

THE GOLDEN CALF
A Paper Presented by
Brooks Major

The Athenaeum Society
September 5, 1996

THE GOLDEN CALF

In America during the Roaring Twenties, the South was generally considered to be the idiot child left behind in the backwash of progress, with no culture worthy of the name (unless one considers the Ku Klux Klan and cock fighting cultural activities). While it was beginning to industrialize, the South was light years behind the Northeast. Its population was divided, according to common conception, between the urban Progressives, the "Moonlight and Magnolia" Sentimentalists, and, in vast and overwhelming majority, those whose thought processes rarely got beyond the "Moon Pie and RC Cola" stage: in other words, the "Good Ol' Boys."

In 1920, H. L. Mencken took aim at the South, which he called "The Sahara of the Bozart," in his book, Prejudices, Second Series:

Down (South) a poet is now almost as rare as an oboe player, a dry-point etcher, or a metaphysician. It is, indeed, amazing to contemplate so vast a vacuity. One thinks of the interstellar spaces, of the colossal reaches of the now mythical ether. Nearly the whole of Europe could be lost in that stupendous region of fat farms, shoddy cities and paralyzed cerebrums... And yet, for all its size and all its wealth and all the "progress" it babbles of, it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert.

Once you have counted James Branch Cabell (a lingering survivor of the ancien regime: a scarlet fly embedded in opaque amber) you will not find a single Southern prose writer who can actually write.

Mencken went on to add, concerning the influence of the prevailing Protestantism on personal behavior,

...the most booming sort of piety, in the South, is not incompatible with the theory that lynching is a benign institution. Two generations ago it was not incompatible with an ardent belief in slavery.

Mencken was not alone in his acerbic assessment of the South. Sociologists Howard W. Odum and Harry Estill Moore, in their American Regionalism: A Cultural-Historical Approach to National Integration, using criteria commonly accepted then (and now) to differentiate "advanced" from "backward" cultures, provided the following statistics of Massachusetts and Mississippi:

Per Capita Wealth:	\$1,000 up <u>vs.</u> under \$250.
Urban Population:	over 90% <u>vs.</u> under 20%.
Plane of Living:	70% and above <u>vs.</u> 15%. This was measured by tax returns, tele-phones, radios, etc.
Farms having Autos:	61.9% <u>vs.</u> 26.5%.
Indoor Plumbing:	79% <u>vs.</u> 5%.
Library Expenditures: (per capita)	\$1.18 <u>vs.</u> 7¢.

By every commonly accepted cultural standard of the period (and, to a large degree, presently) Mississippi was at the bottom of the totem pole. Even UK used to have a sign on the campus stating "Thank God for Mississippi." How then, using these cultural criteria, is one to explain that during the 1920s and 1930s, a literary renaissance of explosive character and lasting fame emerged from this benighted South? And don't forget to add to the gloom the infamous "Monkey Trial" at Dayton, Tennessee, which amused most of the nation in 1925.

Surely Tennessee was judged as one of the most notorious centers of cultural depravity in the whole world.

Yet at the same time, the Fugitive Poets were making history at Vanderbilt and William Faulkner was writing in Mississippi. If cultural environment is responsible for great writing, and the criteria of cultural environment are progressivism, material wealth, industrialism, consumerism, and urbanism, this becomes either a fluke or a paradox. The world recognition and prestigious awards won by the whole coterie of Southern writers and which placed the South in the national forefront of literary excellence rules out the possibility of fluke and leaves the paradox. OR there is the possibility that the cultural criteria distinguishing the "advanced" from the "backward" are the wrong criteria. The twelve Southern writers who produced I'll Take My Stand in 1930 considered these commonly held criteria a false and cruel hoax. They became known as the Southern Agrarians, and their various and informal ties with Vanderbilt later became a source of pride to the University.

