club offerings, and film adaptations might set him at odds with his socially and intellectually conservative peers. In the instance, however, of his relationship with two close friends whom Strauss initially names—Allen Tate, whose lifelong friendship with Warren derived from their shared Fugitive, New Critical, and Agrarian identities, and Tate's wife Caroline Gordon, a fellow Todd County Kentuckian who was also a novelist and short story writer—Warren's agent could little know that the Tates had

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<sup>2</sup>For a useful analysis of Brooks and Warren's *Modern Rhetoric* (1949) as well as how it "imports the vocabulary and pedagogy of New Criticism" (35) that the two men had established in their previous literature textbooks, see Cullick.

long desired to achieve the same financial success that her client was anticipating.

True, Tate and Gordon had for decades been influential partners in Warren's professional development, Tate primarily in the sphere of poetry and Gordon in the sphere of fiction, especially short fiction. Allen Tate, somewhat older, more widely traveled, and more conversant with the emerging modernism of the 1920s, had taken Warren under his wing when they were both undergraduates at Vanderbilt. From the *Fugitive* years on, Tate assumed the role of Warren's *de facto* editor and agent, prompting his younger friend, when a graduate student at Yale, to write, "you have placed everything I have ever published; you might as well start an agency. . ." (Blotner 83). Exchanges of completed poems or poems-in-the-making for revision or commentary became a lifelong habit of their friendship.

Tate and Warren had been Vanderbilt classmates and friends for about two years when in 1924 they were introduced to Caroline Gordon through the younger man's mother, Anna Ruth Warren, in their hometown of Guthrie, a meeting that eventually resulted in Tate and Gordon's marriage in 1925. Warren later recalled that Gordon's "tales about the South had been very important" in helping him understand that writing fiction was something that could impart the "Same excitement [as poetry], same sense of being a complicated, rich thing inside" (Warren, *Talking* 141). A poet first, Warren saw the world of fiction through new eyes and as carrying new possibilities, in part because of her example.

While Tate and Gordon might very likely have looked askance at Warren's success in the glossy magazines as well as on the movie screen (Strauss's autobiography, for example, proudly reports her having struck the movie deal for *Band of Angels* [1955] that made Warren \$200,000 [131]), their suspicions of these popular venues would not have been for the reasons his agent expected. These money-making pursuits, and others, were certainly not beneath the Agrarian standards of this chronically cash-strapped literary couple. According to one biographer, Gordon nursed great, though ultimately shattered, hopes that *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934), her fictional tribute to her father, would be "a popular sale" (Jonza 151) equal to the nagging debt the Tates were carrying at the time. Gordon's hopes were also dashed when the "movie nibble" at her moderately successful Civil War novel *None Shall Look*

*Back* (1937) failed to materialize into a concrete offer. The “nibble not strike” she reported to a sympathetic Warren was all the more frustrating to Gordon in light of Margaret Mitchell’s phenomenal success with *Gone With the Wind*, both the novel (1936) and the film (1939). Gordon was convinced that the only factor separating the Tates from a financial bonanza was her bad timing in completing *None Shall Look Back* only after Mitchell had published her blockbuster (Makowsky 134).

Nor, in spite of the Tates’ resentment of the effort Warren expended with Cleanth Brooks on writing textbooks (they asserted he would be better and more creatively occupied with his poetry), were the couple themselves above efforts to secure a comfortable nest egg through academic publication (Blotner 157). The financial successes that resulted from the solidly productive collaboration of Brooks and Warren on textbooks such as their LSU ventures *An Approach to Literature* and *Understanding Poetry*, then later *Understanding Fiction* (1943, 1959) and *Modern Rhetoric* (1949), more than likely spurred Tate and Gordon’s similar efforts in the field, one of which was an ill-fated Warren/Tate collaboration (Blotner 157). Gordon and Tate went on to co-edit a college literature anthology, *The House of Fiction* (1950, 1960), but well-regarded as it was, it never achieved the status or ubiquity of the Brooks/Warren textbooks.

Ultimately, Tate and Gordon’s anticipated rejection of what Strauss terms Warren’s “commercial leap” probably had little to do with the putative damage to their New Critical or Agrarian sensibilities and much more to do with two other factors: their perception that Warren was allowing his poetry to languish so he could pursue the lesser genres of the novel and short story (not to mention film), an attitude compounded by their very human resentment of a more financially flush colleague, and one whom they had mentored to boot. As if to credit the first factor, Warren later admitted that in 1946, the composition date of his last short story, he was experiencing a poetic slump during which he “didn’t finish a single short poem, not one” (*Talking* 129). Once past this poetic block by the early to mid-1950s, Warren realized that the poetry he was writing then, poetry “more directly tied to a realistic base of facts,” was also “tied more directly to the sort of thing that might become a short story” (*Talking* 130). Consequently, and in deference to poetry, his first and lasting love, he never wrote another short story, though he

continued to write novels, the production of which appeared not to affect his poetic output.<sup>3</sup>

Warren would hardly have openly acknowledged the second factor—personal and professional jealousy—even though he must have recognized its reality. A striking refrain in the respective biographies of Warren, Tate, and Gordon is the difficulty with which they weathered the 1930s and 1940s, trying times for the nation as a whole, but especially tight for fiction writers and poets. They all managed to survive, at some points just barely so, by piecing together tenuous livings from teaching appointments, fellowships, and writing prizes, but money was always in too short supply. Joseph Blotner observes the vicious cycle in which Warren found himself during this period, one in which his peers no doubt found themselves as well: “he was determined to write, not just because it was his vocation, but also because it promised a better return than teaching” (134). But the “better return,” though hardly negligible, was not itself the primary goal: “Money was the key to doing what he wanted most, to write without distraction” (239). Warren’s drive and determination bore results, eliciting a witty, edgy prophecy in Allan Tate’s 1935 correspondence with mutual friend Andrew Lytle: “We’d better get Brer Warren to touch us; his touch is both the king’s and Midas” (Lytle and Tate 95).

With the publication of *All the King’s Men* in 1946 and its lucrative sale to Hollywood, turns of fortune that made Warren’s subsequent contract with agent Helen Strauss not only possible but necessary, he was on his way to realizing his goal of writing “without distraction,” while his two friends continued to struggle. The bond of friendship between the two men was such that Allen Tate’s bitterness over Warren’s success probably never resulted in direct confrontation between the two, but according to another mutual friend, Tate, long since divorced from Caroline Gordon and on his deathbed in 1979, was given to a sad and compulsive veracity regarding old resentments:

He talked about Red Warren, saying that Red’s work had suffered because of its popular success, but he was clearly envious of the money Red had made. He kept up

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<sup>3</sup>As Joseph Millichap notes in his study of the short fiction, Warren published “Invitation to a Dance” as a short sketch after *The Circus in the Attic* appeared, but that piece hardly qualified as the type of short fiction included in the collection; furthermore, “The several pieces of fiction published in journals after 1947 are excised pieces of his later novels” (80 n24).

with the sales of Red's books and the fees he got for ancillary rights. It seemed unfair to Allen . . . since . . . Red was already rich and did not need more money. (Sullivan 96)

Clearly, the gifted protégée's having long since outdistanced his mentor both wounded and rankled, and most likely had for a long time. Still, Tate and Gordon could hardly have denied Warren the means of financial success they themselves had sought to implement.

