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THE COURAGE AND ENDURANCE TO REMAIN IN HIS OWN COUNTRY AND FIGHT THE BATTLE OUT: DONALD DAVIDSON AND THE SOUTH, 1893-1968

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THE COURAGE AND ENDURANCE TO REMAIN IN HIS OWN COUNTRY
AND FIGHT THE BATTLE OUT:
DONALD DAVIDSON AND THE SOUTH, 1893-1968

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the life of Donald Grady Davidson (1893-1968) and the forces - external and internal - that drove him to contribute to *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, in 1930 and remain an avid apologist for Southern Agrarianism for the remainder of his life. Davidson, who began his literary career as a devotee of modernism, opposed much of his native culture yet suddenly changed directions around 1925 and embraced the distinctiveness of his Southern heritage. This thesis argues that events surrounding the Scopes Trial in 1925 caused Davidson to reevaluate his position on the South and on Southern culture. As he saw it, modernism was unable to produce or sustain true art. Since he held art to be foundational to any vibrant society, he sought a culture that could support art. In his mind, the Agrarian South represented the best option the modern world had remaining to perpetuate a healthy view of art and culture.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wife Julie and my children: James, Isaac, Kate, and Owen. Their constant support, willingness to let me write every Saturday and most evenings, has made the completion of this thesis a reality. My wife has been a constant source of encouragement and criticism, and, as always, my first, best editor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who should be acknowledged for the completion of this thesis. My Mom and Dad have been extremely supportive of my decision to complete an advanced degree, financially and otherwise. My wife and children have undergone as much stress as I have during the thesis-writing process, and I appreciate their patience while I wrote every Saturday and most evenings for longer than I care to remember. My sister-in-law first sat down with me and brainstormed with me about what this thesis could look like. Without her prompting, I might still be trying to figure out what I wanted to write about at all. The staff of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library at Vanderbilt University has been very helpful in getting my hands on original letters and other primary sources, as well as fielding many questions. The Interlibrary Loan office at Clemson's Cooper Library has been fantastic about helping me get materials as well. Finally, I would like to thank the faculty of the History department at Clemson University, especially those members of my committee. Without their willingness to answer numerous emails, stay late so I could see them, and think through troubling spots with me, I would never have been able to complete this project.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1930 a book called *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* was published and immediately became the subject of a controversy that has not abated. Scholarly debate over Southern identity, Southern heritage, and conservatism has raged since the end of the Civil War. Authors of such renown as Eugene Genovese, Richard M. Weaver, Michael O'Brien, C. Vann Woodward, James C. Cobb, and many others have tried their hand at defining and describing these vague notions. It may be that one of the most obvious ways of defining conceptions of such importance lies in personal understanding and devotion. Eugene Genovese seems to have come to this conclusion prior to writing *The Southern Tradition* in 1993. He says, "My pretensions to being a southerner ... rest on my having become fascinated with southern history ... and on having settled my heart in Dixie Certainly, I am devoted to the sentiment expressed in the bumper sticker: 'Get your heart in Dixie or get your ass out!'"¹ While Genovese maintains that he is not a conservative, he nevertheless appreciates much about the South; therefore, he has an intense devotion to the South. If a former Marxist historian from New York can come to appreciate some vague notion of Southern Identity and declare, "that the people of the South, across the lines of race, class, and sex, are as generous, gracious, courteous, decent – in a word, civilized – as any people it has ever been by privilege to get

¹ Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), ix.

to know” how much more can we learn about southern identity, traditionalism, and conservatism from a Southerner himself?² This thesis argues that personal beliefs about these elusive topics can be helpful to historians as they seek to define these terms in a more specific and useful way.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “There is no history. There is only Biography.”³ Modern historians have tended to disagree with the categorical nature of Emerson’s comment, yet biographical histories continue to be published and remain an attractive way of understanding the past. John Haaren has also stated, “The study of history through biography is as natural as is the attainment of growth and strength through the use of proper and nourishing food.”⁴ Similarly, historical consideration of southern identity that does not take into account real southern folk and their beliefs is doomed to failure on lines of simple ignorance. A voice from inside the South is necessary, and many historians have recognized this. Biographies of Southerners who typify the traditional Southerner abound. Yet, it was the wisdom of Solomon that declared, “Of making many books there is no end” (Eccl. 12:12). Surely there is no harm in yet another essay designed to consider southern identity, southern heritage, and conservatism from the perspective of one more life - that of Donald Grady Davidson.

