

# The Southern Agrarians and Utopia



**Maria Teresa Castilho** | CETAPS – Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies | Universidade do Porto

In his essay “The New Provincialism”, Allen Tate suggests that Southern history is considerably different from the experience common to the rest of the United States (262-72). It is distinct because the American story of success, industrial progress, wealth and optimism about the future was not the story of the South. Southern history is made of defeat, dispossession, poverty, oppression, and, after the Civil War, of corrosive guilt as well. It was precisely this distinctive experience that, in the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, contributed to a thoughtless enthusiasm concerning the so-called gods of modernity, who were bringing rapid modernization and urban behavior patterns to the South. Indeed, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought about radical change in the United States, resulting from industrialization and urbanization, which were seen as the way to rebuild the country following the Civil War. The social, scientific and cultural situation was, in fact, reinventing itself just as Darwin’s theories of evolution and natural selection were questioning established views. Thus, the urbanization and the restoration of the United States following 1865 once again promised that a better place and a better life could be created in America owing to those concrete actions. As a result, the country’s pastoral and agrarian roots dating back to the nation’s founding were being replaced by the winds of change, which at the turn of the century were also being felt in the South. However, while the South in general seemed to embrace its modernization and consequent Americanization wholeheartedly, in 1915 a group of Southern intellectuals concerned about the gradual loss of Southern identity and culture founded a movement to defend southern rural values against the

modern urban and industrial ones. In their essays, the so-called Nashville Agrarians voiced their fears and openly rejected the constant denial of the Jeffersonian principles in favour of a national economy based on devouring industrialism.

As pointed out by Paul Conkin in “The South in Southern Agrarianism”, the Nashville Agrarians defined themselves in terms of everything they opposed in Southern society (131). These intellectuals did not believe in the optimistic notion of continual progress. On the contrary, as John Crowe Ransom emphasized, they believed that, “What [was] called progress [was] often destruction” (Ransom, “The Aesthetic of Regionalism” 310). Ultimately these intellectuals, connected to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, bemoaned the increasing loss of Southern identity and traditional culture to industrialization.

The first paragraph of chapter one of *The Southern Agrarians* describes this context:

In a sense, the origins of Southern Agrarianism stretch back to about 1915. By then, a half dozen young men in Nashville, Tennessee, most either students or faculty at Vanderbilt University, began gathering periodically for some heavy philosophical discussions. After the war those few, joined by an equal number of younger men, switched their concern to poetry and for four years published a small monthly journal, *The Fugitive*. After 1925, four of these Fugitives, soon joined by friends or colleagues, turned their attention to political and economic issues, and particularly to the problems of the South. These discussions first found outlet in what became a famous book, *I'll Take My Stand*, and in a crusade called Southern Agrarianism. (Cokin 1)

In *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, the twelve Southern Agrarian intellectuals and poets wrote a manifesto that highlighted, on the one hand, their own understanding of the society and the culture of the South rooted in the Old South and, on the other, their indignation towards the

changes imposed by Americanization in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They sought to confront the widespread and rapidly increasing effects of modernity, urbanism, industrialism and a new money economy on the country and, above all, on Southern culture and tradition. Pointing out the effect of replacing the natural agrarian economy with a new money-based one, in *I'll Take My Stand* Andrew Nelson Lytle, one of the twelve Southerners, states: “[The farmer may] trade his mules for a tractor. He has had to add a cash payment to boot, but that seems reasonable. He forgets, however, that a piece of machinery, like his mules, must wear out and be replaced; but the tractor cannot reproduce itself”. And he continues:

This begins the home-breaking. Time is money now, not property, and the boys can't hang about the place draining it of its substance, even if they are willing to. They must go out somewhere and get a job. If they are lucky, some filling station will let them sell gas, or some garage teach them a mechanic's job". (236)

These twelve Southerners rejected the integration of the region into the modern social and economic American model which, in those days, promoted the view of never-ending progress caused by post-First World War technology and industry, at a time when, as John Crowe Ransom wrote, in his introduction to *I'll Take My Stand* “the word science [had] acquired a certain sanctitude ” (xxxix).

