Robert Penn Warren, Wendell Berry, and the Dark Side of Civil War History

MITCHELL G. KLINGENBERG

Wendell Berry is descended from slaveholders, a fact he admits freely in The Hidden Wound, his moving 1970 essay on the legacy of slavery and race relations in the United States. Berry writes that his great-grandfather, though a slaveholder, “was evidently a rather mild and gentle man by nature.” During the Civil War, John Johnson Berry lived on a small farm in Kentucky that seemed an altogether idyllic place. Unlike the Big Houses and plantations of the Deep South, the farm needed the labor of only a few slave hands and was small enough “where domestic violence would have been very noticeable and disruptive.” But John Johnson Berry had inherited a problem. He owned a slave who, according to family tradition, “was a ‘mean nigger,’ too defiant and rebellious to do anything with.” So one day, John Johnson Berry sold his slave to the brutal Bart Jenkins, and Jenkins, “having completed his purchase . . . knocked the man on the head while he was asleep, bound him, and led him away with a rope.”

The scene, which hearkens to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (set also in Kentucky) for its portrayal of innocence lost to violence, illustrates how the legacy of slavery in the South still haunts those who live in the shadow of its memory. John Johnson Berry, his family, and his posterity give flesh, blood, and spirit to the claim of Robert

I wish to thank numerous scholars who contributed to the success of this project, which originated as a conference paper at the 2014 meeting of the Robert Penn Warren Circle in Clarksville, Tennessee. William Bedford Clark and John J. Langdale III read the essay in its infancy and offered great help. Miles Smith, Blakeney K. Hill, and Michael Burns provided suggestions for revision that improved the essay in its later development. Steven E. Woodworth has supported me in all my work, and I am thankful for his mentorship and example. Finally, I thank Brian Craig Miller for graciously and patiently guiding this essay to publication, and the anonymous readers of Civil War History for their constructive critiques.

Penn Warren, who wrote in *The Legacy of the Civil War* that the southerner “feels trapped by history.”2 Not surprisingly, Wendell Berry struggles in *The Hidden Wound* to reconcile his identity, historical reality, and the painful knowledge of his ancestral complicity in what Ta-Nehisi Coates considers the essential fact of American history: the rape of African culture and the destruction of black bodies.3

A close reading of *The Hidden Wound* reveals that Berry senses the evils of slavery and its tragic legacy in America. Yet, the opening pages suggest that though Berry assents intellectually to his place in the history of slavery in the South, he also communicates a whitewashed narrative of slavery in Kentucky and a will to disbelieve that his family worked to perpetuate an inherently violent system. And the history of slavery in Kentucky, and the southernness of Kentucky, are those issues on which Kentucky’s complex Civil War memory rests. “I find it impossible to believe,” Berry writes, “that my great-grandfather and his household were resigned or oblivious to the pain” in the sale of the family slave. Then, as if it were a confession of imperfect faith, he adds, “I am fairly sure that it shocked and grieved them, and left them deeply disturbed.” In family tradition, John Johnson Berry was a peaceable man. As a master, he was “thought too kind” to his slaves. In Berry’s mind, this ancestor could hardly have known the fullness of the horror of his actions—or even the implications of the transaction—as he sold his slave. Finally, the will to disbelieve appears with almost shocking naïveté: “I think it is even possible,” Berry writes, “that my great-grandfather did not understand . . . that in selling the slave he abandoned him to violence.”4

As a man of letters, Wendell Berry occupies a moment in history that makes him the symbol of a long and complicated expression of Kentucky Civil War memory over time. In Berry’s writings, one detects regret and horror for the American Civil War. Like Robert Penn Warren, who wrote of the conflict’s inwardness and its tragedy, Berry displays a sensibility concerned for its great human costs. In his 2007 essay “American Imagination and the Civil War,” published not long before the sesquicentennial celebration, Berry wrote that the outcome of the war, and the destruction of racial slavery in America, “should not stop us from asking, if only to keep the question open, what we gained, as a people, by the North’s expensive victory. My own impression is that the net gain was more modest and more questionable than is customarily said.”5 A close reading of Berry’s essay, and of the nostalgic view of Kentucky characteristic of his literature, leads one to consider

---

that such a statement offers an escape into Lost Cause sentimentalism veiled as count-the-costs arithmetic. Its logic displaces a triumphal view of the American Civil War from the center of American history. The sort of questioning that has produced Berry’s critical view of the war has found similar expression in the new Civil War revisionism, known among academic historians as the “Dark Turn.”

This essay suggests that the Civil War writings of Robert Penn Warren and Wendell Berry function as a conduit and nexus of Civil War memory and historical scholarship, linking elements of antiwar sentiment inherent in the old revisionism on the dark side of Civil War history but also exposing the divergence of these historiographical traditions. I argue a twofold thesis: first, that Warren and Berry’s Civil War writings trace a nostalgic pattern of Kentucky Civil War memory, and while these essays evidence a darker interpretation of the conflict and point to the scholarly concerns of the new revisionists, they cannot break completely from that nostalgia. Second, precisely because of this, the new revisionism functions as a corrective to the essays of Warren and Berry, which beautifully illuminate the dark aspects of the war but remain otherwise tinted with the kind of sentimentalism that invites Lost Cause interpretation. The Civil War essays of Robert Penn Warren and Wendell Berry erect a palatable antiwar position, one that is intellectually dexterous and successfully calls into question the inherent necessity of the American Civil War. In their essays, critiques of nationalism and moral absolutism, and emphases on the horrors of war operate freely and apart from the problem of racial slavery that the outcome of the Civil War helped to solve. Their essays are, therefore, instructive for historians; they call for the timely historiographical interventions of Dark Turn scholars, who in some sense fulfill Warren and Berry’s vision in pointing to the war’s tragic dimensions but, unlike these men of letters, succeed in divorcing the legacy of the Civil War from older interpretations. All told, this surprising intersection of literature from the Union’s most Confederate state and the new Civil War revisionism points to the possibilities and limitations of understanding the Civil War from literary perspectives. When read against the grain of Warren and Berry’s Civil War essays, the new revisionism sheds light on the darkness of the war while emancipating its memory from the Lost Cause ideology residue in the broader canon of Kentucky postwar literature.

Recent years have brought about a flourishing of scholarship on the history of Kentucky in the era of the Civil War and its postwar condition in the early twentieth century. This blossoming literature stems from the fact that fewer states boast a richer and more complicated history in connection with the American Civil War.

and its aftermath than Kentucky, which in 1860 stood as the strategic and geopolitical middle ground of looming conflict. Kentucky chose to oblige neither the North nor the South in their respective efforts to preserve or dismantle the Union. Its citizens understood clearly that they occupied a difficult position in a body politic that lawfully protected slavery, an institution essential to the economy and culture of their state, and one that Henry Clay had worked ceaselessly to protect through political compromise.

Economic and social conditions in Kentucky on the eve of the American Civil War complicated the period of Reconstruction and beyond when Americans struggled to reconcile racial conflict and come to terms with the full meaning of emancipation and the abolition of slavery. In his classic history of the Old South, Clement Eaton, then a renowned historian at the University of Kentucky, noted that though more Kentuckians fought for the Union than for the Confederacy, the state nevertheless benefited from an economy, and manifested a psychology, that was distinctly “part of the Old South.” Eaton wrote of the “significant and surprising fact” that on the eve of the Civil War Kentucky boasted a larger number of slaveholders than any other southern state save Virginia and Georgia.

So integral was slavery to Kentucky’s culture that it reinforced the state’s commitment to a Union that in 1860 protected the institution by law. Kentucky remained loyal to the cause of Union not in spite of slavery but precisely because of it: “Slavery,” writes Patrick A. Lewis, “was the glue that bound white Kentuckians to the United States, its government, and its ideals while that same government allowed them to continue to exercise the prerogatives of mastery in all their forms.” Kentuckians committed to slavery were among a dwindling group of southerners who seemed actually to take Lincoln at his word when the president restated on March 4, 1861, in his inaugural, “I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it exists. I believe I have

7. Abraham Lincoln remarked, perhaps apocryphally, “I hope to have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky.” Quoted in Eric Foner, The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery (New York: Norton, 2010), 169. Lincoln knew, as did Jefferson Davis, that to obtain the loyalties of the Border States (of which Kentucky represented the crown jewel) was to win the whole game. In Kentucky especially, citizens felt the need, in the words of Donald Stoker, to join either the Confederacy or the Union. “Where they fell out bore important consequences,” Stoker writes. He cites the 45 percent increase in manpower and the 80 percent increase in industry that seemed sure to benefit the Confederacy in the event Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri voted for secession: “This might have proven decisive.” Moreover, a neutral Kentucky provided the South with a natural geographical buffer and protection from northern invasion. Stoker, The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 44–45.
no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.”¹⁰ They believed that in their adherence to the Union, slavery in Kentucky might endure.