² Ibid.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1820-1875*, vol. 5, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 208.

⁴ John H. Haaren, *Famous Men of the Modern World* (New York: American Book Company, 1909), 4.

Donald Grady Davidson was born in 1893 in Campbellsville, Tennessee. His parents and extended family raised him on a traditional, classical, and southern cavalier education, engrossing him with classical languages, stories of Greeks and Romans, tales of the Civil War battles and generals. He was immersed in the stories of Bedford Forrest and others. He was schooled at home and at a smattering of local schools around Middle Tennessee until his high school years. He finished his pre-collegiate education at the exclusive Branham and Hughes School in Spring Hill.

Davidson entered Vanderbilt University in 1909 but had to withdraw after a year for lack of funds. Over the next several years he worked at various schools in the area to make money to continue his infrequent studies at Vanderbilt. He was finally able to return to Vanderbilt in 1914 but had to leave in 1916 to earn more money. During this time he began gathering with students, faculty, and others at the home of Sidney Mtttron Hirsch for philosophical and literary conversation.

In 1917 he entered military service and was trained at Chickamauga Battlefield outside of Chattanooga. He was deployed to France late in the war and saw very little action. While in France, Davidson read and reread some poems given to him by John Crowe Ransom. It was here that he first began to consider writing poetry.

He returned to Tennessee in 1919 after the war was over. He had received his bachelor's degree through officer's training before the war. He

immediately visited Vanderbilt seeking a position that was not available. He spent a year in Kentucky teaching at the Kentucky Wesleyan College while waiting for Edwin Mims, director of the English Department at Vanderbilt, to find him an instructorship at Vanderbilt. In 1920 he was able to move back to Nashville and take up a teaching position at Vanderbilt. The move enabled him to reconnect with the Hirsch group and begin his own graduate studies at Vanderbilt. New arrivals and new sensitivities began turning the Hirsch meetings into opportunities for poetry criticism and the group began its conversion into the Fugitive group.

The Fugitive, a literary magazine, was first published in 1922, the same year Davidson received his master's degree from Vanderbilt. *The Fugitive* only ran for three years, ending in 1925, but it was very influential in the life of Davidson. All those contributing considered the poetry they wrote in *The Fugitive* to be modernist poetry. They conscientiously decried the traditional idea of the South as perpetuated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Ku Klux Klan. Davidson even said of the name, "Fugitive", that "the Fugitive flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South."⁵

However, by 1925 something was beginning to change in Davidson's thinking toward his ancestral home that was certainly intensified by the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. With the outcome of the Scopes Trial, Davidson found himself reevaluating his own identity as a Southerner and, more

⁵ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), 5.

importantly, as a Southern writer. In 1924 Davidson had begun editing a book review column for the *Nashville Tennessean* which, in later reflection, he admitted to using to “advance the cause of the South.”⁶ In 1926 “The Artist as Southerner” appeared in *The Saturday Review of Literature*.⁷ In 1927, Davidson’s epic poem celebrating the frontiersmen of colonial Tennessee, *The Tall Men*, appeared. In 1928, Davidson published his article directly involving the Scopes Trial, “First Fruits of Dayton.”⁸ Two years later his own “A Mirror for Artists” complemented the other essays published in the symposium on the South and the Agrarian tradition, *I’ll Take My Stand*.⁹

From 1930 until 1937 Davidson became embroiled in a campaign to make public policy out of the cultural images of the South as indicated by the essays from *I’ll Take My Stand*. As one of the leaders of the so-called Agrarian Movement, he eventually sought, with dwindling cooperation from the original essayists and limited success, to create a political system based on the agricultural model of the Old South as he understood it and a renovated regional

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ Donald Davidson, “The Artist as Southerner,” *Saturday Review of Literature* May 15, 1926, 781-83. Daniel Singal indicates that this piece was written before the Scopes trial and thus he concludes that the trial had very little to do with the onset of Davidson’s (or any of the group’s) Southern phase. cf. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 200-01. While the timing is important, it does not rule out the Scopes trial as being a serious beginning point for Davidson’s public feelings concerning the South and its role in society.

