

Almost "a Bare Hanging"

A man may be capable . . . of a plain piece of work; but to make a malefactor die sweetly was only belonging to [Jack].

Mrs. Jack Ketch. From Dryden's *Discourse concerning the origin and progress of satire*.

The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians, by John L. Stewart, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965. xiv + 552 pp. \$12.50.

Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians As Social and Literary Critics, by Alexander Karanikas, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966. xii + 251 pp. \$6.50.

AMERICAN conservatism has many faces and many names. Its champions are as various and as inclined to quarrel among themselves as its antagonists are united—at least in their determination to drive it to the wall. But in one sphere of activity and in one guise a native species of the conservative sensibility has, for the last thirty-five years and more, managed to command a hearing and to hold an audience. And it has accomplished this in the midst of an overwhelmingly antagonistic intellectual establishment. The sphere of which I speak is the republic of letters; the species of conservative, the Southerner (here referring to a state of mind, not an address) as poet, novelist, and critic—as maker and arbiter of taste. To both the hostile and the sympathetic the Southern Renaissance and the critical theory which called the world's attention to and established the stature of that body of literature is an unsettled question of some importance.

However, despite the recognized status and the anomaly of the Southern Renaissance, for some reason its collective emer-

gence and maturation have not (aside from a brief period when a few Southerners became too open and self-conscious in acknowledging what they were about) elicited from either its natural friends or its enemies anything like a coherent, comprehending, or systematic response. Most conservatives not involved in this revival seem to have been put off or embarrassed by its origin. Perhaps they have listened too long and too well to the warnings from the Left (*vide* Clinton Rossiter) that nothing for their use or to their interest can come out of Dixie. Perhaps their obtuseness has deeper roots—in the half-hearted or ambiguous quality of American conservatism in general and in the bad blood which (though we no longer admit it) still stands between the South and other sections of the nation. Or again, it may simply be the total quality of the Southern writer's retrospective empathy with the roots of his culture that frightens his more tentative and pragmatic conservative readers. (Imagine attempting to explain Spanish Carlism to the Chamber of Commerce!) Merely opportunistic conservatism is easily intimidated by a piety more thoroughgoing than its own. And, as Donald Davidson noted some years ago, piety, a contemplative focus on what, in a permanent sense, *is* and not only what supposedly *ought to be*, provides the spiritual substance of the literature of the twentieth-century South.

However, if conservative reaction to the Southern Renaissance has been a bit puzzling, that of American liberalism has been what we might have anticipated. The successes of Southern writers and critics have been accomplished quietly and thoroughly. The area of their performances has been the academy, not the hustings. And the majority of their natural antagonists have so long been confident of their power in the universities and so busy in the consolidation of their authority over things outside the academic grove that they have paid only passing hostile notice to the advocates of the ancients in con-

temporary battles of the books. True, they did respond vigorously with calumny and condescension to the bare-faced challenges to their ideology: William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*; Davidson's *Attack on the Leviathan*; the biographies of Allen Tate and Andrew Lytle; Ransom's *God Without Thunder*; and of course the two powerful symposia, *I'll Take My Stand* and *Who Owns America?* The Jacobin responds to whatever confronts him directly and forthrightly in his attempt to execute "plans" for the "common good." But he is less self-assured in dealing with serious literature which is not overtly propagandistic; it (like genuine religious faith and family feeling) belongs to an order of being unavailable to his calculus. And so when the sensibility revealed openly in the argument and exposition of the works just mentioned went, as it were, "around the flanks" of the hatchet men of the Left, their reaction was simple uneasiness.

But the rank-and-file Jacobin is a relentless creature; he has an instinct for sensing who and where are his enemies. And he has had sufficient reports of nibblings from his flanks (in such tracts as Richard Gorham Davis' 1949 *American Scholar* essay on the "fascism" of the New Critics; John Bradbury's exposé, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account* [University of North Carolina Press, 1958]; and Robert Lane's astonishing diatribe on the effects of courses in critical reading upon the good citizenship potential of undergraduates, *The Liberties of Wit* [Yale, 1961] to confirm his earlier suspicions. Therefore, with matters in the Congress and the courts temporarily arranged to his liking, he has found time for the unfinished business of discrediting or distorting the Southern Renaissance and the related developments in contemporary critical theory and practice which have at their heart and as their point of reference the achievements of the "Fugitive" and the "Agrarian" circles, once centered in Nashville.

I have for some time been expecting

books like *Tillers of a Myth* and *The Burden of Time* to appear. Both are orthodox establishment productions. Both have all the earmarks of their origin—as dissertations written under the auspices (and according to the prejudices) of liberal directors and advisers. They put on a mask of objectivity and of pretended open-mindedness calculated to disarm the unwary. Yet neither is really a *study* of the Vanderbilt group and its ultimate significance for American thought and letters.