Though the prevalence of slavery in antebellum Kentucky ultimately did not convince the state of its necessity to secede from the Union, it did make Kentuckians particularly sensitive to criticisms of the institution on religious and cultural grounds. Luke E. Harlow demonstrates how evangelicals in Kentucky aligned slaveholding with religious orthodoxy to counter threats from radical abolitionists and hyper-Protestants to the northeast. This development bore profound consequences for the nature of postwar memory in Kentucky: “White evangelicalism,” Harlow writes, “drove the developments that were to come in the postbellum years, when white Kentucky ultimately embraced a Confederate memory of the war.”¹¹ Cultural conservatism that honed proslavery opinion in Kentucky in the antebellum period held sway in the years following 1865 and manifested itself in the commemoration of Civil War remembrance.

When the war came, Kentucky seemed essential to the strategies of both sides; as a result, it bore the brunt of broader national conflict even as it experienced intense intrastate civil strife. Daniel Sutherland has noted how early instances of guerrilla violence in loyal border states bespoke the fundamentally uncivil nature of the brothers’ war in that conflict’s important strategic zone.¹² The dissolution and division of the family in places such as Kentucky over the nature of rebellion and its meaning for the Union provided nineteenth-century Americans with a disturbing frame of reference for a kind of warfare new in the American experience. In this war, sons dishonored their fathers and brothers took their backyard brawls to the battlefield.¹³ For Kentuckians, civil war meant literally that brother fought brother. Divided houses fell. Kentucky existed as a Platonic form of civil and uncivil war battlegrounds—a form that typified both the divisiveness that caused the war in the first place and the experience of war as it came to exist in other states, such as Missouri, Virginia, Georgia, and South Carolina. Yet, war in Kentucky existed as an exceptional historical case. Sutherland has characterized the Kentuckian response to

¹². Paraphrased from Daniel E. Sutherland, lecture and remarks delivered at the West Point Summer Seminar in Military History, Carl von Clausewitz Library, Thayer Hall, U.S. Military Academy at West Point, June 20, 2016, cited with permission.
war as “schizophrenic” and “not at all neat or predictable, though somewhat akin to what happened in Missouri.” Significantly, one Kentuckian writing in 1861 noted that political unrest in Kentucky was ubiquitous, but not geographically defined as it was in Tennessee and Virginia.

The American Civil War and the era of Reconstruction thus initiated a sea change in Kentucky politics and culture. African Americans in the Upper South and especially in Kentucky experienced Reconstruction as visible and manifest symbols of an Old South that perished in intense sectional strife. This proved volatile. One historian has written that Kentucky politics “underwent a radical shift between 1860 and the early 1870s as the social revolution engendered by war, emancipation, and black military enlistment provoked violent white reaction, electoral realignment, and a cultural reinterpretation of regional identity.” While the war achieved freedom for former slaves, its outcome forced conservative (and former) Kentucky unionists into unorthodox political positions. Traditionalist Kentucky Whigs took up the banner of the Democratic Party. Whites took to violence to thwart African American citizenship. The violence that persisted in Kentucky in the postwar years thus reflected the uncertain identities and futures of disenchanted former unionists, ex-Confederates, and African American freedmen who sought an improved condition in society.

Kentucky’s remembered past and its decidedly Confederate memory of the war cast a long shadow. This theme has captured the attention of numerous historians who seek to situate Kentucky unionism and social conditions in postwar Kentucky in the broader narrative of Confederate Civil War memory. Maryjean Wall assesses how Bluegrass horse culture and business interests co-opted white postwar nostalgia at the turn of the twentieth century to remake Kentucky into the Cavalier image of the Old South. Anne Marshall illustrates how Kentucky’s newfound Confederate identity appeared quite visibly as early as 1870 and extended into the early years of the twentieth century. Her work nuances the findings of David Blight—who contends in Race and Reunion that “ideological remembrance”

15. Edmund Ruffin’s daughter, who resided in Frankfort, wrote to the prominent fire eater in 1861, “This State is not like Va & Tenn, divided into sections, East & West. . . . But there is division every-where throughout the State. There is scarcely a family that is not divided in sentiment, some for the North & others for the South.” Mildred C. Sayre to Edmund Ruffin, Aug. 13, 1861, Edmund Ruffin Papers, quoted in Sutherland, Savage Conflict, 37.
diminished as white northerners shifted toward an “emancipationist” vision that included African Americans—and demonstrates instead that Kentuckians never entertained notions of emancipationist memory: for most loyal border states and citizens, “the ‘emancipationist’ narrative was never in viable contention for white memory.” Marshall characterizes Civil War memory in Kentucky as fluid, “not always geographically defined . . . pluralistic and subject to myriad nuanced interpretations.”

Caroline Janney recently channeled this interpretation in her assessment “that for vast numbers of loyal citizens in Kentucky . . . Unionism never embraced emancipation.” After the Civil War, in their adoption of a Confederate memory of Kentucky, Bluegrass natives evidenced a nostalgic forgetfulness that later caused Robert Penn Warren to observe of Americans and their war that “when one is happy in forgetfulness, facts get forgotten.”

In 1986, Robert Penn Warren received the distinction of becoming the first U.S. poet laureate. He stands preeminent among American men of letters. He was possessed, William Bedford Clark writes, of a particularly American vision. “No writer of [the twentieth] century was more intrigued by the nation’s history, nor more susceptible to the sweeping grandeur of its landscape,” Clark observes, “but by the same token few writers equaled Warren when it came to cataloging the liabilities of America’s past.”

From the earliest days of his childhood, Warren had seen—and heard—much of America’s past. David Blight, also a shrewd interpreter of Robert Penn Warren’s literature and “wondrous sense of history,” notes how Warren drank deeply of history and literature and myth as a young boy on his visits to Grandpa Penn’s farm. Gabriel Thomas Penn, a Tennessean before the war who removed to Kentucky after its conclusion, had fought at Fort Pillow under William Bedford Forrest. He had survived Shiloh. And he had collected a trove of artifacts, memories, and stories that powerfully influenced Robert Penn Warren as a boy. Warren often

---

19. Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2013), 17. Janney complicates the picture of Civil War remembrance: the nation, she writes, moved very little to embrace a unified memory of the American Civil War so captured through the lens of Ken Burns (3). Her work, a significant revision of David Blight’s *Race and Reunion*, demonstrates how Americans of the North and the South vehemently protested national reconciliation in the years following the war.
caught fleeting glimpses of Civil War rifles and sabers that Gabriel Penn stored in
his farmhouse closet. He saw Kentucky’s centrality to the Civil War experiences
of both the Union and the Confederacy manifested in his grandfather: Grandpa
Penn was a “Union man before the war” who “saw slavery as a doomed institution”
but, like his neighbors, “went with [his] people” when it came time to pick sides.23
When the war ended, he brought mixed memories concerning the meaning of the
Civil War to the Bluegrass State. Blight paints a quintessentially southern scene in
which, seated with his corncob pipe in his wicker chair, Gabriel Penn would “regale
[young Robert Penn] with stories of the Civil War.” Gabriel Penn—who loved books
and poetry as much as his pipe tobacco—would recite poetry to Warren and sing
to him songs from the war.24

Robert Penn Warren’s academic credentials—studies at Vanderbilt University,
the University of California, Yale University, and at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar—
provided the foundation for an illustrious literary career. His life’s work helped, in
Clark’s words, “to establish a respectable place for the writer within the academy.”
Warren co-founded the prestigious Southern Review with Cleanth Brooks.25 He
authored over ten novels in addition to volumes of poetry, essays, and stories and

vols., The Apprentice Years, 1924–1934, ed. William Bedford Clark (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State
Univ. Press, 2000), 1.
Robert Penn Warren, Wendell Berry, and the Dark Side of Civil War History

accrued three Pulitzer Prizes. Though Warren spent much of his life in the North and eventually diminished his association with the Fugitives, he nevertheless manifested a particular southernness, an identity that typified a robust intellectual and cultural exchange between the American South and New England that dated to the eighteenth century.  

He died in 1989 after a distinguished career in the academy, having penned perhaps the most emotionally penetrating and incisive novel about the American Civil War and the postwar South in *All the King’s Men* (1946).

Wendell Berry took undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of Kentucky in 1956 and 1957, then attended Stanford University in 1958 as a Wallace Stegner Fellow. He also received a Guggenheim Fellowship and traveled to Italy from 1961 to 1962. In 2012, upon his receipt of the National Humanities Medal, Berry delivered the prestigious Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Though he taught for a short while at New York University and then at the University of Kentucky, he did not pursue an academic vocation. He has published with striking frequency and regularity—more than fifty books—and his essays, which engage such themes as environmental care, agriculture, technology, human dignity, the family, and communities, have appeared in such prestigious journals as the *Sewanee Review*. Indeed, one is hard pressed to find a more accomplished and active man of letters in the United States today. As a practicing agrarian, Berry is often a perceptive critic of American culture and its pressing social and environmental problems. His writings have spawned multiple volumes of commentary from scholars across the disciplines of literature, history, politics, theology, and philosophy. Paradoxically, Berry’s fiction, poetry, and essays find favor with conservatives and with proponents of liberal politics. His public support of marriage equality in January 2013 startled evangelical Christians. In an increasingly polarized and fractured political culture, Berry has managed a rare feat: he is a darling of traditionalists and liberals and something of an icon for hipsters and artists. In 2016, Berry featured in a documentary that premiered at the South by Southwest Interactive Festival (SXSW) in Austin, Texas, and he has interviewed in publications ranging from the *American Conservative* to the *New York Times*.