## 2.

And so it appears that in spite of Helen Strauss's keen awareness that the American public's impression of the New Criticism had led to a "too convenient, heterogeneous grouping" of broadly disparate literary agendas and personalities, she herself had also fallen into the trap of painting all New Critics with the same brush. In reality, the antagonism for the financially productive venues of popular and mass culture that she attributes to Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon would be more fittingly attributed to Donald Davidson, whose staunchly Agrarian essay for *I'll Take My Stand*, "A Mirror for Artists," deplors such media as the movies, book club publications, and magazines directed toward the "lowest common denominator" of American readers (35).

Davidson's "A Mirror for Artists," true to the original Agrarian purpose of *I'll Take My Stand*, warns his readers not only of the growing industrialization of the American workplace but also of the "industrialists in art" (35) who emerged as a consequence to satisfy the "feverish and energetic" (34) pseudo-leisure of the working class. Davidson's list of targets provides a brief window into that moment in popular culture: in the category of industrialists in art Davidson includes "the Hollywood producers, the McFadden [sic] publications, the Tin Pan Alley crowd, [and] the Haldeman-Julius Blue Books." He also speaks dismissively of the book clubs—the most prominent of the time were the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild—in the service of whose mass production of questionable art "eminent critics sell their prestige and ability." Davidson worries that, preoccupied as they were with these "vulgar enterprises," the time the working classes might spend listening to Beethoven is given over to jazz, and their potential for fluent knowledge of Shakespeare is replaced by an appreciation of the world as mediated through "magazines of large circulation" (such as *True Romances* and *True Detective*), through comic strips, and through the

movies (35-36). Davidson predicts dire effects upon the artist in such a culture: in a section of his essay that reveals how the developing Agrarianism of some of the Fugitives had shifted slightly away from the modernist movement they had embraced in the 1920s, he cites modernism as only one unfortunately detached creative extreme to which the artist is forced when faced with industrialization's imperative to conform.

On the other hand, Davidson's essay makes it clear that he does not expect the shop-girl or the automotive factory worker to have any real affinity for Beethoven or Shakespeare in the first place, a class-based bias that makes his protestations against mass-produced art all the more suspect. One easily anticipates the genuine source of Davidson's antipathy for a businessman like Bernarr MacFadden. The huge MacFadden publishing empire included pulp titles like the above-mentioned *True Romances* and *True Detective* as well as a daily paper, the *New York Evening Graphic*, often slightly referred to as the (*Porno*)*Graphic*. MacFadden was also highly visible in his adherence to and promotion of what was, for that time, a bizarre health regimen, and he was known for his frank pronouncements against sexual prudery. The morally strait-laced Davidson would have had nothing but distaste for such a public figure.<sup>4</sup>

Davidson's far from liberal social and political views also explain why socialist Emanuel Haldeman-Julius makes his list of "industrialists in art": Haldeman-Julius began printing the Little Blue Books on which Davidson casts opprobrium using the same press on which he was already printing the weekly *Appeal to Reason* (Schocket 69). If we set that ideological difference between the two men aside, however, we still must conclude that Davidson concocts a knowing half-truth at best when he uses the Blue Books as exemplars of bad art. His purpose in "A Mirror for Artists" is to reveal alarming interconnections between the progressively industrialized nature of every American's workday to the industrialization of bad art churned out for his or her leisure. As the Agrarian Davidson points out, "it is just as easy to distribute bad art—in fact, it is much easier, because bad art is more profitable" (35). With this comment, Davidson chooses to ignore that Haldeman-Julius's Blue Book offerings included many titles that even the Fugitives, Agrarians, and

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<sup>4</sup>Readers interested in MacFadden's colorful career should consult the new cultural biography of him by Mark Adams.

New Critics would have recognized as classics or “good art,” many marketed in a small pocket-sized format that sold for an affordable five cents apiece. To focus only on authors about whom Warren himself would later write major criticism or of whom he would admit influence, a list of titles includes works by Shakespeare, Twain, Whittier, Housman, Milton, Dante, Yeats, Dreiser, Coleridge, Melville, Hawthorne, Hardy, and Conrad. To be sure, Haldeman-Julius also included works by leftist writers such as Mike Gold and James T. Farrell and scores of self-help and do-it-yourself titles as daringly progressive as Margaret Sanger’s *What Every Married Woman Should Know* and as usefully mundane as *How to Build Your Own Greenhouse* (Schocket 70). Still, one suspects that the invitations to independent autodidacts suggested by many of the titles in Haldeman-Julius’s self-styled “University in Print” (Herder, “Haldeman-Julius” 883) was Davidson’s genuine concern. This Agrarian is disturbed enough when he notes how “eminent critics sell their prestige and ability” to the Book-of-the-Month Club or the Literary Guild to produce bland reading lists that will not intimidate their middle-class readers (Davidson 36); evidently, allowing the working classes to assume the responsibility for educating themselves from the Little Blue Books is another matter altogether.

Davidson might have been surprised to learn that Haldeman-Julius also adamantly denigrated the MacFadden publications as “trash” (Herder, “Education” 200); he and his supporters drew a meaningful distinction between Blue Book readers and customers of the burgeoning book club companies, which were gaining popular momentum at this time. As one commentator for the *New Republic* observed in 1929, the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild carried the favor of a middle-class clientele while Haldeman-Julius’s sales were “so fantastic as to make his business almost a barometer of plebian taste.” The crucial difference between the two markets lay in Haldeman-Julius’s lack of appeal “to those who buy literature by the yard or who regard it as a detail of interior decoration” (“That Which We Call a Rose” 206), this observer’s reference to the book club member’s ostensible desire to own merely the appearance of culture rather than to acquire it through diligent reading.

Like the book clubs, on the other hand, Haldeman-Julius made business judgments that would certainly find little favor with the Agrarian-based literary pronouncements outlined in Davidson’s essay.

The publisher was not above giving titillating or more vulgarian titles to his blue books in order to trick “the tabloid intelligence into accepting—perhaps even liking—a Harvard classic” (“That Which We Call a Rose” 207). Experience had also taught him that books of poetry and literary criticism would sell poorly among American readers, as would books that were “too esoteric,” “too high hat,” and “too refined” (Herder, “Education” 216). Haldeman-Julius’s sales figures bore out his conviction that the middle and working class buyers of his Little Blue Books were attracted not by the authors’ prestige and certainly not by the modest paper covers of their purchases but by the sheer information contained within; by mid-1930, the same year *I’ll Take My Stand* was published, Haldeman-Julius had sold his two hundred millionth Little Blue Book (Herder, “Education” 199). Warren, a Rhodes Scholar working on his B.Litt. at Oxford in 1929, along with any number of his enterprising colleagues engaged in similar literary studies, might well have read this somewhat grudging recommendation of the Little Blue Books: “Apprentice critics could do worse than spend a year or two of graduate study in [Haldeman-Julius’s] culture factory” (“That Which We Call a Rose” 207).

