

The Agrarian Inheritance: An Affirmation

Melvin E. Bradford

But who will stand tonight,
Holding this other door against the press
Of brazen muscles? Who can conquer wheels
Gigantically rolled with mass of iron
Against frail human fingers? Who can quench
The white hot fury of the tameless atoms
Bursting the secret jungle of their cells?
Oh, who can stay or ever chain the dull
Gnaw of the fiery smoke, eternally settling
Into the beating heart?

"Fire on Belmont Street"

*Donald Davidson*¹

When first invited to prepare this address, I was uncritically delighted by the prospect. For my relationship to the subject is, as my subtitle announces, altogether personal: was so (even though I came later to know many of the original Agrarians rather well) from the time I first read through *I'll Take My Stand*. Here, I said then to myself, is a voice for the deepest sentiments of the people I have known best, a voice bringing into focus the largely prescriptive and anecdotal wisdom of the world "where I was born and raised." Furthermore, my kindred, or those who had read the book for themselves, in general agreed. At the age of twenty, a discovery of this sort is overwhelming. And the passage of years, especially when added to the effects of fellowship with and study under particular Agrarians and their disciples of a second and third generation, has done absolutely nothing to diminish that original impression. Yet testimonial to a private indebtedness, even though it be offered in deserved tribute to the most gifted "school" of thinkers our region has yet produced, is not the sole motive for my remarks this evening.

For this is a gathering of social scientists and/or persons interested in the questions and procedures by which such sciences are defined. And, as we should remember, social scientists have been, from the beginning (and of all identifiable breeds), the most numerous and perfervid

¹ Donald Davidson, *Poems: 1922-1961* (Minneapolis, 1966), p. 180. This poem is the epilogue to Davidson's many-sectioned assessment of what it meant to be a southerner of his commitment and generation. The lines immediately preceding those quoted recall "The Fight at Finnsburg," an Anglo-Saxon composition depicting the defense of a hall against a treacherous night attack.

enemies of the Agrarian enterprise. Numerous, and I must add, quite often ignorant.² With the passage of forty-two years since the appearance of the Agrarian manifesto, the situation has been, admittedly, somewhat improved. Barely a month passes without the publication of some fresh consideration of the meaning or significance of the “Nashville Twelve.” Moreover, the new studies are not all the handiwork of men of letters, as was earlier the case. Historians, political philosophers, sociologists, and representatives of other related kinds no longer imagine that simplistic denunciations of *I’ll Take My Stand* are (as they once were) useful identifications for numbering the legitimate members of their profession.³ There is evidence that they (and I do not mean just the southerners in their camp) begin (in the light of what has happened to the South, the nation, and the world) to ask a few disinterested questions for themselves—questions concerning the prescience of the little group of friends who took their stand. Moreover, there is further evidence that they have finally read their book. Therefore, I believe that the moment is propitious for one holding openly to my persuasion to confront, in character, a society committed as is yours. In the aftermath of the 1972 election, though more difficult than I first perceived, exceedingly propitious. I propose to concede nothing. But in the context of our own segment of history, I am eager to explain why.

Now, as was just indicated, I believe, even more than I did almost twenty years ago, that the Agrarians were on the right track. First of all, I believe they were altogether correct in what they chose to stand against. And, furthermore, I believe their understanding of the dangers posed by what they called “industrialism” had a necessary connection with their being born and bred southerners. The latter condition, if thought be taken, encourages a certain uneasiness about the former. It is thus a mistake to “desectionalize” *I’ll Take My Stand*—just as it is an error to lift the book out of the temporal circumstances and convert it into pseudo-poetic tract or exercise in pastoral mythmaking.⁴ In 1930, the tiresome iteration of the “New South,” rhetoric was finally

² For illustrations see the early responses summarized and cited by Virginia Rock in her monumental “The Making and Meaning of *I’ll Take My Stand*: A Study in Utopian Conservatism” (Ph.D. diss., 1961). See also, as recent examples of this simplicity, John S. Ezell’s *The South Since 1865* (New York, 1963), p. 456; Thomas D. Clark and Albert D. Kirwan’s *The South Since Appomattox* (New York, 1967), p. 224; Paul N. Gaston’s *The New South Creed* (New York, 1970), pp. 10-11; William H. Nicholls’ *Southern Tradition and Regional Progress* (Chapel Hill, 1960), pp. 8-11, 27-42; David Potter’s *The South and the Illusional Conflict* (Baton Rouge, 1968), pp. 3-33; and (especially) H. Brandt Ayers and Thomas H. Naylor, eds., *You Can’t Eat Magnolias* (New York, 1972). The list could be extended.