---

Robert Penn Warren and Wendell Berry came of age in a Kentucky in which Confederate Civil War memory colored the imaginations of most citizens. Warren wrote famously in The Legacy of the Civil War that the South was born not with the creation of the Confederate States of America but in defeat and that it endured after Robert E. Lee’s surrender and the conclusion of the war as “a City of the Soul.” As a boy, he witnessed the building of monuments that were to enshrine that City. The Lost Cause lay at the foundation of southern belief and of southern knowledge of the world. “No southern War and Peace, Guernica, or ‘Gettysburg Address’ came out of [the war],” historian Charles Reagan Wilson writes, but the tragedy southerners took from their defeat “shaped postwar southern life.” He continues: “The war was a tremendous bonding experience for southern whites who had tried and failed at independence,” and that shared sense of failure “would forever differentiate the region from others in the nation.”

Wendell Berry is hailed as one of the nation’s leading poets, novelists, and essayists. He has written widely and with eloquence on agriculture, foodways, responsible use of the land, sexuality, the family, and local relationships. His many novels, poems, and essays, which have appeared in a wide range of venues, evidence a deep and abiding love for those fundamental things that make us most fully human. A recipient of the National Endowment for the Humanities Medal, Berry lives with his wife, Tanya, on their farm in Kentucky. Wendell Berry by the Woodshed, Henry County, Kentucky, 2012. (Portrait by Guy Mendes. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.)


29. Anne Marshall recalls how Warren stole off in the family car as a young boy to the construction site of a Jefferson Davis memorial, then incomplete, outside his hometown. Marshall, Creating a Confederate Kentucky, 188.
characterized the Lost Cause as “myth-history that ennobled the destruction of the southern nation” and has observed also that the Lost Cause “inspired a romantic literature perhaps best exemplified by Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind.” In an observation that invites deeper inquiry, Thomas links the Lost Cause to the very literary movement that grew from Vanderbilt University and informed Berry’s writings: “The myth helped to spawn the Southern Literary Renaissance that fueled the intellectual movement known as the Nashville Agrarians.”31 Significantly, economic conditions in the South resulting from the Great Depression helped to produce a reactionary conservatism among men of letters who pined for an agrarian way of life that, with the ascendancy of New Deal Liberalism, seemed to wither and fade from modernity.32

In the writings of Warren and Berry, one detects a measured intellectual and thematic resonance, a resonance perhaps explained through both Kentuckians’ connections to the Southern Literary Renaissance and to the Nashville Agrarians. Warren endured criticism for his youthful association with the Fugitives and their symposium, I’ll Take My Stand (1930), to which he contributed “The Briar Patch” at the urging of fellow Fugitives John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate. Scholars divide on the meaning of Warren’s work for the Fugitive project. David Blight considers “The Briar Patch” an awkward and “lame defense of segregation,” the only piece Warren seems to have regretted writing. Daniel Joseph Singal takes a measured view of “The Briar Patch” and notes that the piece kept close step with “contemporary liberal opinion on race. [Warren’s] closing argument that country life provided more direct personal contact between the races came virtually as an afterthought” to progressive calls for expanded employment and educational opportunities for African Americans. And John J. Langdale III notes the uneasy relationship Robert Penn Warren enjoyed with the polemical spirit of I’ll Take My Stand from the first: “Upon learning of the proposed title . . . Warren pronounced it ‘the goddamnest thing he had ever heard of,’ and implored Tate to ‘block it if you can.’”33


32. John L. Robinson writes that “the Nashville Agrarians congregated around Vanderbilt University to praise an idealized Old South” and that “such figures as Robert Penn Warren, Frank L. Owsley, and Donald Davidson . . . railed against ‘big government,’ decrying the New Deal as a threat to the South’s traditional economic and racial structure, even proposing a Calhounian regional government to protect white elites’ interests.” John L. Robinson, “Great Depression,” in Wilson, New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, 3:112.

In 1970, Berry published the “The Regional Motive,” an essay he later considered “descended from, or at least a cousin to, the essays of I’ll Take My Stand.” In it, Berry links the destruction of environment to human communities’ disregard for place (and the resulting transience) that mark modernity. The end result, in his mind, is diminished conditions for human flourishing. In the essay, Berry takes issue with the regrettable fact that “[American] society is almost entirely nomadic, without the comfort or discipline of such memories, and it is moving about on the face of this continent with a mindless destructiveness.” Lest any reader doubt the impression that the American Civil War left on Berry’s southern imagination, he invokes the utterly controversial and complicated legacy of William T. Sherman in the South. The “mindless destructiveness” that results from losing one’s sense of place, Berry writes, is of such “substance and of meaning and of value, that [it] makes Sherman’s March to the Sea look like a prank.” Berry adds that without substantive and meaningful knowledge and appreciation for one’s place, and without fidelity to that place, “it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed.” For him, reverence for tradition and local community bear an intimate relationship to man’s office as steward over the creation he enjoys.

Because “The Regional Motive” illuminates Berry’s commitment to the local and to farming, it offers a point of continuity with, and departure from, the Nashville Agrarians in whose tradition Berry wrote. Berry acknowledges the Fugitives’ lasting literary influence and openly admits to the profundity of I’ll Take My Stand and his indebtedness to that work, but in a manner that suggests how he attempts to move beyond the limitations of the Fugitive vision, he questions the validity of their regional project. “The withdrawal,” Berry wrote in 1970, “of the most gifted of [the Agrarians] into the Northern colleges and universities invalidated their thinking, and reduced their effort to the level of an academic exercise.” In a manner that reveals how he esteems the practical and particular above the abstract, he acknowledges the Agrarians’ love of land—“not for its life” (a higher love) but rather “for its historical associations.” But one cannot value the “myths and abstractions of a place . . . apart from the place itself.” Thus, for Berry the “Regional

---

34. Wendell Berry, Imagination in Place (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 7.
Motive” ultimately rang hollow—the agrarianism of the Agrarians “was doomed to remain theoretical by a sentimental faith that history makes the grass green, whether the land is well farmed or not.”37 In 2004, Berry acknowledged that his nuanced 1970 critique of the Agrarians amounted to little more than academic “smartassery.” Even so, he restated his critique, that *I’ll Take My Stand* “is abstract, too purely mental. The book is not impractical—none of its principles, I believe is in conflict with practicality—but it is too often remote from the issues of practice.” He continued: “*I’ll Take My Stand* mostly ignores the difficulty and the discipline of locality. As an agrarian book, it mostly ignores also the difficulty and the discipline of farming.” Berry’s critique of the Agrarian symposium marks an attempt

37. Ibid., 974.
to move beyond the conservative, reactionary, and agrarian postwar South. But his sympathy for the Fugitives—a reality underscored, for instance, in his praise for Andrew Lytle and John Donald Wade—suggests he cannot altogether escape their influence, and his Kentucky connection to Robert Penn Warren points to the possibility that Berry is not as removed from the Agrarians as he cares to believe.38

A scholar wishing to assess Warren’s and Berry’s values as historical thinkers must inevitably confront their vocation as men of letters and not as historians. For all his demonstrated ability, Warren did not consider himself a historian, and he noted a clear divide between the historian’s vocation and the poet’s craft when he observed at the 1968 meeting of the Southern Historical Association, that while historians seek facts about the bygone world, the artist—the poet—knows “the inside” of that world.39 While Warren maintained outwardly a certain critical distance from the historical profession, his Civil War nonfiction nonetheless evidences real intellectual substance and vigor. And scholars across the disciplines of history and literature acknowledge this fact. The remarkable potency of *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961) and its reflection of Warren’s “research in the historical documents and his own imagination, philosophy, literary talent, and moral values” represent, in historian Howard Jones’s view, “arguably, the most memorable short piece ever written on the symbolic meaning of the Civil War.”40 David Madden, Robert Penn Warren Professor of Creative Writing, Emeritus, and founding director of the now-defunct U.S. Civil War Center at Louisiana State University, has observed that “some of the finest Civil War novelists . . . also wrote some of the most intellectually vigorous nonfiction on the subject,” and he cites Warren’s biography of the famed abolitionist, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), as one such important text.41 Berry’s writings mark a more serious departure from the conventions of historical scholarship. While his frequent forays into cultural criticism often rely on historical narrative—he recently rebuked University of Kentucky president Eli Capilouto’s decision to remove an Ann Rice O’Hanlon fresco from Memorial Hall for its depiction of slaves working in Kentucky fields, for instance—he writes with greater attention to human interiority and moral imagination, a fact not lost on his most perceptive admirers in history, theology, philosophy, and literature.42