⁸ Donald Davidson, “First Fruits of Dayton: The Intellectual Evolution in Dixie,” *The Southern Agrarians and the New Deal: Essays After I’ll Take My Stand*, ed. Emily S. Bingham and Thomas A. Underwood (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 35-49.

⁹ Donald Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 28-60 page citations are to the reprint edition).

government system that would stand between the administration of state authority and that of federal authority.

In 1937 the Agrarians made a final attempt at making Agrarianism a political reality with the publication of *Who Owns America?* to which Davidson contributed, not another essay on the value of Southern art and literature, but an argument in favor of his own deepening concern for regionalism. *Who Owns America?* was a joint venture comprising a cooperative statement between the Southern Agrarians and the English and American Distributists on the nature of liberty and freedom in the United States in the early twentieth century. Davidson had little oversight of this project.¹⁰ Designed to be more programmatic and practical than *I'll Take My Stand*, it nonetheless had little impact on the modern world.¹¹

After 1937, with the Agrarian movement all but ended, Davidson continued to teach at Vanderbilt University (though with limited support from the University and no promotions into the higher echelons of the faculty there) and write poetry.¹² In 1938 he published *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems* in which he republished the *Tall Men*. In the same year his *Attack on Leviathan* was

¹⁰ *Who Owns America?* was primarily edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate.

¹¹ Herbert Agar and Allen Tate eds., *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937; reprint Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999) (page citations are to the reprint edition). Donald Davidson, "The 'Mystery' of the Agrarians: Facts and Illusions About Some Sothern Writers," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, January 23, 1943, 6-7.

¹² Mark Winchell tells a story in which Davidson, upon opening his faculty renewal contract, remarks to a student that "I'm just going on from one year to the next." Mark Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies: Donald Davidson and the Southern Resistance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 347.

published in which he detailed his program for regionalism that was based heavily in the historical analysis of Frederick Jackson Turner.¹³ In the 1940's Davidson published a two-volume history of the Tennessee River for the *Rivers of America Series*.¹⁴ The first volume was a careful piece of historical scholarship that looked at the culture of the Tennessee Valley from the original habitation of the Cherokees and other Native American tribes down to Secession in 1861. The second volume of the work was a very critical analysis of the Tennessee Valley Authority, a government program instituted by Roosevelt as part of the New Deal to create dams along the Tennessee River and produce hydroelectric power throughout the Tennessee Valley. Davidson initially applauded this program but later saw it as the state Leviathan encroaching once more upon the agrarian South.

In 1957, Davidson published *Still Rebels, Still Yankees* which included various essays from his career that were "concerned with the impact of the modern regime upon the great vital continuum of human experience to which we apply the inadequate term 'tradition'; and no less with the response of tradition to that impact, in the arts and in society."¹⁵ While Davidson, at this point in his life, may have given up on the hope that his agrarian or regional programs should

¹³ Donald Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan: Nationalism and Regionalism in the United States* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1938).

¹⁴ Donald Davidson, *The Tennessee*, vol. 1, *Frontier to Secession* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1946). Donald Davidson, *The Tennessee*, vol. 2, *Civil War to TVA* (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1948),

¹⁵ Donald Davidson, *Still Rebels, Still Yankees and Other Essays* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957; reprint, 1972), xvii (page citations are to the reprint edition).

ever become political reality, he had not given up speaking his mind on such matters. The title essay, "Still Rebels, Still Yankees" was originally a chapter from Davidson's *Attack on Leviathan* and was a piece promoting the essential sameness of two men, whether they be from the North or the South, who appreciated the goodness of the land and were intent upon living in concert with it instead of imposing economic and industrial patterns on it.