³ I refer particularly to the papers of Edward S. Shapiro of Seton Hall University, who along with Miss Rock, may be expected to give us a fine book on the Agrarians. Some fruitage from Shapiro’s 1968 Harvard dissertation, “The American Distributists and the New Deal,” has recently appeared in his “The Southern Agrarians and the Tennessee Valley Authority,” *American Quarterly* 22 (Winter, 1970): 791-806

⁴ This view is represented in Allen Guttman, *The Conservative Tradition in America* (N.Y., 1967), pp. 148-158; Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made* (N.Y., 1969), pp. 239-242; Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America*, 2d ed. (N.Y., 1962), pp. 228-232; George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge, 1967), pp. 578-588; and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *The Writer in the South* (Athens, 1970), pp. 82-106 and his “Introduction” to the 1962 Torchbook reissue of *I’ll Take My Stand* (New York) pp. vi-xviii.

There are, of course, the malicious “mythographers”: F. Garvin Davenport, Jr.’s *The Myth of Southern History: Historical Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature* (Nashville, 1970), pp. 44-81; M. Morton Auerbach’s *The Conservative Illusion* (N.Y., 1959), pp. 104-133; Alexander Karanikas’s *Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics* (Madison, 1966); John Lincoln Stewart’s *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton, 1965); Wallace W. Douglass “Deliberate Exiles: The Social Sources of Agrarian Poetics” *Aspects of American Literature*, ed. Richard M. Ludwig (Columbus, 1962), pp. 277-300; C. A. Ward’s “The Good Myth,” and “Myths: Further Agrarian Views,” *University of Kansas City Review* 25 (June and October, 1958): 53-56 and 272-276.

beginning to bear fruit. The conquest begun in arms and pursued in politics and in “education” had moved forward, inexorably, to that point at which it was able to threaten the economic basis of the South’s identity. All lesser reconstructions, which left that facet of the region’s autonomy intact, could produce no equivalent peril to its independence. Indeed, the ability of military garrisons of the federal judiciary to impose a permanent alteration upon the character of a people determined to be themselves and in possession of property sufficient for the support of their obduracy is, as we now understand very much in doubt.

That the Agrarians wanted the South to retain a considerable degree of control over its own destiny is beyond question—*as much* control as It could retain. Certainly, it was not by chance that they took a title for their book from the spirited anthem of their warlike forefathers. But it is not always properly understood that this impulse was definitive of the Agrarian effort—and that it was continuous with the South’s historic sense of the danger in things moving down upon it from above the old surveyors’ line: a danger often spoken of by the elders in restrictively theological terms as “apostasy” or “heresy.”⁵ Of course, the Agrarians finally decided that industrialism was unsound in and of itself. But their first suspicion of the iron age to come proceeded from their suspicions of its source. And this disposition (though it co-exists with a comfortable assent to Union of sort) survives to this day in Dixie, unquestionably strengthened by what the Agrarians wrote and taught—and by later plans for regional “improvement” visited upon us by our self-appointed consciences and tutors “up there.”

But, after insisting that the Agrarians were sectionalists, I believe that I should specify what they were sectionalists for and which of the regional qualities they affirmed have demonstrated, in the past four decades, a high degree of durability. The point of reference for all study of the Agrarian teaching must be the “Statement of Principles” with which *I’ll Take My Stand* was prefaced and to which all twelve of its authors subscribed.⁶ This small document is a locus toward which (forward or back) most Agrarian writings may be seen to point, the expression of a common perspective. It identifies industrialism with applied science, attributes to that science a restless tendency to regard itself as the definitive human activity, and connects with its hegemony over an industrial society the rise of Marxism and related dehumanizations. In other words, for the Agrarians, the road through Manchester and Lowell, Pittsburgh and Middletown was the wrong road in that, at least insofar as their contemporaries followed that “broad way,” it led finally and inevitably to the gates of the Winter Palace and the ministrations of Madame la Guillotine.