Finally, given the nature of the race, class, and gender subtexts of “A Mirror for Artists,” and indeed of all of *I’ll Take My Stand*, the most damning element of Haldeman-Julius’s publishing philosophy would have been his advocacy of the civil, social, and political rights of marginalized elements among his readership, especially workers, women, and blacks. His “Rational Sex Series” proved the means through which Haldeman-Julius hoped to educate women readers seeking liberation from sexual myth and masculine domination. He also exchanged letters with such Negro rights advocates as W.E.B. Du Bois, whose praise of the Little Blue Books in a March 1931 issue of *The Crisis* was no doubt influential in their becoming “common tools of self-education and radicalization within African-American communities” (Schocket 74). In the meantime, the Little Blue Books had already established themselves in locales both urban and rural during the 1920s, among readers from regions as disparate as the industrialized East, the mid-western “Corn-belt,” and the agrarian South.

In this light, Donald Davidson’s ideological differences with Emanuel Haldeman-Julius are as clear as they are intrinsic to his promotion of Agrarianism. In “A Mirror for Artists,” Davidson speaks on behalf of the

“shop-girl” and “Henry Ford’s hired hands” (35)—whom he clearly considers irremediably vulgar—ostensibly to protect them from the depredations of mass-produced art. On the other hand, while continuing to mass-produce “Dickens, Coleridge, Goldsmith, Burns, Hugo, Balzac, Maupassant, Ibsen, Lincoln, Jack London, [and] Washington Irving” (886), Haldeman-Julius voiced this rationale to his critics:

From the viewpoint of the scholar and thinker, even though he believes that the masses can never reach his lofty level of learning, I should say that the popularization of knowledge is an obvious policy of self-defense. Popularization . . . creates an atmosphere favorable to culture: it brings respect for the scholar and freedom for his work—while it means also that scholarship has a greater responsibility and must meet a wider test of usefulness. (Herder, “Haldeman-Julius” 889)

Speaking much later of his old friend Davidson, Warren commented that as American culture changed, he in particular became ever “more *frozen* in . . . opposition to change” (*Talking* 159). While Warren’s reference is to his friend’s racial attitudes, others have attested that Warren’s characterization of Davidson was also true of a broad range of social issues, including the “popularization of knowledge” of which Haldeman-Julius speaks. While it is unlikely (but not impossible) that Warren ever read the passage quoted above, Haldeman-Julius’s arguments supporting the scholar’s freedom to work, the respect thus afforded him, and his responsibility to be useful to a popular readership might well have struck a sympathetic chord with Warren, whose loyalty to Agrarianism Davidson questioned as early as the younger man’s submission of his own essay for *Ill Take My Stand*, “The Briar Patch.”<sup>5</sup>

### 3.

Warren was not insensible to the culture wars going on about him, of course, and in 1935 he voiced his own concern over the challenges faced

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<sup>5</sup>Eric Schocket’s analysis of Haldeman-Julius’s career also critiques the analyses of his contemporaries who, like Davidson, “declaim the quietistic and homogenizing forces of the culture industry on the American working class.” Theirs, he notes, is a “variant of American Exceptionalism” that tends “to discount the multivalent ways in which the working class has used mass culture in their struggles to maintain agency even as they adapted to the normative influences of a mass production society” (68). For a cogent discussion on how mass culture can be alternately viewed as offering agency to the working classes and as functioning to oppress them, see Narramore and Brantlinger.

by the artist in the essay "Literature as a Symptom," his contribution to *Who Owns America?* When he writes here from the perspective of aesthetics, Warren makes many of the same points Davidson made in "A Mirror for Artists" regarding the difficulties faced by the modern artist who feels he lacks "a powerful and coherent culture" from which to draw his essential subjects and themes (Warren, "Literature as a Symptom" 265). Alternately, and on a philosophical level, Warren's views approached those voiced by Emanuel Haldeman-Julius regarding the scholar/artist's role in a culture that includes popular readers. His very practical subtext, however, is apparently to define the circumstances under which an artistically mature artist could maintain his legitimacy and still become a money-making writer.

In one passage in particular, Warren warns, as Davidson had, that artistic distaste for "finance-capitalism" may encourage the writer to distance himself from society and abandon "his function as 'a man speaking to men'" (276). Yet unlike Davidson, Warren's harshest judgments are leveled not at the economic system from which this disaffected writer fastidiously recoils, but at the writer who first acknowledges his artistic role and only secondarily recognizes that he is also "a citizen and a human being." For this man, art is merely "the expression . . . of his own personality" (267), and he creates it as a being set apart from other people: "his concerns are not their concerns, and he is inclined, with the egotism of frail mortality, to set a very high valuation on his own concerns" (268). Without this sense of connection to the people for whom his art is intended, without a sense of being a part of the world rather than removed from it, this artist allows his aesthetic to be shaped by faddishness, by a commercially-driven adherence to a literary movement, and by crass sales promotions. Tellingly, Warren refuses to scapegoat "the machinery for marketing books, good and bad, under the present system and the present standards of taste," focusing instead upon the flawed artistic temperaments of the "literary racketeer" and the "literary hummingbird" (276-77). Only a writer firmly in command of his "subject" and "theme" can maintain, in the face of commercial reality, his purpose for writing, about which he has "thought long and deeply" (279). But, Warren suggests, only the author who thus maintains his artistic integrity can enjoy with a clear conscience the hefty financial reward that might follow.

In his 1942 critical essay “Irony with a Center: Katherine Anne Porter,” Warren also introduces sentiments resembling, then finally diverging from, Davidson’s own in “A Mirror for Artists.” He initially recognizes the possible dichotomous effects on Porter that “widespread critical adulation” (136) for her short stories and popular negligence of them might have. The effect Warren cites takes its cue from Davidson’s earlier warning to artists about the influences of popular and mass culture:

It was once fashionable to argue complacently that the popular magazine had created the short story—had provided the market and had cultivated an appetite for the product. It is true that the magazine did provide the market, but at the same time, and progressively, the magazine has corrupted the short story. What the magazine encourages is not so much the short story as a conscious or unconscious division of the artistic self of the writer. (137)

Next, Warren deferentially quotes from the formulations of R. P. Blackmur, which were seminal to the New Criticism, to frame an explanation for the artist’s current tendency toward “a genial self-congratulation in the face of ‘mass appreciation.’” Perhaps surprisingly, Blackmur sees little relative difference between “popular art” and “great art”; the first, Blackmur instructs, is “topical and natural” and the second “deliberate and thematic.” On the other hand, Blackmur identifies a substantial difference between these two and “popularized art,” or that which “can be sold,” not just once, but regularly and reliably. From the artist’s willing production of popularized art, only “art without standards” (137-38) results. In Warren’s judgment, Porter’s creative strength is her refusal to make “the compromise” that results in popularized art and makes popular acceptance inevitable. Two elements are key to Blackmur’s argument and Warren’s use of it, however: the onus placed upon the artist rather than on the economic system for the production of “art without standards” and the broad definition of “art,” which includes popular and great varieties.