The Agrarians were particularly concerned about the fate of the tenant farmers and, as Donald Davidson sums up in his essay “*I'll Take My Stand: A History*”, they “wished that the greatest possible number of people might enjoy the integrity and independence that would come with living upon their own land”. (311)

All this constituted the pillars of a very different culture from that of the North, dominated by capitalism, industrialization and a dehumanizing urbanism. As

Crowe Ransom underlines in “Reconstructed but Unregenerate”, “the latter-day societies have been seized - none quite so violently as our American one - with the strange idea that the human destiny is not to secure an honorable peace with nature, but to wage an unrelenting war on nature” (7).

It is important to emphasize that in spite of their aversion to a changing American and Southern society, these twelve thinkers were not arguing for a nostalgic and reactionary return to the Old South. Instead, and according to a recent reassessment of the Agrarian’s work which contradicts its first negative reception, they intended to articulate a philosophy rooted in a love of the land with the enormous changes the traditional rural South had undergone. They were trying to reformulate a pastoral and regionalist impulse to look for an attractive alternative to the new urban cosmopolitan centers.

However, as Donald Davidson very often explained, *I’ll Take My Stand* was born out of the indignation against the attitude that Northern Yankees and their journalists had towards the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925. This court case resulted from a State of Tennessee law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools. Journalists, spokesmen of the dominant national culture represented by the Northern technological and industrial order, ridiculed and humiliated the South, which they denounced as ignorant and backward. In an act of indignation, the Southern Agrarians neglected to discuss the prohibition to teach Darwin’s theories of evolution in science classes, as that was not their point. What the Southern Agrarians actually did was to promote distinctive traditional Southern values plus an agrarian way of life. They posited this as an alternative to industrial urban life and industrialism, which North Yankees were blindly advocating, totally unaware that such progress would sooner or later become dystopia itself.

As Thomas Daniel Young points out, quoting Professor William Pratt in *Waking Their Neighbors Up*, one of the basic values defended by the Agrarians is

that a “satisfying way of life cannot be produced by economics forces, with their shifting cycles of poverty and wealth, but can come only from an adherence to stable human values and ideals”(60). Above all, moved by their preoccupation with life in the South and in the country as a whole, they identified themselves as the spokesmen for the principles they believed in and defended as the basis for a good and happy life in an organized and well-structured agrarian society idealized by memory. To this extent, they were undoubtedly utopian and, once again, utopianism arose from America’s discourse, now through the voice of the twelve Southerners of *I’ll Take My Stand*.

On the other hand, the cultural and the political American model was built on the belief that America was the place to remake the world. As Conrad Cherry states in *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretation of American Destiny* “the belief that America has been elected by God for a special destiny in the world has been the focus of American sacred ceremonies, the inaugural address of our presidents, the sacred scriptures of the civil religion. It has been so pervasive a motif in the national life that the world ‘belief’ does not really capture the dynamic role that it has played for the American people”. (11)

In fact, the idea that America had been chosen by God to create a perfect society and serve as a model to humankind dates back to the time of the first English settlers. They saw America as a new beginning in history and they were thus undoubtedly utopians. It is in precisely in this context that I have stressed the projection of the utopian vision onto the first two English colonies, Virginia and Massachusetts, whereby I mean the South and the North in the New World. Each region underwent trials caused by the tension between the belief in the dream of building a place of happiness and perfection and the recognition that facts and history were making this impossible. The two regions, with their differing experiences between 1861 and 1865, went through unique processes of social destruction and reconstruction. These processes led American history

either to dystopian moments, such as the horrors of slavery, Vietnam, and Iraq, or to historical moments and experiences full of utopian impulses, like the belief in an elected America, the Declaration of Independence or even the current technological euphoria and dream of infinite American progress.