But the Agrarians, with reference to now familiar political categories, were an even more complicated case than suggested by the above distinctions. In no sense were they strict libertarians or laissez faire Republicans. Rather, it is more appropriate to think of them as the

Other comment is merely malicious: Idus A. Newby, “The Southern Agrarians: A View After Thirty Years,” *Agricultural History* 37 (July, 1963): 143-155; Anne W. Amacher, “Myths and Consequences: Calhoun and Some Nashville Agrarians,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 59 (Spring, 1968): 251-264; and James L. McDonald, “Reactionary Rebels: Agrarians in Defense of the South,” *Midwest Quarterly* 10 (January, 1969): 155-170.

⁵ This neglected vein in Southern thought has been mined to some extent by Tommy W. Rogers in a series of papers. See for example, “Dr. F. A. Ross and the Presbyterian Defense of Slavery,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 45 (June, 1967): 112-124. Also see Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought*, ed. George Core and Melvin E. Bradford (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1968).

⁶ *I’ll Take My Stand*, “Introduction: A Statement of Principles,” pp. xix-xxx of the Torchbook edition.

natural heirs of Randolph of Roanoke, John Taylor of Caroline, and the better side of Jefferson—anti-Hamiltonian, anti-statist, conservative Democrat. Neither were they high Tory champions of an aristocratic regime on the continental European model. Community was their a priori ideal—an informally hierarchical social organism in which all southerners (including the Negro, insofar as the survival of that community permitted) had a sense of investment and participation. In brief, a patriarchal world of families, pre-or non-capitalist *because* familial, located, pious, and “brotherly”; agrarian in order not to produce the alienated, atomistic individual to whom abstractly familial totalitarianism can appeal; classically Republican because that system of government best allowed for the multiplicity that was the nation while at the same time permitting the agrarian culture of families to flourish unperturbed.⁷

And this brings me to my major point: for the Agrarians, the measure of any economic or political system was its human product. Goods, services, and income are, to this way of thinking, subsidiary to the basic cultural consideration, the overall form of life produced. Of course, the Agrarians were anti-egalitarian. They knew the abstract drive toward Equality (capital E—that is to say, equality of condition) to be the mortal enemy of the patriarchy. And thus they agreed that, though some have providentially five or three or only one talent, every man should be encouraged to become as independent as he can be—encouraged even to the point of artificial (that is, temporary and federal) measures such as may be designed to produce a wide distribution of real property, the necessary basis for a culture of families. And, for the same reasons, they were not in every instance opposed to the New Deal, not hostile to any New Deal measure in which they sensed a potential for undoing some of the damage to the South wrought by conquest, reconstruction, and economic colonialism: that is, where they sensed a “restorative” potential in such measures. The role of the gentleman was *ex officio* cementing the bonds between unequal men, in providing or arrangements “encouraged” independence could not guarantee. Stated briefly these men had a Burkean attitude toward a polity most appropriately denominated “old Whig” or “old Republican”—English *and* Roman, as their origins would lead us to expect.⁸ Ignorance of southern intellectual history has had no small part in the misinterpretation of *I’ll Take My Stand*.

In the midst of our overwhelming passion for “dear water in the sun,” of the great thrust toward ecological responsibility, it is not difficult to maintain that the Agrarians were correct about the aggressive implications of the cult of applied science.⁹ The shrine of GNP is now largely

⁷ A view of the traditional order of the South maintained as recently as this fall by Andrew Lytle is found in “The Old Neighborhood,” *Southern Review*, n.s. 8 (Oct., 1972): 817.

⁸ It is a basic confusion of the scholarship on the political disposition of the region—and on the origins of that disposition—which attempts to identify it as “democratic” or “feudal.” Depending upon the kind of pressure it experienced from without, Southern apologists have often stressed one or the other side of its outlook, thus making it to appear, for rhetorical purposes, as a stronghold of hierarchy or a stronghold of populism. Of course it has been (as still is) both—or rather, a syncretism of both. See Richard Weaver, “Aspects of Southern Philosophy,” in *Southern Renaissance*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore, 1953), pp. 14-30; see also Melvin E. Bradford, “Faulkner, James Baldwin, and the South,” *Georgia Review* 20 (Winter, 1966): 431-443.