Thus, in the context of his 1935 and 1942 essays and in the contexts established in the earlier sections of this study, hiring Helen Strauss as his agent in 1946 was indeed an important step for Warren because it acknowledged not only his ability to command a popular market for his work but also his confidence that he could do so on his own artistic terms. Granted, at that point in Warren’s career, the stance he assumes in these essays is based merely on a theoretical conception of popular

success; faced in 1946 with its reality, Warren was forced to a reassessment of his actual ability to resist artistic compromise.

Hiring an agent with Strauss's reputation for making the commercial sale also proved momentous for a writer whose lengthy career was a continuing process of revising the Fugitive, New Critical, and Agrarian views he had developed in conjunction with his Vanderbilt mentors and colleagues. Blotner contends that despite the successes of *All the King's Men*, Warren "would never consider his work 'popular' fiction, and his novels to come would continue to explore philosophical problems" (265). Nevertheless, Warren's blockbuster novel set him on the path toward more popular consideration, and a few of those closest to him felt that after Robert Rossen's screen adaptation of *All the King's Men*, Warren's later novels were written with the possibility of other film adaptations in mind (264), or, as R.P. Blackmur would have framed it, under a popularizing influence.<sup>6</sup> The seeds of such thinking were evident when, even after having won three Academy Awards, the film version of *All the King's Men* still failed to lure long-time friend Andrew Lytle into his local theatre; he justified his staying home instead in a letter to Allen Tate dated 14 April 1950: "I can't see books done into movies any more, nor movies for that matter. . . . I don't know whether the movies are getting worse or me better" (Lytle and Tate 223). Regardless of which of those two options he considered more likely (Lytle's petulant tone suggests that he felt both were valid), his estimation of the film's accomplishments as merely middlebrow, and possibly lowbrow, distinctions is apparent. Furthermore, Lytle's dismissive attitude toward the film was evidently not swayed by the over-the-top advertising employed by the Columbia Studio publicity department. Predictably, the film's promoters had judiciously traded upon the novel's Pulitzer Prize-winning status when they designed the movie posters, asserting thereon the novel's cinematic transition into a "vital, very great motion picture" ("All the King's Men [1949]"). Lytle's resistance to such promotions notwithstanding, other movie-goers could and would be

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<sup>6</sup>Even before *All the King's Men*, Warren had cinematic aspirations for his novels, especially *Night Rider* (1939), which one of Warren's friends from his UC Berkeley days unsuccessfully pitched to a movie studio (Blotner 173). Warren also had great hopes for *The Cave* (1959), but despite his perception of the novel as getting the "best press" and "best sale" of any of his books up to that point, the author reported to friend Arnold Stein that it had garnered "no book club and no movie" (Blotner 326).

tempted into their local theatres in response to the implicit message that this was a film every person aspiring to heightened culture and intellect must see.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, Warren or Helen Strauss or both certainly had lucrative book club sales in mind for his novels, despite *All the King's Men's* having somehow been passed over by the Book-of-the-Month Club judges.<sup>8</sup> Five of the seven novels Warren would subsequently publish became selections of the less well-regarded Literary Guild: *World Enough and Time* (1950), *Band of Angels* (1955), *Wilderness* (1961), *Flood* (1964), and *A Place to Come To* (1977). The remaining two novels, *The Cave* (1959) and *Meet Me in the Green Glen* (1971) were picked up by Books Abridged and by the *Saturday Review of Literature* Book Club respectively.<sup>9</sup> As if to consolidate his ability to command a popular audience, his *Selected Poems, 1923-1975* (1976) was also a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, notwithstanding the book club publishers'

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<sup>7</sup>At a ceremony held on 23 March 1950, *All the King's Men* won the Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Actor (Broderick Crawford), and Best Supporting Actress (Mercedes McCambridge) ("All the King's Men [1949]"). Neither popular culture nor Hollywood was finished, however, with this, Warren's most famous and compelling novel. One of the most discussed books of 1996 was Joe Klein's *Primary Colors*, a work broadly allusive to *All the King's Men* that featured strikingly similar characters and themes; its film adaptation, written by Elaine May and directed by Mike Nichols, was released in 1998. Then in 2006, director Steven Zaillian mounted a costly A-list remake of *All the King's Men*, an adaptation he maintained he had written without having seen the original Rossen version. Visually lush, with a script seemingly designed to please those devoted Warrenites who hoped to hear the poetic language of the original novel integrated into the movie's voice-over and dialogue, it was still almost universally panned by the critics and drew scant box-office trade.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph Blotner's otherwise masterful and meticulously researched biography of Warren is unaccountably misleading on this detail of publishing history, claiming for *All the King's Men* the distinction of having been a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club (227). Not only James A. Grimshaw, Jr.'s *Robert Penn Warren: A Descriptive Bibliography 1922-79* but also Charles Lee's history of the Book-of-the-Month Club, *The Hidden Public*, contradicts this erroneous statement. *All the King's Men* was, however, distributed by the BOMC as a special deluxe edition upon the thirty-fifth anniversary of its original publication, and this is very likely the edition to which Blotner refers.

<sup>9</sup>For relevant publication data regarding these novels, see Grimshaw.

previously cited judgments that poetry would not “sell.”<sup>10</sup> By that point in Warren’s career, however, his status as a prominent American literary figure probably trumped the unwritten rule that the publishers must accede to the public’s aversion to poetry.<sup>11</sup>

And how did Warren feel about the commercialization of his art? Reminiscing for interviews in 1970 and 1977, Warren reveals that, unlike his novels and poetry, his short stories were always written “for the quick buck” even though “I was trying to write the best story I could, of course” (*Talking* 178), a qualification that resonates with his aesthetic stance in “Literature as a Symptom” and “Irony with a Center: Katherine Anne Porter.”<sup>12</sup> As we noted earlier, to capitalize upon the success, both literary and commercial, of *All the King’s Men*, Helen Strauss sold the shortened version of Warren’s “The Circus in the Attic” to *Cosmopolitan* for \$5000, with the author’s blessing. Then the enterprising agent and her success-bemused client realized that another quick sale lay at their fingertips: a collection of the short stories Warren had written between 1930 and 1946. The book would be called *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories* (1947), adopting the title of the first story to appear in the volume, which was also among the last short stories Warren would ever write. Another of those final short stories was “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger,” completed, like “The Circus in the Attic,” in 1946. Strauss’s publishing acumen paid off once more for Warren in the collection and sale of his stories to Harcourt; the two final stories Warren wrote for that collection, however, reveal his coming to terms with the nature of their sale, with the potential for similar sales of his

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<sup>10</sup>By 1946, the year an anonymous reassessment of “The Book Clubs” appeared in the 30 September issue of *The Nation*, most judged that the fears that traditional booksellers would be ruined by the public’s “new book-buying habits” had been exaggerated. All the same, the author despaired of the “sorry record of the quality of the selections” and that “the reading diet of [book club] members is neither rich nor nourishing.” Yet, to the Book-of-the-Month Club’s credit, the author does concede that their “selections range well above” those of “the average of American publishing as a whole” (421), an observation perhaps confirmed by the BOMC’s choice of Warren’s *Selected Poems* in 1976.