However, scholars of utopian America have limited their focus to the Puritan colonization since, as they have pointed out, it was the Puritan colonists who planted the idea of a social utopian project in America. And as they limit their reflection to the Puritan colonization, those academics have forgotten the contribution of the South, as a cultural region, to the broadening of a utopian mentality and vision in the New World. This is a lacuna that I want to address today.

It is true that those responsible for the Puritan colony established firmly in people's imagination the utopian myth of "America's" election, glory and progress by means of religious and political speeches. However, it is also undeniable that the colony of Virginia was announced as the perfect place to bring back the English "yeoman" tradition.

In effect, the pamphleteers claimed European utopian aspirations and at the same time they proclaimed the colony to be a place of perfection, "a garden of Eden which the Lord planted", "a cross between Arcadia and that place" (Gray, *Writing the South* 6).

Both colonies had the same sense of self and the same eschatological vision, although they had different plans for achieving their goals. It is, therefore, clear that the colonization of Virginia and Massachusetts was linked to two different proposals, two ways of pursuing the same dream. But, both the cultural North and the cultural South shared similar origins, anxieties and aspirations, in the minds of the Europeans travelling in search of their land of dreams; undoubtedly they also shared a similar utopian vision.

In fact, while a culture based on an urban, market-based economy came to prevail in the North, a pastoral and Arcadian vision, based on an agrarian ideal, predominated in the South. But in both colonies, the New Continent was seen as a land with the potential to be transformed over time from a European fiction into an American reality by the hand of humankind. America proclaimed itself to be the place where happiness would be built and, thus, the New Continent started its own page in what Lyman Sargent defines as the ultimate tragedy of human existence:

Utopia is the ultimate tragedy of human existence, constantly holding out the hope of a good life and repeatedly failing to achieve it. (83)

From 1776 until the confrontation in 1861, both regions progressed peacefully side-by-side precisely because they had been motivated until then by the pursuit of similar European ideals. Furthermore these aspirations were nourished by the same utopian impulse over time. As Krishan Kumar clearly stated in his excellent book *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, the utopian impulse in America was practically converted into a national ideology – “Utopianism, the idea of America’s special destiny, was a central part of the national ideology – almost the national ideology” (81). Furthermore, that impulse has informed, in particular, most of American thought and most of the American imagery and imagination.

Considerable attention has already been given to the literature of the American Renaissance and its relation to utopia and two main points have been made. Some scholars have argued that the American tradition failed to develop the utopian form because, as Kumar reasons, “Americans thought they were already living in utopia” (81). Others have stated that literature has announced the possible achievement of utopia without explicitly writing about it, revealing, however, a utopian mentality. But both these arguments totally ignore 19<sup>th</sup>-

century Southern writers who in fact imagined the Southern utopia. These arguments deny a utopian literary tradition that indeed provided a detailed portrait of an ideal society in the New Continent.

Despite the obvious differences between the writers of the American Renaissance and the Southern Agrarians of *I'll Take My Stand*, the fact remains that in 1930 the Agrarians gave voice to utopian thought just as the American Renaissance writers had done before them. With *I'll Take My Stand*, the twelve Southern intellectuals and poets intended to illustrate their understanding of the society and the culture of the South. But their essays also showed their indignation towards the changes imposed by Americanization and its notion of work solely for reward, which they considered degrading. In reaction to this concept, Andrew Nelson Lytle wrote: "A farm is not a place to grow wealthy; it is a place to grow corn". (205)

*I'll Take My Stand* is the best example of how the agrarian social and cultural order was kept in the Agrarian minds as a utopian impulse nourished by an idyllic rural tradition. In effect, as Louis Rubin Jr. wrote in his introduction to the 1962 edition,

The image of the old agrarian South in *I'll Take My Stand* was the image of a society that perhaps never existed, though it resembled the Old South in certain important ways. But it was a society that should have existed - one in which men could live as individuals and not as automatons, aware of their finiteness and their dependence upon God and nature, devoted to the enhancement of the moral life in its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions, possessed of a sense of the deep inscrutability of the natural world.(xxxii)

As Crowe Ransom pointed out in "A Statement of Principles" to the twelve articles,

All the articles bear in same sense upon the book's in the same title-subjects: all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or



prevailing way; and all as much as agreed that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial.(xxxvii)

In fact, to these heirs of the Fugitives, the ideal period to return to was that of harmonious pastoral and Arcadian principles which had the “Yeomen” and the “planter” as models.