Into Darkness, Loss, and Sentimentalism

In “Worrying About the Civil War,” the pioneering call with which he helped to launch what later emerged as the new revisionism, Edward L. Ayers wrote that *The Legacy of the Civil War* offered a “critical” meditation on the meaning of America’s central event. Ayers likened Robert Penn Warren and his contemporary Edmund Wilson to “voices in the wilderness,” prophets “delivering jeremiads” to Cold War–era Americans desirous of exchanging older and more skeptical views of the American Civil War for a “new tradition of acceptance and celebration” atop a heightened wave of American nationalism. 43 Historians have answered Ayers’s call for narratives that make more comprehensible the mythic proportions of Civil War lore, histories that “set aside the Olympian perspective and voice of our dominant books and films to provide a different sense of the war’s depth and scale,” narratives that “might give up older reassurances to provide new kinds of clarity.”44 Taken together, they have rendered a darker picture of the war, one more complicated than any linear, grand master narrative could possibly allow. Significantly, when interpreted on the whole, these histories invite antiwar sentiment—the suspicion that the Civil War was horrific, grisly, and fundamentally disturbing to most Americans—while jettisoning the needless war thesis of the Old Revisionist canon.

Yael A. Sternhell has observed how the new revisionism deploys a surprising range of literary and historical techniques to darken historians’ understandings of the war. But in her estimation, a theme that unifies this eclectic literature is “the redefinition of Civil War heroism and villainy” and the reorientation of a Civil War metanarrative from a fight for freedom and union against the forces of slavery and treason, toward an interpretation that dismantles “our sense of the war as a coherent event fought for comprehensible causes” and “shatters” all metanarrative interpretations to shards. She continues: “The Civil War emerging from this new scholarship is just another messy, ghastly, heartless conflict between two parties who were both, to some degree, in the wrong. Historians writing in this vein underscore the war’s bleakest facets while exposing the tragedies underlying even the most scholars across various disciplines, see Mark T. Mitchell and Nathan Schluerter ed., *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011), and Jason Peters, ed., *Wendell Berry: Life and Work* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2010).


44. Ayers, “Worrying about the Civil War,” 165.
uplifting moments. There are few winners and fewer heroes, little glory and scant justice.”45 Another theme that marks this literature is its account of nineteenth-century American society’s descent from order into disorder. In an ironic twist, and precisely because they dwell on the war’s darkest aspects, certain elements of the new revisionism have demonstrated a power to elicit antiwar sentiment in a manner similar to the old revisionism, but this antiwar spirit results from emphases on destruction and ruin and villainy. On the whole, it does not flow from laments for the destruction of the middle ground, from the failures of a “blundering generation” of politicians, or from nostalgia for a vision of the South memorialized in Lost Cause literature.

Stephen Berry, a leading architect of the new revisionism, has articulated how the American Civil War did not represent, in the language of Edward Ayers, the “apotheosis of American ideals.”46 For Berry, it is most important “to ask new questions of new social types” and to resist, in every way possible, the glorious interpretation of the war that shines forth from the Battle Cry of Freedom school of Civil War studies, which, according to Faust, historians who love to love the Civil War have enshrined in the last fifty years.47 More important, in his view, to bring into historical focus “soldiers who looted bodies and joyfully blew things up,” those opportunistic capitalists “who guiltlessly made money making war,” women “who trafficked in the war’s wake,” and “African American troops who decided desertion was the better part of valor.” The Civil War was hardly grand; more often than not it was unremarkable. It cost a staggering amount of human life, and it lost men and women their honor. A “redemptive conflict”? To the contrary, it was a “fool’s errand.” In the Civil War, suggests Berry, many “did worse than nothing.”48 And Michael Fellman, who among the new revisionists rendered perhaps the darkest view of the war, suggested that if one ignores such “grand abstractions” as duty, honor, and country that Civil War studies scholars emphasize, it becomes apparent that in the case of the American Civil War, the ends achieved do not justify the means.49

The new revisionist advance has hardly moved along this singular front, but it has challenged the orthodoxy that holds forth the American Civil War and its outcome as a classic narrative of good triumphing over evil with ready-made morals for its

48. Berry, introduction, 12.
49. Fellman, afterword, 367.
students. Numerous scholars have highlighted the uncivil nature and intensity of guerrilla warfare in the Civil War and have even suggested that unconventional, bushwhacker warfare was a decisive zone of Civil War action for the reorientation of the hard war policy it wrought in Union ranks and among northern war planners.50 One historian has emphasized torture and the brutality of southern soldiers against noncombatant North Carolinian unionists.51 Others have drawn heightened attention to the northern conduct of the Civil War and the war crimes Union troops committed against southerners. Religious historian Harry Stout most famously called into question the ethical conduct of northern forces against southern civilians in his “moral history” of the conflict and characterized the Civil War as a total war, a move that elicited no small (nor dispassionate) reaction from leading practitioners of classic military history and “hard war” adherents.52 In a manner that communicates a particular aversion to moral absolutism—the kind of aversion that Warren and Berry evidence in their essays—and in a manner like unto Stout, in America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation, David Goldfield places blame for the Civil War at the feet of militant Protestant clergy.53 His work illustrates further how scholars seek to turn the Civil War narrative inside out, for, as one noted intellectual historian has observed, it was precisely the religious commitments and tenets of evangelical Protestant Christianity that made possible moral reform movements in the United States and the ultimate destruction of racial slavery.54

In their aversion to the ideological origins of the war and in their attention to the material, natural, and human costs of the conflict, the Civil War writings of Warren and Berry point to the scholarly concerns of the new revisionism. But the very sentimentalism these essays communicate, which is absent in the Dark Side

of Civil War historical scholarship, also illuminates how the new revisionism has finally come to emancipate antiwar sentiment from Lost Cause nostalgia. The end result of reading *The Legacy of the Civil War* and “American Imagination and the Civil War” is a humane antiwar position. This position emphasizes human dignity and the tragedy of war and, tellingly, makes a rigid anti–Civil War stance seem palatable and seductive in spite of the war’s significant achievements for human freedom. Berry’s antiwar position is conspicuous, and perhaps even suspect, for its intellectual dexterity. Berry embraces the southern tradition of Kentucky and admits, somewhat awkwardly, that the American Civil War resulted from “foolishness, fanaticism, sectional loyalty and pride, the wish to protect one’s faults from correction by others, moral outrage, self-righteousness, the desire to punish sinners, and sectional hatred”—all of which made slavery a political problem with no practical solution in 1860. Berry’s view that the war constituted a failure of American political imagination echoes metanarrative interpretations offered by leading diplomatic and intellectual historians; significantly, his view also hearkens to the heyday of repressible conflict studies.55

Of the American Civil War, Berry writes that the two sides, North and South, “met in a series of great battles, and at last the strongest won in the name of emancipation and Union.” This “official” version contains a kernel of truth, but to understand the war truly, Berry writes, one must consider the unsavory elements: “to grant a just complexity to this history let us add a third side: that of the dead.”56 That Berry should seem concerned not with the traditional, “official” version of Civil War history—what one might distill into the emancipationist narrative—but rather, instead, that he would fixate on the unofficial version of the Civil War and its grisly features suggests both the fluidity of Berry’s Civil War memory and his drift


into darkness and nostalgia. Indeed, Berry’s fascination with death in the Civil War provides an illuminating point of intersection with the new revisionism and those scholars who highlight the war’s unsavory aspects. It serves another purpose, too, in that it masks an otherwise critical view of the northern political and military triumph in the American Civil War.

