

ate deception by employing a shibboleth to win the uninformed and unthinking to the support of a sinister undertaking.”

The “sinister undertaking” to which he refers is the transformation of the federal government into an agent for Northern industrial interests at the expense of Southern agricultural interests. While slavery was one economic factor in this power grab—which ultimately led to war—Owsley cites several others, which were part of a much larger list of economic and political conflicts between the two regions.

The federal government subsidized the maritime industry and the merchant marines with tax dollars, and these enterprises supported Northern manufacturing but not Southern farming. The federal government spent millions on internal improvements designed to help Northern factories deliver their goods to Southern and Western markets—such tax-funded projects as paved roads, railroads, and canals. The Northeast favored a government-controlled national bank to serve the needs of business interests to finance further industrial expansion. And, most of all, the North favored a tariff (the higher the better) to protect goods produced in Northern factories—which forced lower-income Southerners to buy from domestic manufacturers and to pay artificially high prices.

These criticisms seem like irrelevant carping to most 21st-century readers, North and South, who drive the Interstate Highway System, buy agricultural products hauled into local markets by freight cars, and admire Alan Greenspan. Only the tariff issue continues to resonate, largely because globalists want the United States to lower its trade barriers while allowing its “trading partners” to raise theirs. But apologists for the South’s past believe these economic concerns were fundamental considerations in the increasingly bitter debate that led to secession and war.

And Southern apologists believe they have a better historical imagination than their intellectual adversaries, who, they argue, want to measure the social and political arrangements of another era by modern, politically correct standards, as if the 19th century were a Harvard sociology professor reading the *New York Times* while jetting from Boston to San Francisco.

Southerners who harbor a neo-Agrarian piety are also bemused by the blindness of many conservatives—allies in oth-

er battles—who fail to recognize the seeds of Big Government in the Union’s victory, not only on the battlefield but in every other aspect of American life: Industry and urbanization have led to increasing government involvement in the lives of all people.

An agricultural society would never have required such intervention, which necessarily involves high taxes and much “ordering about.” As Owsley wrote, “The North was demanding positive action on the part of the federal government, and the South was demanding that no action be taken at all. In fact, it may be stated as a general principle that the agrarian South asked practically nothing of the federal government in domestic legislation.”

These are some of the historical disagreements that spring from *I’ll Take My Stand* and the Southern *pietas* it exemplifies. These quarrels continue to rage, although many of the terms have been altered. Southern apologists no longer argue for the preservation of family farms, since Prudential Life and ADM do most of the nation’s farming these days. Nor do they claim that industrialism inevitably leads to mass unemployment, an argument that seemed credible in 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression.

The opponents of Southern Agrarianism no longer defend the unlimited building of factories, nor do they laud the benefits of living in big cities. As an ideology, industrialism is dead, although, like Stonewall Jackson, it died only after completely routing the enemy.

Despite the shifting grounds of debate, however, the enmity is very much alive.

Outsiders and a growing number of Southerners will continue to say, “Give up and rejoin the Union. Admit that the South was wrong and wicked, that its defeat was a blessing, that the nation we live in today is better because Lee surrendered at Appomattox. And by the way, quit flying those Confederate flags and playing Dixie at athletic contests. These things are symbols of hatred and offensive to a lot of good people.”

On the other hand, unreconstructed Southerners will continue to reply, “We haven’t left the Union. We’re simply trying to restore what the Founding Fathers established. As for the war, if we’d won—and we could have won—we would be enjoying greater freedom and equality in our part of the continent than the Yankees have in theirs. And who are you to tell us what our symbols mean? Unlike

Lee, Grant didn’t free his slaves until after the war; and Lincoln wanted to ship them all back to Africa.”

These quarrels—kept alive by a natural conflict between pieties—are unlikely to disappear in the foreseeable future. They are like the ancient differences between England and Scotland; the ghost of history whispers in the ears of both sides, egging them on. And since that is the case, then we might as well try to fight with some civility and enjoy ourselves in the process.

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Societas Regained: Agrarianism, Faith, and Moral Action

by H. Lee Cheek, Jr.

Allen Tate’s “Remarks on the Southern Religion” (his contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand*) was a plea for the recovery of a humane social order. Nourished by daily labors in the fields, the agrarian community not only produced a more stable and wholesome environment for families and workers than industrialism could offer, but an agrarian community was also more conducive to religious and moral living. Farming, by its very nature, is a communal act: The experience of tilling the soil and harvesting crops fosters a sense of self-sacrifice and an attachment to a shared community.

Genuine cultural renewal, Tate believed, could not take place without appreciating the agrarian worldview—grounded in a connection to the soil and love for the Creator that was increasingly less palpable to his generation. At the end of the 20th century, even the memory of such an existence is quickly fading.

For Tate, the root of the problem was simple: New England (or, more specifically, the Massachusetts Bay settlement and the subsequent religious and political developments in American life) had crowded out the agrarian alternative from public discourse. To the 12 Southerners who contributed to *I’ll Take My*

Stand, the American political, religious, and social experience largely stemmed from Puritan New England. In the hands of the divines, the “Puritan ethic” was incorporated into the American understanding of politics.