Four of the Agrarians had been major contributors to The Fugitive, a poetry magazine published in Nashville between 1922 and 1925, and assessed as the most important poetry publication of the time. The Fugitive arose from an informal seminar group largely consisting of Vanderbilt professors and students, who met regularly to read and criticize each other's work. Later, as they realized they

shared a common position concerning the positive values of the agrarian, non-industrialized South, and the danger of the loss of those values as the South seemed to be eagerly imitating an essentially alien culture in order to keep up with the rest of the country, the twelve produced a stirring manifesto in I'll Take My Stand. Each contributor was responsible for an individual chapter on a selected topic and the book was tied together by an Introduction by John Crowe Ransom. The four contributors who had also been leaders in the publication of The Fugitive were Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson. They were joined by eight others of like mind, with literary backgrounds in such varied fields as History, Political Science, Theater, Biography, Literature, Psychology, and Economics. After 1930, the twelve produced more than 100 widely acclaimed works in almost every genre, winning, as the sales brochures are wont to say, prestigious prizes too numerous to mention.

I approach a summary of their position in I'll Take My Stand with the diffidence of a hack writer trying to condense a classic work of art for the Condensed Book Series. The Southern Agrarians saw a culture in which agriculture was the predominant factor, as it had been throughout the South's history and they saw it as supportive of humanistic values, while an encroaching industrial culture was necessarily destructive of those values.

They saw regionalism and provincialism as positive values. They felt industrialization inevitably leads to centralization. Andrew Nelson Lytle wrote in his chapter, "The Hind Tit," that socialism, communism, and sovietism are the three final stages industrialism must take. Cantralization inevitably leads to conformity, standardization, and loss of liberty. These men would have seen no reason to eat McDonald's hamburgers just because they are depressingly uniform and the Golden Arches span the globe.

They did not argue against pure science, but they did recognize that applied science had a distressing tendency to spread like kudzu, smothering all other forms of life. More industrial technology produces more goods, saves more labor, and gives men a sense of mastery over the vagaries of nature. It multiplies on itself and has no end or purpose except the process of multiplication. All this is denominated "progress." Ransom wrote that the concept of progress is man's increasing command, essentially perfect command, over the forces of nature. He believed this neither possible nor applicable to the human condition. When it came to progress, the Agrarians asked the embarassing questions "why?" and "to what end?" They found no answers in the industrial society. They would have looked at our rapid communication networks and asked "Does it make you communicate more profoundly or just more rapidly?" When one inveterate booster claimed his small city had 27 miles of paved roads, they simply asked, "Where do they lead?" and "Why are you going?" Seven years

after the publication of I'll Take My Stand, Kentucky's license plates had the motto "Progress" stamped on them. One wonders what that meant. The Chicago World's Fair in 1934 had as its motto, "A Century of Progress." In 1934, that was really whistling in the dark.

If progress is truly advancement, it cannot simply be hedonistic consumption and materialistic ideals. As Robert Penn Warren later wrote, the Agrarians concern was their image of the whole man, imperfect, fallible, desirous of enjoying the good life, of realizing the potential of his "self." The values the Agrarians perceived in a way of life expressive of aesthetic, religious humanism, of the enjoyment of work and the amenities of human relationships---manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, romantic love---these were the rallying points for their cause. The Agrarians believed that this genuine humanism was rooted in the agrarian life of the older South and of other parts of the country that shared such a tradition.

The whole idea of "progress" is a relatively modern one. It assumes, for the modern industrial state (by that is meant one in which the needs and demands of industrial production and consumption are absolutely paramount and industry is the master, not the handmaiden, of society) progress is as inevitable as "Manifest Destiny" was assumed to be for America in the Nineteenth Century. Get on board or you miss the train. Miss the train and you are stuck in the

backwater, forever to lead a benighted and unfulfilled life. It sees nature as an adversary to be eliminated and work as a good only in terms of its product. While this may produce admitted problems, such as overproduction, unemployment, unequal distribution of wealth, urban slum crime, etc. the solution offered is homeopathic: more is better and better is progress.