Civil War dead and the portrayal of those dead in photographs are themes that preoccupy several scholars who have helped more recently to portray the nature of death in the American Civil War.57 James Marten’s incisive and stirring depiction of My Dead Confederate—a Thomas C. Roche photograph that features a young Confederate soldier, struck between the eyes by shrapnel shortly after the fall of Petersburg—draws its viewers into a proximity and closeness with the isolated dead boy.58 In October 1862, the New York Times described the effect evoked by this proximity and clarity, so typical of Civil War photographs, as a “terrible distinctness.”59 The Civil War killed nearly eight hundred thousand men and on the home front ushered death to the doorsteps of countless other Americans who were fortunate enough to receive the remains of loved ones.60 In the photograph, death appeared disturbingly in scenes that framed “the isolation of a single casualty” and the individuality of one’s encounter with the great unknown.61 The intimacy with which Americans experienced death and the destruction of war proved so shocking that it nearly discredited religious belief.62

According to Berry, photographs also temper the power of abstraction: “The dead in Matthew Brady’s photographs don’t look like Unionists or Confederates; they look like dead boys, once uniquely themselves, undiminished by whichever half of the national quarrel they died for.” In the Civil War photograph, the viewer “meet[s] war as a great maker of personal tragedies, not as a great enterprise of objectives.”63 Warren struck a similar chord when he wrote, “It was real blood, not

57. See Drew Gilpin Faust, This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War (New York: Knopf, 2008).
60. In his penetrating analysis of microdata samples of census counts from the 1850s, 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s, J. David Hacker posits that 130,000 additional men died as a result of the American Civil War than cited in previous studies and that 200,000 more women were widowed, “A Census-Based Count of Civil War Dead,” Civil War History 57 (Dec. 2011): 311.
62. Faust observes, “The traditional notion that corporeal resurrection and restoration would accompany the Day of Judgment seemed increasingly implausible to many Americans who had seen the maiming and disfigurement inflicted by this war,” This Republic of Suffering, xvi.
tomato catsup or the pale ectoplasm of statistics, that wet the ground at Bloody Angle and darkened the waters of Bloody Pond.”64 Lesley J. Gordon has written in another context that Civil War soldiers sought in their war experiences to bring order from disorder and to elicit meaning from suffering. In a similar way, historians have long sought to understand the meaning of the American Civil War in light of its horrific costs. In attending to the death and blood captured in Civil War photographs, Warren and Berry question, to channel Gordon, Civil War narratives often refine, mythologize, sanitize, and memorialize in order to trace progress along the arc of history.65

Warren and Berry deliver devastating critiques of abstracted hyper-nationalism and moral absolutism, which they identify as causes of the Civil War and sources of its great destructive power. Warren frames the issue of the war’s causation in The Legacy of the Civil War around the Manichean dichotomy of “higher-law-ism” (the cause and ethos of abolitionism) and “legalism” (the “legalistic and deductive bias of mind” deployed to defend the institution of racial slavery). This tension, he claims, did not cause the war but rather poisoned the dialogue surrounding those events that led to it, all but ruining any hope for mutual self-understanding between North and South.66 He situates (what he considers) the lunacy of John Brown and his brutal murders in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry against “the anachronistic idiocy” of Preston Brooks, who infamously caned Charles Sumner nearly to death on the Senate floor in 1856.67 In their politics and in their demeanors, Americans of the North and South such as Brown and Brooks made themselves “morally unassailable” and, in so doing, politically and militarily irresponsible.68 Political failures resulted for both the North and South in prescriptions for total war and violent worldviews that demonized opposing partisans. Destruction of the middle ground turned political enemies into infidels and stumbling blocks to the cause of righteousness.

“Righteousness,” Warren writes in language unmistakably biblical, “is our first

64. Warren, Legacy of the Civil War, 50.
67. Warren writes of the southern temperament on the eve of war and its tendency to safeguard cultural orthodoxy: “It offered space . . . for the folly of Governor Wise and his fellow Virginians, who, instead of committing John Brown to an asylum, where all the medical evidence, even then available to the court, clearly indicated that he should be, hanged him—and thereby proved again what is never in much need of proof, that a crazy man is a large-scale menace only in a crazy society.” Warren, Legacy of the Civil War, 39. For analysis of the Brooks-Sumner incident, see Ritchie Devon Watson Jr., Normans and Saxons: Southern Race Mythology and the Intellectual History of the American Civil War (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2008), 1–18.
68. Warren, Legacy of the Civil War, 75.
refuge and our strength—even when we have acted on the grounds of calculated self-interest, and have got caught red-handed, and have to admit, a couple of days later, to a great bumbling horse-apple of a lie. In such a case, the effect of the conviction of virtue is to make us lie automatically and awkwardly.” Self-righteousness worked to erode political unity. It affected the earnestness and sincerity with which parties decided to go to war and prosecuted war aims. The moral certitude with which belligerents North and South conceived of the righteousness innate to their respective causes made the Civil War into a total and utterly destructive conflict. Significantly, Warren cites Cornelius C. Felton, a Harvard classicist, friend, and contemporary of Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner who, remarking on the noxious rhetoric of abolitionism on the eve of war, noted “that it seemed ‘as if the love of man meant the hatred of men.’”69 The evolution of slavery in the national consciousness from a necessary evil in the colonial period to a positive good in the Antebellum era made institutional slavery an awkward immoral aberration at first and southerners objects of wrath at the last. Sin and sinner became impediments to an otherwise holy civilization. Abolitionist zealots longed for the apocalypse, the final purgation of evil and the triumph of liberty and Christian polity; in their millennial hopes they failed to imagine properly the humanity of their adversaries even as they championed the humanity of those in bondage.70

Historians of the Civil War have documented thoroughly how this unassailable moral righteousness manifested itself when unforgiving and unrelenting ideologies met on the field of battle. Romantic notions of Napoleonic combat featuring set battle pieces, the fixed bayonet, and the cavalry charge received moral and theological sanction in the public square. Politicians and ministers called zealously for the annihilation of the enemy. So total was this conflation of war, religion, and politics that the Civil War turned quickly into a holy crusade. Stout has argued in *Upon the Altar of the Nation* that the profound national transformation which occurred from 1860 to 1865 required religious and messianic meaning and that, as the war descended into greater horrors and depths, the need to justify the war in theological and ideological terms proved all the more pressing.71

69. Ibid., 22.
71. Of the great national bloodletting, Stout writes that the war received its loudest cheers from religious leaders: “Tragically, no less than everyone else, the clergy were virtually cheerleaders all.” Clergy, writes Stout, ought to have opposed such a bloodletting: “One more easily forgives generals, journalists, and soldiers for their moral silence. But clergy—especially the majority Protestant clergy—had traditionally opposed reflexive patriotic rhetoric from the pulpit. They supposedly answered to a higher authority.” In the end, it was nationalism and civil religion baptized in blood that fueled their bloodlust (xvii). Stout continues: “As the war descended into a killing horror, the
Wars for righteousness do not exist apart from wars of extreme ideology. Blight writes that Warren loathed ideology, that he distrusted idealism and abstraction, and that he probed “ceaselessly” into the nature of original sin and redemption. In *The Legacy of the Civil War*, Warren betrays his distaste for ideology in his critique of antislavery moral absolutism. He takes aim at the murderous zeal of abolitionists for lending moral sanction to destruction. Self-righteousness (if not lunacy) manifested itself in John Brown’s startling misappropriation of Scripture: “Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.” Brown is hardly an isolated case. Theodore Parker, a heterodox theologian from New England, called for the “White Man’s blood” to wash away the stain of slavery. Warren displays a sharp aversion most especially to James Redpath. Redpath made the abolitionist cause all the more uncomfortable for those wary of war when he wrote in 1859 on the prospect of slave insurrection, “If all the slaves in the United States—men, women and helpless babes—were to fall on the field or become the victims of vengeance . . . if only one man survived to enjoy the freedom they had won, the liberty of that solitary negro . . . would be cheaply purchased by the universal slaughter of his people and their oppressors.” One sees condemnations of nationalism, abstraction, moral absolutism, and violence most distinctly in both Kentuckians’ critiques of abolitionism. The ideological effect of “higher-law-ism,” according to Warren, was to align the cause of God with the purposes of abolitionism. This could only end in mass slaughter, for all the blood spilled in the abolitionist cause “is to be spilled in God’s name and by his explicit directive.”

grounds of justification underwent a transformation from a just defensive war fought out of sheer necessity to preserve home and nation to a moral crusade for ‘freedom’ that would involve nothing less than a national ‘rebirth,’ a spiritual ‘revival’” (xxi). Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*.

74. Qtd. in ibid.
The North hardly deserves exclusive blame for preaching and practicing gospels of destruction and slaughter. Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, the puritanical Cromwell of the South and martyred hero of the Lost Cause, advocated for the “black flag” policy in the Confederacy’s broader war stratagem. Long after his death, southerners implemented this policy with shocking ease, and Confederate troops in all theaters of the war engaged in the systematic murder of surrendered Union soldiers. Confederate armies especially targeted and slaughtered captured African Americans (who, if they survived murder, often were returned to slavery), but it was generally true irrespective of race.