<sup>11</sup>Blotner also notes that in 1981 the Book-of-the-Month Club’s list included Warren’s essay *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (460).

<sup>12</sup>Warren ruefully adds that stories he wrote in the thirties, when he really needed the money, produced only meager returns; happily, “I got some very good prices for some of the stories. But usually a lot later when I didn’t need it so bad” (*Talking* 267).

work, and with the inevitable charges that his work thereafter would be and should be devalued as only so much popularized art.

#### 4.

Much has already been written about the intersections of theme, character, and trope observed in *All the King's Men* and in "The Circus in the Attic," which Warren wrote in 1946, the same year during which he was engaged in a final revision of the novel (see Bradley, chs. 1-2, and Shepherd). Each work features a meaningful triangulation of primary characters: the novel's assertive Willie Stark, repressed Anne Stanton, and cynically idealistic Jack Burden and the short story's confident and bombastic Jasper, his demure social-climbing mother Mrs. Parton, and the man who marries her late in his life, the single-mindedly artistic and reclusive Bolton Lovehart. No critic has yet explored the two works' intersections with a story that Warren had first drafted in the early 1930s and then revisited and completed also in 1946, "The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger." The character triangulation in this third work significantly echoes the triangulations from "The Circus in the Attic" and *All the King's Men*, reiterating the now-familiar figures: Slick Hardin, the man of action and bombast, Jeff York, the single-minded and distant idealist, and Mrs. York, the woman whose seemingly placid surface obscures motives and desires powerful enough to alter personal and cultural paradigms.

The similarities between Mrs. Parton and Mrs. York speak acutely to any ambivalence Warren would be experiencing at the onset of the most financially gratifyingly yet most disconcertingly commercialized period of his professional life. If Bolton Lovehart resembles the imperiled modernist highbrow, the alienated artist whom Donald Davidson had portrayed in "A Mirror for Artists" and the avatar of Warren's modernist fugitive years, then Bolton's wife Mrs. Parton is the image of encroaching middle- and lowbrow desire. Likewise, if Jeff York's loss of his farm represents the decline of Agrarian values during the 1920s and '30s, his wife's triumphant relocation "in town" and the cultural forces that have lured her there have announced Agrarianism's demise. Both Warren's altered modernism and shifting Agrarianism are implicated in the "commercial leap" he will be called upon to make after the success of *All the King's Men*: "The Circus in the Attic" confirms the aesthetic utility of Warren's relinquishment of his youthful modernist tendencies,

and “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger” questions the viability of Agrarian standards in the face of social and cultural change.

The protagonist of “The Circus in the Attic” is Bolton Lovehart, something of a portrait of Warren as a young modernist. Prevented from entering the larger world by a fiercely possessive mother (critics often point out Mrs. Lovehart’s similarity to Warren’s own mother), Bolton manages to escape her imaginatively through his decades-long creation of a secret world of handmade circus figures. Crafting them is his late-night attic obsession, although his community is convinced that he is occupied with the much loftier work of writing a history of his small town of Bardsville. Secluded from the outside world, Bolton is the image of the alienated modernist Davidson describes in “A Mirror for Artists”: “Individuality being imperilled, he reaffirms the sacredness of the individual. . . . sing[ing] less and less for the crowd in whose experiences he no longer shares intimately.” Most revealingly, Bolton, like Davidson’s imperiled artist, “develops not only a peculiar set of ideas, more and more personal to himself, but a personal style that in time becomes the ‘unique’ style demanded of modern poets, highly idiomatic, perhaps obscure” (44). Laboring as he does under these restrictions, Bolton is finally only an artist *manqué*.

With the beginning of World War II, history liberates Bolton from his attic and its modernist limitations. Even before that point, however, he emerges into the world in a very modest fashion through his marriage to the widow Mrs. Parton. Husband and wife little know that they are linked by the “secret blood” they share from a common but now forgotten ancestor; while their alliance marks the aristocratic Bolton’s having “married down,” for Mrs. Parton it is the culmination of painstaking self-invention and self-education. In the years before their marriage, she crafts her own image as carefully and skillfully as Bolton crafts his circus figures, both of them drawing upon popular resources to do so: Bolton patterns his art upon the circus with which he had made a failed adolescent escape from his mother and Mrs. Parton shapes herself as a work of art through her mass-produced reading matter, the likes of which Davidson disdains in “A Mirror for Artists.”

Mrs. Parton’s characteristic practice is to watch people, never directly or assertively, but “out of the corner of her innocent, china-blue eyes,” steadily amassing knowledge and power, for “knowledge is power.” Over the years, she elevates herself from being “the daughter of a poor,

scratch-living farmer” to achieve respectable middle class status. To accomplish this feat, she joins the PTA, wears the right clothes, attends the socially-accepted church, and learns to correct her own grammar; she even “subscribed to a national organization which sent her a good book every month, and she sometimes read the book” (47).<sup>13</sup> By 1934, she has assumed all the middle class attributes available to her through her reading of the citizens of Bardsville and through her equally attentive reading of popular mass-produced publications. Bolton marries her and takes her away from her old life in “her pleasant little brick house, tastefully decorated according to the magazines” (48), to live with him among Bardsville’s elite in his rundown mansion on Aristocrat Hill, aka “Rusty-Butt Hill.” Mrs. Parton is no starry-eyed young heroine, as her similarity to the pretty girl acrobat in Bolton’s attic circus might suggest; she is scheming and duplicitous, and she ultimately proves unfaithful to her husband. Furthermore, Warren’s narrator more than hints that the powerful knowledge she distills from her reading of popular magazines does not extend itself to an enhanced self-awareness, a type of knowledge privileged throughout Warren’s canon. Nevertheless, marriage to Mrs. Parton and his paternal relationship with the grown son she brings with her to share Bolton’s home are the catalysts to Bolton Lovehart’s temporary emergence into the world, and they endow his intensely private and idiosyncratic circus art with greater relevance to and significance for the community.