In proposing the predominantly agrarian society as not only an acceptable, but desirable alternative to this order of things, the Southern Agrarians of I'll Take My Stand chose a most felicitous year to publish: 1930. The dizzy, uncritical boosterism of the 1920s was beginning to bear the long harvest of its bitter fruit. The downward spiral of the Great Depression belied the outrageous optimism of the 1920s when, as President Coolidge inanely put it, "The business of America is business." Industry expanded, stock prices skyrocketed far above real value, and American leaders assumed that every day, in every way, all must be bigger and better. Even Edwin Mims, the respected chairman of the Vanderbilt English Department and obviously no Agrarian, wrote a paean of praise to America's industrial leadership in his Adventurous America, published in 1929. Poor Eddie Mims! His timing was as unfortunate as the Agrarian's timing was fortuitous. Reading his book today in the light of subsequent developments, it appears pitifully fatuous. He was not alone.

The 1930s saw catastrophic unemployment and a dangerous

collapse of the American industrial economy. Conditions seemed to verify the warnings of the Southern Agrarians. Agriculture was affected as well, but more so in the Great Plains, where a long period of drouth created the Dust Bowl. The message of the Southern Agrarians seemed prophetic. They had, after all, defined the "good life" in terms of human needs rather than simply material prosperity. As World War II brought a renewal of prosperity on the home front, the attraction of the almost self-sustaining agrarian life faded quickly. As one writer later put it, the Agrarians were the poorest sort of economists and sociologists, but they did make excellent points as Christian Humanists. America was not to become an Agrarian Arcadia. Frank Owsley later said, at a Vanderbilt Reunion, "Everybody thought they ought to go out and plow a field." That, he added, was not the point. The point, or as some later put it, the use of the metaphor, was that humane values should maintain predominance over machine production. The Agrarians found those values in the South in which they were bred: recognition of nature as sometimes ally, sometimes worthy foe, whose rythms are part and parcel of human nature; the value of personal relationships, family and friends found in a non-urban environment; the attachment to the land and an ingrained sense of place; the stability of a familiar and structured society; a salvational religion that recognizes the fallibility of man and refuses to accept a material

road to perfection; a society that values hospitality, manners, and the value of work apart from its product; and places all these things above mere monetary gain.

As time passed, the manifesto in I'll Take My Stand has seemed like a quixotic tilting against windmills. America has firmly decided to go another path. Yet, the book remains curiously attractive to new generations. It continues to be reprinted, discussed, and studied. Part of the reason is surely because of the quality of writing by authors of proven first-rate ability, and perhaps part of the reason is the unease we feel because we still find so-called advanced societies spawning ever-larger problems with each new so-called solution. It is the sort of thing that has made classics of Huxley's Brave New World and Orwell's 1984, and reminds us that we still have to ask ourselves the old Roman question, "Cui bono?", roughly translated, "Where is this leading us?"

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he found Aaron had cast a golden calf and the Hebrews were worshipping it. He was put out, to say the least, and thundered at them with the wrath of God. Gold was precious then, as it is now. The casting of the calf was an example of advanced technology which, if it were found today, would be greatly admired. But it fit neither the plan of God nor the nature of Man for it to be worshipped. To make a Master of a Handmaiden is still an abomination.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Conkin, Paul. Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University. University of Tennessee Press: Knoxville, 1935.

Cook, Mary Ann. "Prophets with Honors" in Vanderbilt Magazine. Vol. 72, No. 2, Fall, 1987.

Davidson, Donald. Still Rebels Still Yankees. Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1957.

Mims, Edwin. Adventurous America. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1929.

Stewart, Randall. Regionalism and Beyond. Vanderbilt University Press; Nashville, 1968.

Twelve Southerners*. I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition. Peter Smith: New York, 1951. Also Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge, 1977.

Vaughn, William S. "Some Recollections of a Fugitive Sort" in Vanderbilt Magazine. Vol. 72, No. 2, Fall, 1987.

* THE TWELVE SOUTHERNERS

John Crowe Ransom
Robert Penn Warren
Allen Tate
Donald Davidson

John Gould Fletcher
H. B. Kline
Lyle H. Lanier
Stark Young

H. C. Nixon
Frank L. Owsley
John Donald Wade
Andrew Nelson Lytle