How does one elicit meaning from the violence that resulted from moral absolutism and ideology? The war in its fullness of meaning, Berry suggests dramatically, appears in view “only when one asks Why? Why could people of good sense on both sides not have treated slavery as a problem with a practical solution short of war?” Berry points toward “foolishness, fanaticism, sectional loyalty, and pride.” He claims that the absence of a well-ordered moral imagination worked to destroy lenity. He draws from both literature and history. In a manner that underscores the true horror that confronted divided families in Civil War–era Kentucky, Berry recounts a tragic scene from *Henry VI*, Part 3, which Shakespeare presents with arresting clarity. In the play, “there is a battle scene in which first ‘a Son’ and then ‘a Father,’ not identified as to side, enter separately, each bearing the body of a dead man whom he has killed and whom he now looks at. The Son says, ‘Who’s this? O God! It is my father’s face.’ And the Father says, ‘But let me see. Is this our foe-man’s face? / Ah, no, no, no! it is mine only son!’” Berry understands the outworking of violence as the inward failure of moral imagination. The failure of compromise, when it leads to a purportedly “irrepressible” war, degenerates into raw violence: “Once you have committed yourself to the way of violence, you can only suffer it through to exhaustion.” In another historical context, Great Britain suffered this lesson as it sought to negotiate the terms of empire and reform with its colonies in North America. Berry finds a likely hero in Edmund Burke, who in his *Speech on American Taxation* attempted to propose a via media between imperial resolve and


77. George S. Burkhardt argues that Confederate massacres of white and black Federal troops “were not distinct, unconnected events. Instead, they formed a pervasive pattern and stemmed from southerners’ common desire to defend and protect their heritage and society.” Burkhardt, *Confederate Rage, Yankee Wrath: No Quarter in the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2007), 1. Kevin M. Levin chronicles in grisly detail how Confederate troops engaged in the deliberate slaughter of African American troops at the Battle of the Crater. See Levin, *Remembering the Battle of the Crater: War as Murder* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2012), 7–32.
civil war and denounced the tight regulation Britain sought to impose abroad: “Yet
now, even now, I should confide in the prevailing virtue and efficacious operation of
lenity, though working in darkness and in chaos, in the midst of all this unnatural
and turbid combination: I should hope it might produce order and beauty in the
end.” Berry thus illustrates how self-righteous politics effectually reduce available
contingencies to false and often disastrous political options: “Burke . . . seems never
to have doubted that there were two other possibilities: reconciliation on terms of
justice or amicable separation.” On this point hinges decades of scholarship con-
cerning the inevitability of the American Civil War.78

Does a critical reading of Warren, Berry, and their anti–Civil War positions
expose a deeper and darker reality? As prominent figures in their respected and
rooted literary traditions, Warren and Berry act as important oracles of Civil War
memory. As if they were artists, they would paint America’s Civil War memory,
and the war memory of Kentucky in particular, on a canvas that renders American
politics on the eve of the Civil War in extremes: slavery on one end of the canvas,
which “loom[ed] up mountainously,” wrote Warren, “and [could] not be talked
away,” and the tyranny of moral absolutism inherent to antislavery sentiment—
what Berry describes as “fanaticism”—on the other.79 In these essays, appeals to a
politics of moderation, to moral imagination, and to antiviolence thus accomplish
multiple purposes: first, they stand as philosophically nuanced, sincere, and heart-
felt expressions of the better angels of human nature; but second, if taken out of
historical context, they may effect a dangerous appeal to nostalgia, to forgetfulness
about the very causes and nature of the Civil War, and to Lost Cause memory.
Precisely because of the Kentucky literary traditions that influence them, Warren
and Berry’s anti–Civil War positions function as a via media of Civil War memory:
they communicate the politics and sensibilities of Civil War–era Kentucky even as
they offer a point of intellectual departure from the wound of slavery—the burden
of southern history—to the new revisionism. They confirm that the Kentucky Civil
War consciousness is a fluid stream of contested memory.80

Berry, of course, does right to acknowledge, if only briefly, that the war resulted
from slavery and to note that it was prosecuted so fiercely (there “was no lenity,”
he writes) because the U.S. federal government failed to learn a central truth, a
truth it has since disregarded—“people generally don’t like to be invaded.” But by
this very admission, he almost suppresses the sheer value of slavery on the eve of
the Civil War.81 To state that the result of the war was that “at last the strongest

78. Berry, “American Imagination and the Civil War,” 590, 592, 596, 591.
79. Warren, Legacy of the Civil War, 7; Berry, “American Imagination and the Civil War,” 590.
won in the name of emancipation and Union” risks the implication that slavery was a peripheral consideration of the war but not its essential cause.

One cannot help but add depraved (no matter how rational) self-interest to Berry’s list of Civil War causes. The slave economy of the South constituted a massive and lucrative interest that, as Lincoln said famously in his second inaugural address, “somehow” stood at the center of the war. In his classic essay “The Irrepressible Conflict,” Kenneth M. Stampp wrote, “Slavery, of course, was at bottom a labor system, and property in slaves constituted the largest capital investment of most masters. That the South’s nearly 400,000 slaveholders should have been reluctant to surrender this vast interest may not have been admirable, but it was hardly irrational.” Stampp went on to cite the hard realism of James Henry Hammond, who asked, rhetorically, “[W]ere ever any people, civilized or savage, persuaded by arguments, human or divine, to surrender, voluntarily, two billion dollars?” 82 In point of fact, Hammond’s $2 billion estimate failed to approximate the true power of the southern slave economy. In 1860, one in three persons in the South was a slave, and the net worth of these slaves was $3 billion. 83 And so while Berry states truthfully that the war resulted from “foolishness, fanaticism, sectional loyalty and pride, the wish to protect one’s faults from correction by others, moral outrage, self-righteousness, the desire to punish sinners, and sectional hatred,” so still one must say of him and his essay “American Imagination and the Civil War” that both are conspicuously muted on the first cause of the war. 84

Berry does little in “American Imagination and the Civil War” to suppress his antipathy for Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” a song with a “splendid tune” but lyrics “perfectly insane.” After damning the Battle Hymn for its violent nationalism and its message of militant northern exceptionalism, Berry declares his “failure to perceive the glory of the coming of the Lord in the Civil War and its effects.” 85 On a foundational level, the Civil War reflections of Robert Penn Warren and Wendell Berry invite historians to take stock of what the conflict achieved. More importantly, and in a manner that marks a slow drift into darkness, they invite the historian to take account of how the war ruined America. “Perhaps we ourselves shall not have read the right history books, “ Warren writes, “if we think we can stop here and complacently cast our accounts with the past. Every victory has a price tag; every gain entails a loss.” 86 Such sentiments harmonize with the

84. Berry, “American Imagination and the Civil War,” 590.
85. Ibid., 595.
86. Warren, Legacy of the Civil War, 47.
frightening questions posed by the late Michael Fellman, who wrote that the war presents historians and enthusiasts with a fundamentally disturbing and disordered set of experiences from which to elicit meaning. What if, he asked rhetorically, “we do not conclude that the ends justified the means? Or, indeed, that the ends were ambiguous and the means were horrifically wounding?”

Berry pushes this issue most forcefully: the war, he writes, “should not stop us from asking, if only to keep the question open, what we gained, as a people, by the North’s expensive victory. My own impression is that the net gain was more modest and more questionable than is customarily said.” Such a position complicates the centrality of the Civil War to the American experience. It diminishes the inherently Olympian quality that the Civil War continues to evoke in the American national consciousness. Significantly, it complicates the politics of race in America that has now refracted onto the meaning of the Civil War and the legacy of civil rights. In fact, Berry calls into question the Civil War’s centrality to the American experience with striking ease. This count-the-costs arithmetic bears remarkable similarity to recent observations of Stephen Berry, who suggests in *Weirding the War* that “[historians] should consider—not merely the possibility that we took a wrong turn at the crossroads or did not pass the trial,” referring, of course, to the Civil War as the central event in American national history, “but even that the ‘crossroads’ and the ‘trial’ did not exist.” Both Berrys seem to emphasize the war’s horrors and lasting ill effects over its great achievements. With the skepticism of big business and corporatism that befits a practicing agrarian, Berry writes that “the Civil War was our first great industrial war, which was good for business, like every war since.” He continues, “The Civil War established violence against noncombatants as acceptable military policy. The Army of the United States, no longer the Northern army, proceeded from the liberation of the slaves to racist warfare against the native tribespeople of the West.” Moreover, Berry perceives the American nation’s destruction of its environment as a result of the war:

87. Fellman, afterword, 367.
88. Berry, “American Imagination and the Civil War,” 593.
89. Berry, introduction, 2.
90. Berry, “American Imagination and the Civil War,” 595. In his critique of the government and its conduct of the war against Native American Indians in the West, Berry evidences a selectivity in assessing the place of race and its relationship to the conduct of warfare in the American experience. Here, too, his work anticipates the scholarship of the late Michael Fellman, who viewed the conduct and language of warfare in the West against Native American Indians as ample evidence for the centrality of race and ethnicity to determining the severity of violence applied against enemy civilians and military populations during war. Likening Sherman to Oliver Cromwell, Fellman wrote that “Sherman explicitly countenanced fighting with ‘vindicative earnestness’ against the Sioux, spelling out that he meant genocide.” He continued: “Those markers of war against enemy
The Civil War was followed, perhaps as a matter of course—and would have been followed, no matter who won—by the industrial exploitation of our land and people that still continues. While we have stood at our school desks or in our church pews asserting the divine prerogative of “The Battle Hymn,” we have been destroying our country. This is not an impression. By measures empirical enough, we have wasted perhaps half of our country’s topsoil; we are destroying by “development” thousands of acres every day; we have polluted the atmosphere and the water cycle; we have destroyed or damaged or brought under threat all of our natural ecosystems; in our agriculture and forestry we are treating renewable resources as carelessly as we have burned the fossil fuels; we have severely damaged all of our human communities.91