⁹ For two curious but favorable modern and “ecological” responses to Agrarians, the reader should examine Edwin M. Yoder, Jr., “The Greening of the South,” *Book World* (July 4, 1971): 7; and also George Steiner’s “Thought in a Green Shade,” *Reporter* 31 (Dec. 31, 1964): 36.

neglected. All around us the sorcerer's apprentices are being ordered to put their wands away.¹⁰ And their political preferences, we should recognize, follow from their view of scientific gnosticism. I know from my own experience this past spring in directing a conservative takeover of the Democratic party in the South's largest metropolitan area that, if properly presented, these politics are yet marketable. And, the people who share them to this day retain, according to a Chapel Hill sociologist, despite (in some cases) two or three generations of removal from the land, attitudes and a life-style derived from agrarian antecedents: in religion, family feeling, regional loyalty, and a personal code of honor.¹¹ Furthermore, these attitudes and political preferences are (as we discovered this year) exportable beyond the boundaries of the region.

But enough of science and politics. Perhaps the most important passage in the Agrarian "Statement of Principles" is the paragraph on religion and nature. I now quote it in full because I intend to organize the remainder of my comment on the burden of *I'll Take My Stand* and sequels with reference to its implications.

Religion can hardly expect to flourish in an industrial society. Religion is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our role as creatures within it. But nature industrialized, transformed into cities and artificial habitations, manufactured into commodities, is no longer nature but a highly simplified picture of nature. We receive the illusion of having power over nature, and lose the sense of nature as something mysterious and contingent. The God of nature under these conditions is merely an amiable expression, a superfluity, and the philosophical understanding ordinarily carried in the religious experience is not there for us to have.¹²

Assuredly, religion (American or even southern) has not flourished in the past forty-two years—not even that humanly indispensable, predoctrinal "older religiousness" which the Agrarians' best expositor, Richard Weaver, learned about from John Ransom's *God Without Thunder* (also published in 1930)—the species of religion necessary to any acceptance of the given creation.¹³ That there is a link between the naturalistic, Baconian world view and the megalopolis wherein it seems to flourish Professor Harvey Cox has argued persuasively in his *Secular City*.¹⁴ Moreover, the drift of the arts toward the private, the non-referential and eccentric has in the same interval been unbroken. Poetry, the best critics tell us, is rooted in metaphor; and metaphor does not proceed from a dominance of the creation. The Agrarians also warned that manners,

For other useful and non-malicious comment on the Agrarians, the reader might consider Thomas L. Connelly, "The Vanderbilt Agrarians: Time and Place in Southern Tradition," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 22 (March, 1963): 22-37; Rennard Strickland, "Puritan, Indian, and Agrarian: A Critical Essay on the History of Law, Environmental Values, and Rhetorical Strategy," *St. Mary's Law Journal* 8 (Winter, 1971): 231-248; and Virginia Rock, "The Fugitive-Agrarians in Response to Social Change," *Southern Humanities Review* 1 (Summer, 1967): 170-81.

¹⁰ I refer, for an instance, to twenty recent court and administrative decisions forbidding the construction of new dams.

¹¹ John Shelton Reed, *The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society* (Lexington, Mass., 1972).

¹² *I'll Take My Stand*, p. xxiv.

¹³ See *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, pp. 98-111, and also his "The Southern Phoenix," *Georgia Review* 27 (Spring, 1965): 6-17, a review of the Torchbook reissue. See also Melvin E. Bradford "The Agrarianism of Richard Weaver: Beginnings and Completions," *Modern Age* 14 (Summer/Fall, 1970): 249-256.