The New England ethic eventually developed into a civil theology which accorded special status to the American regime. America was regarded as the “New Israel,” a providential gift offered to the world, a city on a hill, a light amidst the darkness of political despotism. However, alongside New England, there arose a less dogmatic and more explicitly pastoral America, one associated with the other great colonial settlement, Jamestown, which was founded more than 20 years before the Massachusetts Bay colony.

The Southern agrarian tradition produced a very different understanding of religion and politics. Against the tendency to endorse a theocratic and unitary form of life, the Southern experience accommodated divergent theological and political understandings of order. Liberty was conceived in corporate terms that included the family and community. While New England enforced rigorous moral codes, the Southern colonies were more dependent upon the English model of ecclesiastic and civil subsidiarity, relying on those closest to the situation to provide order and preside over the deliberation of disputes. In essence, the religious and political developments within the South were founded upon a spirit of localism. For example, the movement to establish state-sponsored churches met with great success in New England, while in the South a decentralized theory of control and the habit of localism in matters of church and state ensured greater autonomy and forbearance between the associations of the faithful and governing authorities.

As M.E. Bradford explained, the Southern “spirit” looked to Eden after the Fall as a model, with “the best of the gifts of this life,” believing that a fruitful social and political existence was possible only when “pursued with prudence, energy, honor, and regard for a wise prescription.” Contrary to the New England understanding of precision in all religious and political arrangements, the Southern agrarian worldview identified the ancient imperfections of civilization with the need for constant improvement and refinement within human nature. A society grounded upon historical reality

was less likely to be distorted by ideology; conversely, it was also more reluctant to reform the defects of a worldview inherited from previous generations. Distant and overbearing sources of ecclesial and political authority were viewed with skepticism.

From the colonial period, we can witness the divergence of two understandings of religion and politics, prompting historian Nathan Hatch to suggest that one “could draw upon precious few common traditions in defining their Americanness.” John Randolph, a cousin of Thomas Jefferson and an important model of statesmanship for the Agrarians, eloquently defended the Southern worldview in response to a confidant’s query about his attendance at a religious gathering:

I was born and baptized in the Church of England. If I attend the Convention at Charlottesville, which I rather doubt, I shall oppose myself then and always at every attempt at encroachment on the part of the church, the clergy especially, on the rights of conscience. I attribute, in a very great degree, my long estrangement from God to my abhorrence of prelatical pride and puritanical preciseness; to ecclesiastical tyranny. . . . Should I fail to attend, it will arise from a repugnance to submit the religion, or church, any more than the liberty of my country, to foreign influence. When I speak of my country, I mean the Commonwealth of Virginia. I was born in allegiance to George III; the bishop of London . . . was my diocesan. My ancestors threw off the oppressive yoke of the mother country, but they never made me subject to New England in matters spiritual or temporal; neither do I mean to become so, voluntarily.

Randolph affirmed, as would Tate and the other Agrarians a century later, the vision of a moral regime based upon subsidiarity in political and religious concerns. Subsidiarity served to divide public authority and political power, helping to perpetuate the republic. Yet it was dependent upon the virtue of the citizenry. The inculcation of virtue required a sustained effort to allow each generation to hear the “voice of tradition,” as Patrick Henry urged. If citizens

failed to “inform posterity,” social and political life would suffer the consequences of a collective loss of memory and purpose.

Tate and the Agrarians also urged a spirit of prudence toward adopting radical innovation. They accepted the imperfections of American society and acknowledged the decline of religious faith and the concomitant growth of governmental power.

Even though the Agrarians represented many theoretical positions and geographical regions, they were united by their opposition to consolidation, and insisted upon protecting a decentralized, group-oriented society and preserving America’s republican roots.

As an agrarian republican, Tate recognized that, if government could not be restricted and faith encouraged, America would lose her liberty. Tate also appreciated the limits of human experience, acknowledging the shortcomings of his own perspectives and disdaining utopianism. The South had lost its heroic struggle partly because it separated its religion from its politics. In fact, Tate’s essay rightly notes that tradition, devoid of the impact of religion, tends to promote violence rather than spiritual empowerment. Tate’s own life, his political and spiritual confusion, bore witness to his inability to overcome just such a struggle.

Today, the Agrarians’ devotion to the preservation of an inherited worldview and way of life serves as a remarkable testimony for the rising generation. At a time when efforts to create and impose a false and destructive sense of community are widespread, we should revisit the Agrarian defense of an older, organic social order.

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In The Dark

by George McCartney

Sentiment and Sentimentality

There's a crucial difference between sentiment and sentimentality. The first is a direct, emotional response to strong provocation; the second, a self-conscious pursuit of provocation in order to revel in emotion. One is spontaneous; the other, manufactured. This distinction is a troubling one for the artist, whose business it is to fabricate occasions that elicit honest emotions. As Joseph Conrad said of writing fiction, "It's hard labor for life."