But if Berry does not link the destruction of the environment to the Civil War directly, he nevertheless darkens the image of the Civil War in his conclusion that emancipation itself does not emerge in historical view as a grand and noble achievement of the conflict. His is a sobering assessment, one undeniably darker than Americans may prefer:

Must we not say, pragmatically, that a botched emancipation is better than legal slavery? Well, I am a farmer, therefore a pragmatist: half a crop beats none; a botched emancipation is better than none. But, as I am a farmer, I am also a critic, and I know the difference between a bad result and a good one. Of our history, though we cannot change it, we must still try for a true accounting. And to me it seems that the resort to violence is the death of imagination. Once the killing has started, lenity and the hope for order and beauty vanish along with causes and aims.92

And so in “American Imagination and the Civil War” Berry rejects the notion that the war and its political achievements constitute a watershed along America’s

91. Berry, “American Imagination and the Civil War,” 596. The indirect connection Berry establishes between the war and the environment invites comparison to the recent scholarship of Lisa M. Brady, who suggests in War Upon the Land, and in a manner that runs counter to Berry, that environmental conservationism—not destruction—emerged as a social, cultural, and political force after the Civil War precisely because some of its organizers and participants (ranging from John Muir and Frederick Law Olmsted to former Union soldiers) had escaped, witnessed, or wrought the ruination of the conflict. See Brady, War upon the Land: Military Strategy and the Transformation of Southern Landscapes during the American Civil War (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2012), 137–40.

search for national progress. Somewhat paradoxically, Berry’s dark view of the war and his measured assessment of what it wrought for American society point simultaneously to the recent observation of Anne Marshall, who notes that Kentuckians decidedly rejected an emancipationist vision of the Civil War almost immediately upon its ending. It is the manner in which Berry suppresses the emancipationist narrative that proves most instructive. Berry’s skepticism reflects the sensibility of a seasoned conservative: it evinces a particular doubt concerning the perfectibility of human nature and society. It is an outlook that acknowledges, on a foundational level, the darkness of humanity. It is a worldview of limits, not of possibilities. It disbelieves lore, makes human what is mythic, and emphasizes tragedy and destruction. In its most striking point of continuity with the Dark Turn, it internalizes the photographs of Civil War dead and sees the dead not as martyrs for a great national cause upon the altar of progress but rather as dead boys, utterly ruined, mutilated, and gored in the first great industrial war of the long twentieth century, the war that “introduced America to wholesale killing,” as Michael C. C. Adams has described it, and a war that simply begat other social and political problems.93

Does “American Imagination and the Civil War” represent a radical intellectual departure from Berry’s earlier writings? In almost every respect, it, like Berry’s 1970 reflection on race in The Hidden Wound, confirms his reputation as a wise, ethical, and humane man of letters. The Hidden Wound, which Berry introduces with an excerpt from The Autobiography of Malcolm X (“This pattern, this ‘system’ that the white man created, of teaching Negroes to hide the truth from him behind a façade of grinning, ‘yessir-bossing,’ foot-shuffling and head scratching—that system has done the American white man more harm than an invading army would do to him”), concludes with a patent rejection of the paternalism inherent in the view that the white race holds the power to lift African Americans to a position of equality in society: “It is a condescension to believe we have the power to do that,” Berry writes. “Until we have recognized in them the full strength and grace of their distinctive humanity we will be able to set no one free, for we will not be free ourselves.”94

93. Drew Gilpin Faust argues that the Civil War ushered into history “new levels of destructiveness made possible by changed technologies, economies, and societies” and that it “anticipated, in important ways, the transformations that have so often been attributed to the years between 1914 and 1918.” Faust, “Two Wars and the Long Twentieth Century,” New Yorker, Mar. 13, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/two-wars-and-the-long-twentieth-century; Michael C. C. Adams, Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014), 84. Adams writes elsewhere in the text, “Developments that put great citizen armies in the field, such as the spread of democracy and innovations in manufacturing, also conspired to put many thousands on the firing lines and equip them with modern, efficient weapons that inflicted enormous casualties. Killing on an industrial scale had arrived” (60).

And out of the gate, in the essay’s opening pages, he deconstructs the romantic myth of Kentucky Confederates in the war who fought, as the legend went, merely for honor as gentleman soldiers. This myth emerged forcefully in George Dallas Mosgrove’s *Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie*, in which the same Cpt. Bart Jenkins who appeared on the Berry farm in the blackness of the night is rendered as a dashing knight (in actuality he was little more than a guerrilla) who gallops straight into American history from Arthurian legend.95 Berry considers this work not at all historical: “despite his claims that he is writing history,” he writes, “Mosgrove’s book gives no inkling that the war occurred within a social and political context. To him it was brilliant adventure, remote from place and time, detached from cause and effect” (here one is left simply to infer that Berry means the reality and horror of the violence of racial slavery). And Berry notes, as anyone concerned for a faithful retelling of the historical record must, “the profound moral discomfort potential in a society ostensibly Christian and democratic and genteel, but based upon the institutionalized violence of slavery.”96 Anne Marshall has noted the romanticized vision of antebellum Kentucky that emerged in its postwar literary tradition.97 Lost Cause purveyors of this literature desperately wished for a Kentucky that was genteel, cavalier, democratic, and true to reality. Berry considers this myth pure fancy and wishful thinking—a “Walt Disney version of American history.”98

95. George Dallas Mosgrove, born in Louisville in 1844, enlisted in the 4th Kentucky Cavalry Regiment, CSA, in September 1862. He served alongside Bart Jenkins, who features as one of several biographies that Mosgrove recorded in *Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie* (1895). George Dallas Mosgrove, *Kentucky Cavaliers in Dixie, or, the Reminiscences of a Confederate Cavalryman* (Louisville: Courier-Journal Job Printing Co., 1895). See “Mosgrove, George Dallas,” in *The Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky*, ed. Paul A. Tenkotte and James C. Claypool (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2009), 629; From 1863 to the conclusion of the war, Jenkins led a company of “free-lancers” against Union troops in Henry County. He was captured multiple times but brutally murdered his captors. Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 10–12.
98. Berry, *Hidden Wound*, 14–15; Anne Sarah Rubin has written that the war’s greatest novelist, Margaret Mitchell, made ironic use of Lost Cause sources in *Gone with the Wind*: “Mitchell would poke fun at the ‘gentle Confederate novels’ of authors like Thomas Nelson Page, with their ‘moonlight on the magnolias,’ and emphasis on honor and romance.” To some extent, notes Rubin, Mitchell succeeded in moving beyond Lost Cause legend. Still, in the final analysis, “her novel is, as Malcolm Cowley wrote in a famous essay, ‘an encyclopedia of the plantation legend,’ full of faithful slaves, nasty Yankees, and evil carpetbaggers.” A similar play on Lost Cause literature and a similar effect seem present in Berry’s work, which assumes a decidedly post–Lost Cause posture but produces, in the end, a sense of nostalgia for the Old South. Rubin, “Revisiting Classic Civil War Books: ‘Why Gone with the Wind Still Matters; or, Why I Still Love *Gone with the Wind*,’” *Civil War History* 59 (Mar. 2013): 96.
That the corpus of Berry’s writings demonstrates such a capacity for human understanding and a sensitivity to the costs of racial slavery makes his drift into nostalgia and sentimentalism all the more instructive. The brutal Captain Jenkins, who came as a thief in the night to rob, to steal, and to destroy the human dignity of his newly acquired property, seems to Berry to have “appeared to the white household that night, to their astonishment, as the agent of a horror and an outrage that they inherited and lived with all their lives, and had never openly faced.”

His writings invite the reader to allow for the possibility that horror was not essential to the system as it existed on his great-grandfather’s small Kentucky farm; rather, it arrived there, it violated a peaceful domestic economy, in the blackness of night, and in terror. This desire to disbelieve that his great-grandfather participated with full knowledge and moral agency in the evils of slavery reflects how Wendell Berry wrestles with the weight of racial slavery and the complex legacy of the Civil War in American history. His struggle with the horror of slavery in Kentucky is not academic; it is an existential crisis, and one deeply felt. To adapt C. Vann Woodward’s observation, it is the burden of Berry’s history.

Whether intended or not, both The Hidden Wound and “American Imagination and the Civil War” re-present the sense of ambivalence and tragedy that animates Robert Penn Warren’s classic essay. In his 1970 piece, Berry evidences a will to disbelieve in the totality of evil as it existed on his great-grandfather’s Kentucky farm. A similar will animates Berry’s 2007 essay: “The North,” Berry notes, “was not uniformly abolitionist”; and the South, he concludes, “was not uniformly pro-slavery or even pro-secession.”