In 1957 Davidson was invited to give the Eugenia Dorothy Blount Lamar Memorial Lectures at Mercer University and the result was published in 1958 as *Southern Writers in the Modern World*.¹⁶ This work represents Davidson's most mature reflections on the whole of his personal experience up to that time. Davidson published his last full volume of poetry, *The Long Street*, in 1963 just before he retired from Vanderbilt University in 1964 after forty-four years of instruction at that venerable institution. Nineteen sixty-three also saw the publication of Richard Weaver's doctoral dissertation, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought*, for which Davidson wrote a preface. In 1966 he published his final book of poetry, *Poems: 1922-1961*, and wrote an introduction to the *Selected Essays of John Donald Wade*.¹⁷ These are the last writings Davidson accomplished before he died in 1968 at the age of seventy-

¹⁶ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958).

¹⁷ Donald Davidson, *Poems: 1922-1961* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966). John Donald Wade, *Selected Essays and Other Writings of John Donald Wade*, Edited with an Introduction by Donald Davidson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1966).

five. His final volume of poetry included what he considered to be his most relevant and best poems.

This thesis relies heavily on Davidson's biography in order to exploit the following issues. While Davidson was raised in the traditional mold of Southern life, he appears to have rejected some aspects of that traditionalism for a time during his matriculation at Vanderbilt University and the beginning of his poetic expression. He mysteriously returned to a somewhat modified version of that same traditional interpretation of Southern history and identity around 1925 and remained an apologist for the South for the rest of his public and private life. In truth, his rejection was more of a synthesis with blind spots toward the complexity of the modernist worldview.¹⁸

However, this thesis is also designed to explore the ideas used by Davidson in his personal journey and to consider them in the context of his own writings. Davidson's southern apologetic appears to be a quest for Southern identity and traditions in the face of the modern world and for how one maintains that Southernness in a world increasingly hostile to the characteristics that define Southernness. Essentially this thesis argues that Davidson returned to the Southern traditionalism of his youth out of a concern that the scientific and industrial worldview he saw expressed in the Scopes trial of 1925 threatened the basic stability of life that art, and poetry especially, provided. His apologetic for

¹⁸ Modernism refers to the specific literary theories surrounding the total worldview of Modernity which emphasized, among other things, a total release from the moral and religious moorings of the previous centuries.

Southern and Agrarian cultural values and political regionalism flows from this concern to maintain the structure of society which was being threatened by the scientific and industrial worldview that he realized was driving modernity.

Chapter One explores the traditional, classical education that Davidson received as a youth in the emerging New South in Middle Tennessee. It asks the pertinent questions of what Davidson was brought up to believe about the South, about the Civil War and Reconstruction, concerns that played themselves out regularly in his later writing. Chapter Two looks carefully at Davidson's apparent rejection of this Southern traditionalism in favor of more modern ideas from his entrance to Vanderbilt as a student in 1909 through the publication of *The Fugitive* in 1922. It seeks to consider why and how Davidson rejected his traditional upbringing, what he saw deficient in it, and how his poetry and thoughts reflected that rejection. Chapter Three begins in 1923 before the Scopes Trial and focuses on the conversion of Davidson from Fugitive poet to Southern Agrarian apologist. Though this change may have begun as much as two years earlier, it was clearly the trial of John Scopes that brought Davidson's reflections on Southern identity to the surface.¹⁹ It reviews the three dominant problems of the worldview of modernity as Davidson saw them; Southern identity, heritage, and the dangers of industrialism. Chapter Four addresses the

¹⁹ Davidson wrote the poetry that makes up *An Outland Piper* in 1923 and the volume was published in 1924. Thomas Young, Mark Winchell, and Louis Rubin Jr. all find the concerns of the poetry in *An Outland Piper* very influential in Davidson's later apologetic for Southern traditions. Cf. Thomas D. Young and M. Thomas Inge, *Donald Davidson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), 40-57; Mark Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*.

so-called Agrarian movement and looks at how the traditionalism he so easily left behind in 1909 became the dominant theme of his life and work, as well as what he is most remembered for in the world of modern scholarship. It considers the answer of Agrarianism to the deficiencies of the worldview of modernity.