With the publication first of *All the King’s Men* and then of “The Circus in the Attic,” Warren reiterates a criticism of modernism he had voiced in his review of Thomas Wolfe’s *Of Time and the River* in 1935, the same year as “Literature as a Symptom.” In the Wolfe review, Warren demands that literature must speak to all, including and especially to the “ordinary citizens of the Republic” (“A Note” 180), a

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<sup>13</sup>Warren’s narrative comment is consistent with the general assumption that women, who predominated among book club subscribers, seldom read the selections. For example, “Twelve Calls a Year” was an ironic squib in the 6 April 1929 *New York Times* questioning whether subscribers should receive the next month’s selection if the previous month’s had gone unread. In 1944, Richard Rovere’s brief history of the Book-of-the-Month Club, written for *American Mercury*, established a comically disparaging scenario that endures even to the present: “ladies who belong to the Jolly Seventeen Literary Society no longer have to read the books on which they report to their admiring friends. They can obtain, gratis, neatly packaged reviews expertly written . . . in the amateur prose those ladies might be expected to use” (440).

statement that echoes his charge to the artist who, in the face of “finance-capitalism,” must struggle against the impulse to seclude himself from society and instead assume his proper role therein as “a man speaking to men” (“Literature as a Symptom” 276). His judgments against the elitists’ rarified art are confirmed first by Warren’s Pulitzer Prize for the novel, next by the popular film format into which the text of Warren’s *All the King’s Men* is transformed, and last by the broad audience Warren is thereafter able to reach. Still, in the short story “The Circus in the Attic” the reader does sense Warren’s lingering ambivalence for relinquishing his novel to a popular reader- and viewership. When Bolton Lovehart releases his symbolic circus creations to the outside world of Bardsville in recognition of its support of the heroic war effort, the townspeople are plainly confused by the disparity between what they had long assumed about his lifelong scholarly occupation in his attic and its disappointing reality. By positing Bolton as alternately resistant to yet reliant upon popular interpretation and misreading, Warren seems to question his bold divergence from Davidson’s stance in “A Mirror for Artists” as voiced in “Literature as a Symptom”; in aggressively marketing *All the King’s Men* to Hollywood, has he “sold out” altogether to popular taste and to the “industrialization of art?” Is his success, struck as an uneasy balance of the literary and the financial, achieved at the cost of compromising a basic Agrarian stance against seeking the “lowest common denominator” of the American public? Finally, and most importantly, will Mrs. Parton, having received her copy of Robert Penn Warren’s latest best-seller as subject to the terms of her book club membership, not only read the book but understand the import of what she finds there?

## 5.

Not coincidentally then, 1946, when Warren worked on the final revisions of what would be his most popularly successful novel and wrote “The Circus in the Attic,” was also the year he revisited an idea for a story he had begun in the middle of the Depression decade of the 1930s. This story, “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger,” was eventually published, perhaps significantly, in the distinctly highbrow *New English Review* as well as in the more middlebrow *Mademoiselle* before it found a final place in *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories*. The compositional proximity of this story with “The Circus in the Attic”

further foregrounds the several issues emerging from the popularity and success of *All the King's Men*. If "The Circus in the Attic" affirms Donald Davidson's Agrarian assertions that the modernist impulse is an unfortunate extreme to which industrialism and mass production push the artist, while simultaneously confirming Warren's assertion that the modern artist is redeemed only through his emergence into the world and its vagaries, then "The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger" reckons the possible cost of Agrarianism's submission to the world of standardization, wherein the greatest public regard is granted only to those who live and create according to its terms of commodification and conformity.

One striking element of "The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger" is Warren's inclusion in it of the same metaphors and discursive elements used by literary elitists who, during the 1920s and '30s feared themselves soon to be overcome by incursions of the middle- and lowbrow. The fact of Warren's having conceived one version of the story in the mid- to late 1930s would explain the rhetorical alignment of his language with that of other literary elitists of the 1920s and '30s. We should also keep in mind that the publication dates of the short run of the Vanderbilt little magazine *The Fugitive* and of the later Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, works that appeared from 1922-1925 and in 1930 respectively, frame the period when other members of America's intellectual elite first began to disparage the advent of the Literary Guild and its rival the Book-of-the-Month Club as crass symbols of literature's industrialization and standardization.

We know from Warren himself that several of the works in the collection *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories*, among them "The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger," emerge from the author's memories of his own upbringing in rural western Kentucky. The man on whom Warren based Jeff York had lived in Warren's native Guthrie, had mourned his ill-considered sale of his farm to pursue town life, and, in his remorse, had killed himself with a shotgun blast. In his own reminiscence about writing the story, Warren details the false start he made on it at the time he first heard of the local farmer's death. Deeply involved in writing what would in 1939 become his first published novel, *Night Rider*, he shelved the story, dissatisfied when the few editors to whom he sent it for review rejected it for publication. Then almost a decade later, when, as Warren describes it, he felt himself

“blank and used up” (“On ‘The Patented Gate’” 96-97) from completing *All the King’s Men*, he rewrote “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger” from scratch, guided, as he maintains, toward a new perspective on his character Jeff York by way of his reading about pioneers’ early migrations from the Piedmont into Tennessee and Kentucky, accounts which awakened in Warren “a sense of the man standing alone against the backdrop . . . of history and the changing immediate world around him” (“On ‘The Patented Gate’” 98-99). Although not an artist as such, Jeff York has a great deal in common with another “man standing alone”—Bolton Lovehart, the alienated artist who is similarly driven by history and the changes it mandates for his narrow Bardsville existence. Still, one might also consider that Warren’s new perspective on this decade-old concept for a story was also informed by his changing professional circumstances as an author poised on the brink of popular endorsement and yet standing aloof from it as a matter of artistic principle.

Warren’s reminiscence of writing the short story reveals that Jeff York’s “doom” is the “failure of the Jeffersonian version of the American Dream.” Warren recalls having followed the World War II-era westward migrations of the children and grandchildren of those original immigrants through his reading of current history. The lapsed Agrarian was struck by their 1940s-era relocations to “Detroit and Akron and Chicago and the other great industrial cities of the North, where their inherited values and attitudes would not be relevant and where, though they might make a living, they might lose some sense of life-direction” (“On ‘The Patented Gate’” 98). In recognizing the dilemma of gains and losses Warren also faced at the popularization of his art, we better understand that this is the same questionable bargain Jeff York’s wife effects simply by demanding that her husband sell his hard-won farm to buy her Slick Hardin’s *Dew Drop Inn Diner*, the dogwagon in which she determines to live her dream of flinging “mean” hamburgers for the masses of folk drifting steadily townward from countless rural settings. In essence, her American Dream of democracy and progress achieved by way of industrialized consumerism and standardization trumps her husband’s American Dream of individuality by way of Agrarian frugality and self-sacrifice.

Certainly the images in Warren’s story that pit Jeff York, a man naturally bound to his land, against the creeping influences of

mechanization and industrialization evoke Agrarian concerns. York wears his bond with nature in his every aspect, physical and spiritual. Not only does his face seem “to be molded from the clay or hewed from the cedar” (“Patented Gate” 120) indigenous to the hills of Cobb County, Tennessee, but his having mortgaged his property there and then having served that unforgiving land to pay it off has granted him “a place”—the farm that is indisputably his place in the world among lesser men of “the curse.” This curse—the collective tendency to relocate westward on land as impoverished and impoverishing as the land their fathers had worked before them—York and only York is able to overcome through truly heroic effort. His pride in his place, however, makes him paradoxically vulnerable to the seductions of mechanization, and he ultimately purchases a patented gate; this item, the single luxury he grants himself, is his only outward acknowledgment of “all the years of sweat and rejection” (“Patented Gate” 124) he had endured. At first, the patented gate affords him only joy as with it he enacts an unconscious liminality: his ability to step from his property onto the road to town and then just as easily to reopen the gate and reenter his property—a transition from country to city, rural to urban, accomplished without ever dismounting from his mule. York’s having thus “sold out” to the lure of mechanization is a precursor to the moment he will have “sold off” his farm.<sup>14</sup>