¹⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1966).

family life, neighborliness, and (most importantly) romantic love would decline rapidly within the framework of an industrial civilization. In the same vein, they suspected that public education, organized by New England and the teacher's colleges, would become an enemy to the regional identity. There is no need to defend the accuracy of their prophecies in these connections. And, finally, they had a real doubt that the Negro would profit from relocation in our great cities. Again, no definitive gloss is called for. Response is already in motion. It will be the definitive comment. Yet what is noteworthy at this point is that the anti-Agrarian critics of the 1930s denied that any of these things could happen. Now, if they are not silent, the same (or related) voices can argue only that the changes which could not come (but did) were indeed (once here) all for the best. In a set of conversations held at the University of Dallas in the spring of 1968, John Crowe Ransom, Andrew Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate agreed in sober amusement that their foresight had been remarkable. Contrary to a widespread misrepresentation, they recanted in nothing of importance, either in positive commitment or analysis.¹⁵ They rejoiced that their work had received continuance. And they took comfort from the idea that the function of prophets is (as in scripture) usually to warn against a course of conduct which those to whom the prophecy is given will not learn from until the error warned against has borne its bitter fruit.

What then is, in this winter of 1972, the visible inheritance of the southern Agrarians? For one thing, it is the aforementioned body of students who have scattered all across the South and the country, carrying with them all or part of the vision of their masters. I know of above one hundred men and women who are part of the scholarly community in the South and who self-consciously represent the Agrarian position. Moreover, they are remarkably productive in print and pupils. An elite group, they appear in all disciplines and fields, and their effect has been incalculable. Next is the fact of the southern Literary Renaissance. Without the discursive and argumentative writings of the Agrarians, much of this achievement would be unintelligible. In our time it has been *the* American literature, and the marvel of the world. And the understanding of history and the human condition embodied in its unfolding has been, in great measure (and because they wrote much of it), the Agrarian one. In addition, there are others—clergymen, lawyers, journalists, and politicians who hear the same music. Some now occupy high office and many of them are friends with one another.

Finally, there are more pedestrian, yet perhaps also more significant developments. It is true that we have, as a region or nation, found no way of securing Agrarian values without an agrarian economy; have found no model to replace their yeomen. Or rather, not yet. But it is also true that the Secretary of Agriculture travels about the country, holding meetings on how to preserve the family farm. Price supports become less and less necessary. Population growth and international food needs indicate that we will soon return additional land to cultivation. Americans generally announce their preference for rural life—that is, as soon as they can arrange for it. And southerners, especially, whose culture still remains quite rural! Furthermore, as both Dr. Gallup and *The Wall Street Journal* have recently informed us, the South persists as conservative as ever in

¹⁵ To be published as *Conversations at Dallas: An Agrarian Reunion*, 1968. [Never Published. See [Agrarian Reunion Collection](#) at Vanderbilt]

the face of those simplistic predictions that official desegregation would change its total outlook.¹⁶ The city is in general disrepute. A move away from it is inevitable. And some states by law encourage the dispersal of industry into the countryside—a compromise the Agrarians foresaw and accepted. Soon enough, the impetus of the industrial age will expend itself, to be succeeded by something less mobile, probably electronic, and less ambitious in bulk. And, as we can now agree, this passing age came to us so late that our region has, fortunately, missed most of its vulgar phase and will, in its anticipated conclusion, escape its full brunt. Meanwhile, the South will continue with (to use the terms of the intellectual historian, Peter Gay) its “mythopeic” and “precritical” habit of mind, located in space and holding to the memory and the hope of that “cultivated garden” which Leo Marx identifies as the American paradigm.¹⁷ Then, in ten or fifteen years, just as the ecologists have come to accept the Agrarian position on environment and Michigan their political perspective, many of those gathered here may expect to find themselves of their company in much else. If this seems doubtful, I must refer you (I admit, with conscious irony) to the inevitability of “ideas whose time has come” and add the poet’s insistence, that

... Earth
Is good, but better is land, and best
A land still fought-for, even in retreat;
For how else can Aeneas find his rest
And the child hearken and dream at his grandsire’s feet?¹⁸

¹⁶ See Alan L. Otten, “The New South-Still Conservative” *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 2, 1972, p. 10.

¹⁷ Gay’s book is *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York, 1966), see pp. ix-xiv; and also Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York, 1964).

¹⁸ The irony here derives from Senator Dirksen’s peroration to his famous argument for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The closing lines from Davidson, appear on p. 15 of his *Poems; 1922-1961*.

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