In his essay “Reconstructed but Unregenerate”, John Crowe Ransom suggests a solution to the industrial dominance of the Southern economy, thus proposing the South as a moral role model for the rest of the country. “I wish that the whole force of my own generation in the South would get behind his principles and make them an idea which the nation at large would have to reckon with”, states Ransom in his contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand*, providing again a glimmer of hope and enthusiasm in the history of the United States. In *I’ll Take My Stand*, the twelve Southerners strongly defended the distinctive traditional values of the Southern past, as well as an agrarian utopian project as an effective means of protection against urban uniformity and the mass culture of modern times. As Richard Gray wrote in 2004

the approaches and arguments of the essays in [*I’ll Take My Stand*] necessarily reflected the individual training and interests of the contributors. But they were all characterized by three things: a hatred of contemporary society in all its aspects, a commitment to the heritage of the South and, related to this, a conviction that the best kind of social order is one in which agriculture is the leading vocation whether for wealth, for pleasure or for prestige. (466)

In 1930, the Agrarians, motivated by a utopian (American) mentality and, as Tate defended, possessing a peculiar historical consciousness, aimed to resurrect a past (Southern) pastoral dream, which was, however, already behind them. But as Louis Rubin Jr. wrote in the introduction to the 1977 edition of *I’ll Take My Stand*

if *I'll Take My Stand* continues to command an audience today, almost half a century after its publication, the first conclusion to be drawn is that the importance and the appeal of the Agrarian symposium must not have resided in the efficacy of its prescription of a non-industrialized, unchanged south as the proper model for the region's future, but in something else. (xiii)

The approaches and arguments of the essays in *I'll Take My Stand* necessarily reflect the individual training and arguments of each contributor. However, it is undeniable that one feels the presence of that "something else". Rubin Jr. refers to it in the essays of this volume. It is precisely because of this presence that I dare suggest that the best phrase to define the twelve agrarians' Southern thought is ultimately "Utopian *versus* Industrial", which, in turn, in 1930, represented a process of destruction and reconstruction, an attempt to reject contemporary reality to start building a new better one once again.

### Works Cited

Cherry, Conrad, ed.. *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*. Chapel Hill NC: University of California Press, 1998.

Conkin, Paul K. . "The South in Southern Agrarianism". *The Evolution of Southern Culture*, ed.. Numan V. Bartley, Athens, GA, The University of Georgia Press, 1988: 131-45.

-----*The Southern Agrarians*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988.

Davidson, Donald. "I'll Take My Stand: A History". *American Review*, 5 (Summer 1935): 301-21.

Gray, Richard. *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

-----*A History of American Literature*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Gretlund, Jan Nordby. *Eudora Welty's Aesthetic of Place*. Odense UP, 1994.

Kumar, Krishan. *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Inc.. 1991.

Lytle, Andrew Nelson. "The Hind Tit". *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. John Crowe Ransom et al. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977.

Ransom, John Crowe. "The Aesthetic of Regionalism". *American Review*, 2 (January 1934): 290-310.

-----"A statement of Principles". *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. John Crowe Ransom et al. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977.

-----"Reconstructed but Unregenerate". *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. John Crowe Ransom et al. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977.

Rubin, Jr., Louis D.. "Introduction" *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. John Crowe Ransom et al. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977.

Sargent, Lyman Tower. "Utopia Americana: Ambivalence Toward Utopianism in The United States". *Cadernos de Literatura Comparada – Utopias 6/7*: 76-94.

Tate, Allen. "The New Provincialism". *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 21 (Spring 1945): 262-272.

Young, Thomas Daniel. *Walking Their Neighbors UP: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982.