York’s almost sensual pleasure in the patented gate and its significant role in his tragic death make paramount certain gendered aspects of Warren’s story that enhance the thematic implications of the compromise with individuality York makes when, in middle age, he takes a much younger wife. This story speaks not only across two decades to Warren’s youthful Agrarian preoccupations with the mechanization and industrialization of the South, but also across that same temporal space to the culture wars of the late 1920s that raged alongside those Agrarian concerns, wars in which elitists frequently mustered gendered terms to pit masculinized, independent authors and readers against infantilized literary consumers caught in the thrall of

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<sup>14</sup>In his analysis of “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger,” Joseph Millichap suggests a meaningful link between Jeff York of Warren’s story and Sergeant Alvin York, the young man from the Tennessee hill country who became a folk hero after his exploits in France during WWI. The historical York is also a model for Private Porsun, a secondary character in Warren’s novel *At Heaven’s Gate* (1942); Porsun, like the historical Sergeant York, is duped by the designers of a shady investment scheme and loses not only his money but some degree of his heroic reputation as well (41).

feminizing book clubs. Seeking to maintain their roles as arbiters of good literary taste, elitists feared relinquishing to the “industrialists of art” or to the reading public itself their roles as guardians of and gatekeepers to literary enlightenment.

In 1926, the Literary Guild and the Book-of-the-Month Club opened business within only months of each other, each securing a large list of readers through skillful marketing and innovative approaches to the mail order book trade. Ultimately, however, their strategies of presenting their readers pre-selected lists of books from which to order proved too high-handed for those who feared that the commercial choices made by book club judges who were oriented to the “bottom line” would deny the American readership access to legitimate literary works. Charles Lee’s chronicle of the history of the Book-of-the-Month Club quotes one judge’s declaration that surely would have raised the hackles of Fugitives and Agrarians alike: “Literary merit . . . can never be the sole question in such a decision [as the composition of the book lists]. A metaphysical poem, admirable but excessively difficult, may have more sheer literary merit,” but it would never be offered as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection (57).

Janice Radway further examines how in the 1920s the book clubs were implicated in “the standardization debates” over the much-feared “Fordizing of America” (204), debates that grew out of the apprehension that “the fate of the individual was threatened in a world upended materially, socially, and ideologically by the virtual triumph of machine production and mass consumption” (203). The threatened individual was always posited as male and, according to Radway, this “autonomous male subject” was pitted against the giant, endlessly reproductive machine of mass production, a machine “ominously feminized” (209). This discourse is especially prevalent when the product thus achieved is the printed word. Radway’s study documents how the American literary scene reacted to the book clubs’ selections and its perceptions of the consequent ways the book clubs “threatened to remake active, discriminating readers and writers into passive, feminized consumers and effeminate poetasters” (204). This level of discourse inevitably led to the use of the “fertile, sexual body of the reproductive female . . . to demonize the materials and processes of popular culture” (210). Radway’s observations reinforce the conclusions of Andreas Huyssen, the title of whose relevant essay in *After the Great Divide: Modernism,*

*Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986) frames her cultural observations in literary terms: “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other.”<sup>15</sup> Emerging modernists and even those more wary of modernism, such as the Agrarians, were alike in positioning mass culture as the domain of the feminine and the feminized.

In a 1927 article for *The Bookman* entitled “Has America a Literary Dictatorship?” one critic of the book clubs consequently characterized the Book-of-the-Month Club as the “mother” of the disturbing new trend in bookselling in America; comparing the monthly book selections to a “BOX OF CANDY A WEEK CLUB,” the anonymous author extols the “frugal meal on the heights” sought by the artist “who counts” over the “comfortable picnic in the valley” sought by less capable writers (191). Another critic, writing in a 1929 article for *Nation*, associates the book clubs’ marketing practices with the solicitous ministrations of overbearing mothers: when books are made as “accessible as milk on the stoop . . . as compulsory as spinach,” then who can escape the pressures of “mass sales and mass production” (Whipple 182)? Still another critic anonymously addresses the editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature*, declaring “no literary wet nurses for me” (“The Bookseller” 598). This critic then extends a comparison of the book club members’ reading matter to include what Radway characterizes as a “child’s processes of indiscriminate ingestion” (210). Taking the position that he will not have his “books ladled out . . . by literary cooks regardless of their professed or actual standing as critics, reviewers, or blurbsmiths,” he concludes that a selection made by the book clubs is no more than a “pig in a poke, all picked, packed, trimmed, [and] deodorized to suit the tastes and digestions of thousands of readers” (“The Bookseller” 598). According to Charles Lee, Arthur Brentano, Jr., the booksellers’ president in 1929, couched his indignation with the upstart book clubs in the Jeffersonian language of Agrarianism, claiming they had “usurped the inalienable right of every book buyer and book reader to think for himself and to select his own literary diet” (52). Frederick Stokes, quoting widely among the clubs’ detractors to make “The Case against the Book Clubs”

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<sup>15</sup>Huysen writes that the male modernist faces the dilemma of identifying with women while also engaging in misogynistic attitudes toward them, a paradox that “has a lot to do with the increasingly marginal position of literature and the arts in a society in which masculinity is identified with action, enterprise, and progress—with the realms of business, industry, science, and law” (45).

in a 1929 issue of *North American Review*, warns of the “emasculatation of the human mind” when the public’s books are chosen for their suitability to “the largest common denominator.”

These critics and others alternately compare book club products to unpalatable, unappetizing, or unsubstantial foodstuffs and feminize book club promoters as grotesque nursing mothers and nannies. No surprise then that one detects marked similarities between these portrayals of the book club products and the “mean” hamburgers Mrs. York flings in the diner for which she has coerced her husband to sell his farm. The patties she learns to shape and set on the grill are of “pink meat,” not a hearty and masculine red; more tellingly, the hamburgers are flavorless unless served with “pickle and onions and mustard and tomato catsup, the whole works,” all of which are necessary to “jack up the flavor” of the bland ground meat (126). Her most reliable customers, other than the country people seeking variety from their dull farm staples, are “school kids” from town, “young toughs from the pool room or men on the night shift down at the railroad” (127)—populations that are infantilized, unproductive, or otherwise lacking a fixed and stable culture.

Mrs. York further evokes the grotesque, maternal, and promiscuous female body, another image through which critics demonize popular mass culture. Like her sister character Mrs. Parton from “The Circus in the Attic,” she has only “covert, sidewise, curious glances for the world” as, on the York family’s Saturday excursions into town, she and her three towheaded sons look “into store windows and at the people” (121). For these infrequent yet highly ritualized forays into consumerism, she keeps in reserve a pair of black high-heeled slippers to wear instead of her country brogans; thus shod, her progress through town is “slightly limping, stealthy . . . , almost sliding . . . as though she had not fully mastered the complicated trick” (125). Never addressed by her given name (again like Mrs. Parton) and practically silent, when Mrs. York does speak, she does so in a “strained, artificial voice” (128).