Gary Gallagher has demonstrated convincingly that northern soldiers fought to preserve a republic derived from universal belief in representative government and the rule of law, not, on the contrary, to eradicate racial slavery. Even more certain, however, is that the southern states seceded to protect racial slavery and that slavery was so ubiquitous throughout the South, and indeed so essential to its livelihood, that Berry’s Kentucky remained faithful to the Union in hopes of safeguarding it in perpetuity. The southern states were not uniformly pro-secession, but, contra Berry, they were consistent in their pro-slavery commitments.

Interpreted in these lights, a critical view of the war and a true accounting of its costs in “American Imagination and the Civil War” illuminate Berry’s descent into darkness and sentimentalism. Outwardly, the essay appears as a new mode

100. Berry, “American Imagination and the Civil War,” 595.
of making sense of tragedy and the ruination of his native Kentucky. But Berry’s antiwar turn is not anti-southern. As an agrarian, he is much too rooted in place, a fact that makes him somewhat quaint in an age of cosmopolitanism and globalism. Berry opens “American Imagination and the Civil War” with a frank discussion of his southernness, an exercise that bears striking similarity to his earlier reflection in *The Hidden Wound*. In the end, those tensions inherent to questions of race, war, and memory that animate both essays underscore the centrality of Kentucky to the Civil War experience and the ambivalence of Kentuckians in making sense of that war. Berry, like Warren before him, is trapped by history. And perhaps more than any writer who has so outwardly questioned the meaning of the American Civil War, Berry has wrestled with his southernness—as Flannery O’Connor wrote that any aspiring writer of the South must wrestle with that region in its historical richness and complexity—as Jacob wrestled with the angel.¹⁰³

Historians would do well to read these essays of Warren and Berry, for they tell as much about the historical traditions of Civil War memory in Kentucky as they do of the evolution of the historical literature known to academic historians as the Dark Turn. In unpredictable and surprising ways, these essays demonstrate that elements of sentimentalism inherent to the Lost Cause have anticipated the antiwar turn in the new revisionism. In their antiwar stances, and in the means with which they adopt a critical posture toward the conflict, the Civil War essays of Robert Penn Warren and Wendell Berry link the antiwar sympathies and conclusions of previous generations of Civil War scholars to questions raised by the new revisionists.

But more significantly, these essays point in a roundabout way to the vitality and diversity of the new revisionist canon and to the critical distance this historical literature has achieved from older antiwar interpretations. The kind of sentimentalism that colors the literary visions of Warren and Berry is absent in the Dark Turn. This absence therefore serves to illuminate an important contradistinction between the new revisionist literature and the old revisionism it displaced. When read in connection with the literature of the Dark Turn, Warren and Berry’s Civil War essays highlight the essential fact that however much new revisionist scholars may call into question the processes and means by which Americans waged brutal war against one another, and however much they may dwell on the war’s dark and horrific aspects, these same scholars stop short of calling into question the need to fight a war to settle the question of racial slavery. Only David Goldfield, who in

¹⁰³. “The image of the South,” wrote Flannery O’Connor, “in all its complexity, is so powerful in us that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged. The writer must wrestle with it, like Jacob with the angel, until he has extracted a blessing.” O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, sel. and ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 198. I thank John J. Langdale III for alerting me to this passage.
the late 1960s served as a graduate assistant to Avery Craven, admits, in *America Aflame*, that he is antiwar in a manner that invites comparison to the substance and spirit of the Repressible Conflict school. And William J. Cooper, who seems to have breathed new life into the Blundering Generation thesis in *We Have the War upon Us*, constructs along similar intellectual lines how it was that antiwar moderates lost the political debate.104

Yael A. Sternhell notes that Dark Turners writing in opposition to the master narrative of neoabolitionism are not seeking to supplant that narrative altogether.105 Though a handful of scholars seek to blacken the oft-immaculate portrayal of emancipation that endures in Civil War scholarship, the destruction of racial slavery still offers the commanding vantage point from which historians frame other interpretations.106 Similarly, and in a manner that underscores further the intellectual separation new revisionists have achieved from the old, “Weirdlings” do not stress the view that war was avoidable. Rather, they focus on ways to humanize the war even in its darkness and in its chaos. At his most critical—“War is always about damage, even at its most heroic, even when certain people and certain things deserve to be damaged. To be sure, the destruction of slavery was a good thing and a great thing. That we should have had to fight our bloodiest war to end it is neither good nor great. Indeed, it is just sad”—Stephen Berry does not suggest, as his revisionist predecessors did in no uncertain terms, that the war was unnecessary and repressible. To the contrary, he states that persons and things often “deserve to be damaged,” which, translated, means that some causes are good, true, and beautiful, just as others are evil and require defeating. The Civil War was fought for first principles of universal importance and for the dignity of the human race. And yet, in Berry’s interpretation, emphasis falls on the war’s tragedy, on its sadness, and on those damaged.107

104. Though retired, Professor Craven had, at that time, accepted a one-year appointment at the University of Maryland at the age of eighty-four. Goldfield writes that the Civil War is “America’s greatest failure,” that “war was not inevitable,” and that his book “is anti-war, particularly the Civil War.” Significantly, he questions whether northerners and southerners needed to fight that war: “I am not arguing that the death and destruction of the Civil War outweighed the good of abolition,” he writes, “rather, that there may have been other means to achieve that noble end.” Goldfield, *America Aflame*, 1, 3. William J. Cooper, *We Have the War upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, November 1860–April 1861* (New York: Knopf, 2012).


106. Citing Jim Downs’s *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012) and Hannah Rosen’s *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Post-Emancipation South* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008) as examples, Sternhell notes how new works “are placing an even greater emphasis on emancipation’s darker aspects, by stripping the trappings of heroism and hope from the transition from slavery to freedom and focusing on the lived experiences of men, women, and children thrown into the chaos and danger of war with no means of survival.” Sternhell, “Revisionism Reinvented?” 246.

107. Berry, introduction, 12.
Robert Penn Warren, Wendell Berry, and the Dark Side of Civil War History

Megan Kate Nelson, who introduces her work on damage done to cities, the environment, and bodies with an excerpt from Warren’s *The Legacy of the Civil War*, has also demonstrated the potential of the new revisionism. As a work of environmental history, an architectural study, and a cultural study of war, *Ruin Nation* suggests that the Dark Side of Civil War history has indeed achieved a clean break from the kind of sentimental political and military history common to Lost Cause literature.108 And Brian Craig Miller, also front and center in the Dark Turn advance, has performed a great service for scholars in noting the disproportionate extent to which Americans remain awed at the specter of the Civil War and yet retain memories of its grisly features that are surprisingly not awful. His effort to humanize Civil War participants through the lens of very brutal suffering—*Empty Sleeves* is the first significant work to examine the effects of amputation on gender, southern constructions of masculinity, and power in the postwar South—hones scholars’ earlier attention to death and loss but makes these themes intensely personal. In this narrow sense, Miller’s work, and a similar observation by Stephen Berry—that a Civil War soldier’s wound “was one’s own. No man had another exactly like it. The moment a soldier got hit, he and his wound were alone in the world”—fulfills the literary vision of Wendell Berry, who views war as “a great maker of personal tragedies.”109

As an amalgam of cultural, military, medical, social, and gender history, *Empty Sleeves* reflects the conditions of the American military experience in the twenty-first century. Its emphasis on amputees mirrors the human suffering that has resulted from America’s tragic forays into the Middle East, quagmires that hardly resemble those decisive wars Americans fought in the early- and mid-twentieth century amid unprecedented political consensus and cultural solidarity, and the legacy of which Americans now invoke to stoke the fires of patriotism. Efforts to make Afghanistan and Iraq safe for democracy have proven costly in treasure and in blood, and Americans have paid a steep human price fighting unconventional battles. American soldiers, among the best equipped, best educated, and most highly trained in the world, are killed, maimed, and traumatized by cheaply manufactured IEDs. These devices are constructed not by professional munitions experts but by men, women, and children who lack first-class military training and equipment and who daily endure some of the worst poverty in the world. Miller concludes *Empty Sleeves* with a tribute to American soldiers in these wars who have suffered

so greatly; it elicits deep gratitude for their national sacrifice, and it merits a wide readership.

It is therefore a welcome feature of this Dark Turn literature, and perhaps its greatest virtue, that it can accommodate such thematic diversity, make more horrific the steep human costs of the Civil War, simultaneously humanize those casualties, offer critical meditations on the war and maintain emancipation as the war’s great outcome without drifting into sentimentalism, “upend” the master narrative of the war, and “give battle to the moral platitudes” that have emerged from Civil War scholarship without attempting to reduce the Civil War to a different metanarrative interpretation.110 Indeed, to do so would seem to contradict the basic premise that underpins the genre, which is that there is no monolithic “real war” that historians can somehow reach into the past to recapture and put into the books.111 There is no perfect historical form or likeness of the American Civil War—only ragged edges. Perhaps this ragged history, then, is the only true accounting of what Warren considered America’s Homeric struggle between Americans North and South.112

111. Berry, introduction, 3.