Stewart's endeavor in his massive tome is to dissociate the creative achievements of Tate, Ransom, Warren, and their fellows from the intellectual milieu which produced them. And as a subsidiary task he sets out to exalt Warren (because Warren is now "reformed") at the expense of his friends and to negate completely any notion that Donald Davidson, Caroline Gordon, or Andrew Lytle are gifted writers. Moreover, he is particularly abusive of the man who was perhaps the most perceptive historian of the South (and assuredly one

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of the best spokesmen for its bedrock convictions) to appear in this century, the Alabamian, Frank Lawrence Owsley. John Gould Fletcher, John Donald Wade, Stark Young, and others he mentions only with a passing sneer. Almost the first half of *The Burden of Time* is devoted to a one-sided, misinformed, and ill-documented argument with *I'll Take My Stand*—an argument which prepares the way for an equally misleading, detailed reading of the poetry and prose of Ransom, Tate, and Warren. Where politics do not intrude, Stewart is sometimes a gifted commentator. He has an acquaintance with the techniques of formalist criticism. But he is apparently unaware of the logic and epistemology implicit in that critical procedure. And rarely is his hobby-horse at rest. The chief value of his volume is that it serves as a warning to responsible explicators and literary historians (conservative and not) that the sociological and Marxist approaches to literature, apparently discredited in the thirties and forties, may be (disguised as respectable scholarship) on their way back.

Karanikas' *Tillers of a Myth* is, at once, more and less objectionable than Stewart's weighty opus: more, because in effect it revives, as a warning to the regime (following Davis, Lane, and others), the charge that the language and the practice of the New Criticism is inimical to its interest; less, because Karanikas has examined more of the Agrarian literature than has Stewart. The supposed objective of this book is to give an exposition of the position taken by the Agrarians (in which direction Stewart makes only a gesture) and a history of the varied fortunes of their doctrine. However, what one of his subjects, Allen Tate, labels as the "New Provincialism" (in time, not space) precludes his having any luck with the former undertaking; and he is too narrow and exclusive (he stops at 1937) to have much in the latter. Karanikas understands nothing of the South, its history, or of the inherited "vision of order" (unlike

New England's) which it transplanted to these shores. And he appears to be ignorant of the continuing impact of his subjects on numerous younger poets, novelists, historians, and critics. Worst of all, he (like Stewart, but with less excuse) fails to recognize that Agrarianism, above all else, was an attack on modern man's pride and presumption in the face of a "given" order of things, a doctrine of nature. Across the grain of his extensive comment on Agrarian attitudes toward myth, religious orthodoxy, society, economy, and aesthetics runs a blindness to the self-evident connection of the subject matter in each of these chapters. He "discovers" a break between the aesthetic and the social sides of Agrarian thought in the hostility of Tate and Cleanth Brooks to a poetry of "will." But surely wilful poetry is a cousin to wilful sociology or autarkic scientism—and none of the intellectual kindred of Tate and Brooks?

Karanikas is reluctant to attack formalist aesthetic criteria head-on. Instead he is content to describe their sources—except when he is arguing that they are sound because they transcend their nefarious origins (just as Stewart argues that some Agrarian poetry is bad simply because of its intellectual content, which is apparently Southern). At times the Illinois professor appears to be confused. And yet I suspect that Karanikas knew (consciously or instinctively) just what he was doing. He (again like Stewart) concentrates on the manifesto of 1930 because he believes he can use its relation to other works by the men who produced it in such a way as to detract from the stature of everything they have done. In his preface (p. viii) he writes:

As new critics they succeeded in doing what they had failed to do as Agrarians: to denigrate the democratic content in American literature, to smother its traditional note of social protest; and to elevate in its stead new literary gods and canons more acceptable to the rightist tradition.

Talk of "democratic literature" and "traditional social protest" is cropping up everywhere nowadays in discussions of the future of the nation's letters: in the *Re-appraisals* (1963) of the English socialist iconoclast, Martin Green; in several books by the neo-romantic, Karl Shapiro; and in Roy Harvey Pearce's "history" of American poetry—to mention only a few. Karanikas evidently got his marching orders from the same place these gentlemen received theirs. And he knows the tune they follow.

Though the authors of the books here considered lavish some general praise on the power and persuasiveness of certain Agrarian writings, they rarely specify what they admire in these works. Their focus, however, is on the right people. They are (given their purposes) never merely stupid, only wrong—and wrong in a way that should prompt scholars and critics not of the Stewart-Karanikas persuasion to pick up where Louise Cowan's *The Fugitive Group* (Louisiana State University Press, 1959) left off and to undertake a history of the Agarians (past and present) and their role in that rebellion of (and for) the spirit which is the Southern Renaissance.

Reviewed by M. E. BRADFORD