And unbeknownst to York, who marries this inscrutable woman after his years of self-sacrifice and denial, his wife is yet another “curse” under which he must labor. Her antithesis to the land, so different from his own bond with it, is marked by the “scrap of fur” she wears on her winter coat “like some tattered growth of fungus feeding on old wood” (124). This image is also reminiscent of one used by book club critics during the culture wars of the 1920s; according to Frederick Stokes in

1929, an officer of the American Fair Trade Association identified the book clubs as “parasitic growths” against which authors, publishers, and booksellers must unite. Predictably then, when Mrs. York assumes the authority to supply the desires of her dogwagon patrons, the result is cultural disruption. “Lady, you fling a mean hamburger. . . . I hope you make a million hamburgers” (132) says the dogwagon’s former owner Slick Hardin, in a blessing every twenty-first century McDonalds customer can appreciate, but by accepting Hardin’s joking offer to sell her his business, York’s wife symbolically transgresses first into a public sphere denied to her as sacred, masculine territory and second into a sphere of mass production devalued by elitist attitudes.

Warren’s own analysis of “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger” seeks to direct his reader’s understanding of his story’s theme by means of his own almost coy speculation on the implications of the word “mean” as it appears in title and text. “Mean,” Warren tells us, “is a loaded word, with a double sense—*mean* in the slangy, town sense of tricky and expert, and *mean* as cruel, ferocious, destructive” (“On ‘The Patented Gate’” 100). Yet we could legitimately ask whether a poet and wordsmith of Warren’s caliber would have apprehended it for its double sense alone when he made “mean,” a word of many cultural and ideological implications, an element of Slick Hardin’s ambiguous praise for Mrs. York.

Take for example Harriet Martineau’s phrase “mean white,” a term that applies to nineteenth-century whites who worked with their hands and who represent a significant demographic in Warren’s novels and short stories. For a while at least, the Yorks themselves are “mean whites” as opposed to “poor whites,” those who are subsumed by the curse rather than triumphant over it. One of the oldest definitions of “mean” refers to sexual intercourse; its application to this story is fitting in the sense that Mrs. York, seduced by the words and example of the aptly named Slick Hardin, abandons her husband’s home to serve meals indiscriminately to the men and boys of the town, an action suggestive of her granting them sexual favors. A “mean” is also an averaged value in which extremes of high and low—as high and low culture—are intermingled, thus making those designations meaningless. A final, obsolete usage of “mean,” however, is as a noun meaning a lament or a complaint. To the extent that “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger” might be read as an allegory for reevaluated and gradually

abandoned Agrarianism, the story might be Warren's lament not only for the Agrarian identity foresworn by a steadily mechanized America but also a lament for the role his change in literary fortune played in tempering his own Agrarian identity.

One must wonder whether other authors known to Warren in personal or professional terms—authors such as Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Ellen Glasgow, Katherine Anne Porter, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O'Hara, Ralph Ellison, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner—experienced the same ambivalence regarding their associations with the book clubs. But then, as Lee notes in *The Hidden Public*,

Book club files are full of letters from happy authors. Virtually unique is the observation of John Hersey that he felt simultaneously “grateful” and “debased and ashamed” as a result of having had books of his distributed by book clubs. Hersey always accepts his jackpots, however. (225)

And so did Warren cash his Literary Guild earnings, but not, one thinks, without a flutter of disquiet, as “The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger” would seem to indicate.<sup>16</sup>

## 6.

Helen Strauss concludes her autobiography's section on Warren in a tone of distinct self-satisfaction:

What more is there to say but . . . that I did my job well in his behalf, securing lucrative contracts and new outlets which allowed him to reach a larger audience and expose different facets of his talent and humanity; that he was fair and honest and loyal—and that it was good. (135)

At the other end of the spectrum, witness Leslie Fiedler's review of Warren's *World Enough and Time* (1949), which was the Literary Guild

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<sup>16</sup>A contemporary exception proves Lee's rule. In 2001, Jonathan Franzen turned his back on a potential book sales jackpot when he rejected Oprah Winfrey's proposed adoption of his novel *The Corrections* for her Book Club. In his examination of Franzen's decision, “When Popular Culture Meets Grand Literary Ambition,” critic James Campbell characterizes “Oprah's televised Book Club [as] the modern-day equivalent of the Book of the Month Club [sic]”; predictably, Campbell also employs now familiar references to the nation's cultural “diet” that compare popular culture to “pap,” and he further argues that popular culture “feeds” a “leveling of social stratification.”

selection for July 1950 and Warren's first book club novel.<sup>17</sup> In the review, Fiedler is plainly dumbfounded by the "paradox" of the popular acceptance of Warren's fiction. For a novel like *All the King's Men* to have sold as briskly as it did, to have received the Pulitzer, and then to have been parlayed into an Academy Award-winning film, avows Fiedler, surely raises doubts whether the book could possibly be "a work of real merit" (119), even though his personal experience in reading it convinced him that the novel was "a subtle, complex, integrated work, astonishingly plotted and eminently successful in its language and imagery" (120).

Fiedler wants no one to mistake his own literary predilections: "The vulgarity of the taste to which the Literary Guild successfully panders is one certainty of our ambiguous world" (119-20). All the same, he is struck by the facility with which Warren's work appeals to "both our publics"—the "popular" and the "serious," the "mass audience" and the "ideal reader" (120) and concludes that in *All the King's Men* as well as in the novel at hand, *World Enough and Time*, "there are strategies possible here and now which can mediate between mass audience and serious writer" (120).<sup>18</sup> Without a doubt, this variety of critical response was as much as Warren could dare hope for after making the "commercial leap" that hiring Helen Strauss entailed. Still, Warren's certain ambivalence as he waited for the critically insightful and ultimately validating reviews such as Fiedler's to emerge—an ambivalence between the conflicting values of his Agrarian past and his popularly successful present that reveals itself in "The Circus in the Attic" and "The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger"—lends added meaning to two often ignored works and to the trajectory of Warren's career as a fiction writer as of the late 1940s.

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<sup>17</sup>Warren clearly recognized his tenuous post-*All the King's Men* status when he reported to a friend that another critic, who reviewed *World Enough and Time* for the *New Yorker*, "said that the book was deliberately written down to make a movie melodrama" (Blotner 265). At it turned out, no movie deal developed.

<sup>18</sup>Fiedler's biographer, Mark Royden Winchell, observes that he was "fascinated by writers who bridged the gap between elite and popular taste," further noting that Robert Penn Warren "epitomize[d] such wide-ranging appeal in the 1940s and '50s (*Too Good* 207).

I gratefully acknowledge the colleagues who pointed me to texts that proved invaluable to my topic and, to my mind, strengthened my presentation of it: James Perkins, Jonathan Cullick, and Joseph Millichap. Many thanks as well to the anonymous reviewer for *Mississippi Quarterly* for both an appreciative reading and discriminating revision suggestions. My thanks as well to the Office of the Vice-Provost of Academic Affairs at Middle Tennessee State University for granting me a research semester of released time, a portion of which was used to produce this essay.

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