To different degrees, the two films under review this month settle for sentimentality rather than laboring to evoke genuine sentiment. The lapse is not fatal in either case, but it is disappointing.

Sentimentality might seem the least likely charge to level against Neil LaBute, director of *Nurse Betty*. His first two films seemed intent on cauterizing all vestiges of emotion from their narratives. *In the Company of Men* (1997) was a remarkably accomplished debut in which he stripped bare the nihilism at the heart of our culture's liberated sexual politics. It's a ferocious satire that wages a take-no-hostages-war on male boorishness. His second film, *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1999), continued the attack with a sourly mounted sexual rondelet staged to reveal that women as well as men exploit desire for self-aggrandizement. It's a far more tendentious—and uglier—work than the first. In the light of *Nurse Betty*, it now seems the film in which LaBute lost the detachment necessary to artistic perspective. He reveals himself to be obsessively disgusted with sex itself, portraying it as an instrument invariably wielded in the cause of sadistic vanity and leading inescapably to abuse and betrayal. This is not clarifying satire; it's pathological scorn.

While unrelenting contempt for the crudity and heartlessness of human nature may seem cynically tough-minded, it is in fact sentimentally one-sided. Such a position refuses to accept the human condition for what it is: a thoroughly homogenized mixture of sin and virtue. At their extremes, cynics and sentimentalists join forces in their denial of human reality. They present an either/or morality in which the individual is judged wholly damnable or wholly innocent. It's a

Nurse Betty

*Produced by Gramercy Pictures and
Propaganda Films
Directed by Neil LaBute
Screenplay by John C. Richards and
James Flamberg
Distributed by USA Films*

Almost Famous

*Produced by DreamWorks
and Vinyl Films
Directed and written by
Cameron Crowe
Distributed by Dreamworks*

moral vision redolent of America's founding folly: Puritanism.

Nurse Betty is supposed to be a comedy in which a good-hearted woman's innocence redeems the cynics who cross her path. Although the film tries to be charming, it is willfully pretentious and weirdly sentimental. We begin with what has become a LaBute commonplace: a clueless woman in an abusive relationship with a worthless man. Betty (Renée Zellweger) is a nice person married to Del (Aaron Eckhart), a creep who manages a Buick dealership in a Kansas suburb, supplementing his income with a bit of sideline drug-dealing. Even if we weren't shown him couch-bouncing his secretary at the office, we would know he's despicable because he mocks Betty for being addicted to soap operas. They're for people who don't have lives of their own, he sneers. Ironically and quite inadvertently, he corrects this character flaw by creating a situation that literally propels Betty into her favorite soap, the ripely titled "A Reason to Love."

It all begins when Del tries to cheat his drug-dealing associates, and they decide to scare him. When matters get out of hand, they scalp and shoot him instead. Coming in on this grisly scene, Betty defends her sanity by simply erasing it from her memory. In its place, she creates an alternate reality built upon her favorite soap opera. She becomes convinced that the show's lead, the handsome and smarmily sincere Dr. David Ravell, is the man to whom she was once engaged. Naturally, she heads for Los Angeles

where the show is produced in search of happiness. On the way, she explains her quest to one woman, noting that "this is my first time out of Kansas," to which her listener responds, "I should call you Dorothy!" And, indeed, like the Dorothy of Frank Baum's tale, she does get to meet the Wizard of Oz in the person of George McCord (Greg Kinnear), who plays her tirelessly caring hero on television. Behind illusion's curtain, however, McCord is just another jaded actor who long ago traded in his artistic dreams for a comfortable, steady TV berth. When the delusional Betty responds to him as though he were the show's Dr. Ravell, he assumes she is a clever method actress trying to land herself a part in the production. Mistaking her ingenuous sweetness for a dazzlingly accomplished performance, he declares, "This is totally rejuvenating. I haven't felt this way since I was with Stella Adler in New York." Betty's innocence redeems him from his professional cynicism.

Also redeemed is Charlie (Morgan Freeman), the professional hitman who has been pursuing her. Like McCord, he falls under the magic of Betty's niceness. Although he has only been in her presence a few minutes, he imagines Betty to be the woman of his dreams. She's too innocent and pure to kill. Unaccountably, he, too, is affected by the Oz fantasy: Her image appears to him dressed as Dorothy and dances with him under the Nevada stars at the very edge of the Grand Canyon.

These conceits are amusing and well acted. Kinnear is quite wonderful as the self-satisfied actor rediscovering his artistic passion. Freeman, a consummate screen performer, almost makes us believe in his soulful hitman who thinks of himself as "a garbage man of the human condition," cleansing away the more rotten members of the species—but not Betty. "You're different," he tells her, visibly transformed by her natural goodness. (Freeman is good, but the cliché of the high-minded professional killer is awfully tired.) He looks deep into Betty's troubled yet trusting eyes and tries to reassure her: "You don't need any man. You know why? You've got yourself."

This paean to self-esteem is meant to validate Betty's innocence as a redemptive force. It's here that LaBute fully re-