It is my intention that this thesis will advance the scholarship on Donald Davidson by exposing the worldview conflicts involved in the conversion from modernist Fugitive poet to traditionalist Southern Agrarian. While these conflicts have been considered as parts of lesser works, they have often been identified as residual Victorian sentiments. I do not believe it was simply a self-induced tension between Victorian sentiment and modernist leanings that drove Davidson to construct an Old South metaphor to realign his convictions.²⁰ Rather I propose this conversion represents a much deeper, presuppositional commitment to organic connections that, as an artist, brought order to the world. Within his phase of retreat from the traditional Southern culture, Davidson was content to believe, in his limited world experience, that this organic substratum undergirded even the modern world.²¹ With the results of the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, Davidson came face-to-face with an understanding that industrialism, commercial capitalism, and an unquestioning belief in progress were really the driving forces of modern culture. Since he could find no place for

²⁰ Cf. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within Within*, 200ff.

²¹ In this fact, this study differs from the other established treatments of Davidson. My method has been to examine both the foundational agrarian documents and the more mature thought of Davidson and from these sources to identify the basic ideological commitments that seem to have shaped Davidson's reaction to the South.

the organic nature of art in these new narratives, he opted to attack the modern world and argue for a return to a social structure where this organic community could be found, at least theoretically. This presuppositional commitment to an organic community that provides a worldview in which art is understandable is where the real heart of Davidson's Agrarianism is to be found.

CHAPTER ONE

THE EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION OF DONALD DAVIDSON

When Donald Grady Davidson was born in 1893, the South was a very different place than it had been at the end of military Reconstruction in 1877 and a long way from what it would be when he became the prophet of Southern Agrarianism in 1925. The period from the close of the military Reconstruction is often termed the New South, as the South sought to reinvent itself according to modern demands.²² Championed by men like Henry Grady of Georgia, to whom the term New South is often attributed, the architects of the New South wanted to put all the Cavalier mythology behind them, rise up out of the dusty dirt roads that much of the South still possessed, and take advantage of new industrial opportunities to recreate the South in the image of the North. In his famous speech to the New England Society in 1886, Grady exclaimed, “The old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture....The new South presents a perfect Democracy ...a hundred farms for every plantation...and a diversified industry that meets the complex needs of this complex age.”²³

Grady offered to settle the debt of the Civil War by accepting the defeat of the South, pledging loyalty to the North, and showing the progress the South had

²² Cf. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971).

²³ Henry W. Grady, “The New South” in *An American Primer* ed. Daniel J. Boorstin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1985) 492 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

made since 1877. He did this in the hopes that Northern investors would finance businesses in the South, would immigrate to the South, and perhaps even grow to love the South. Though he declared the Puritan and Cavalier traditions unified in the person of Abraham Lincoln, he never sought to erase the distinctiveness of the Southern culture in which he had been raised.²⁴ In short, Grady and the other leaders of the New South movement desired the capital of the North and yet hoped to maintain the traditions of the South. During their lifetimes and for a while afterward, the New South leaders were immensely popular. Harold Davis has indicated that in the years following Grady's death "innumerable boy babies received the orator's name."²⁵ This was obviously the case for William and Elma Davidson who gave their firstborn son the middle name of Grady. Nonetheless, the two goals of Northern capital and Southern tradition had profound implications for the South and for Donald Davidson's formative years in the late nineteenth century.

Donald Davidson grew up in Middle Tennessee.²⁶ His education comprised a balance among the academic traditions of the southern academy

²⁴ Ibid., 487, 492-493.

²⁵ Harold E. Davis, *Henry Grady's New South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 12.

²⁶ In Wilma Dykeman's bicentennial history of Tennessee, she begins with the following geographical comment: "All of Tennessee, like Caesar's Gaul, is divided into three parts. Tennessean's visiting other regions and countries seldom identify their home state by its name alone. Their usual response: 'I live in West Tennessee,' or 'My home is in Middle Tennessee,' or 'I'm from East Tennessee.'" This is a helpful reminder of the expanse of many states in America and provides some geographical knowledge to the stranger to Tennessee. For purposes of clarity, she later describes Middle Tennessee as being "made up of the Highland Rim" which lies roughly between the two branches of the Tennessee River that flow through the state. Wilma

and the oral traditions of the Old South, all undergirded by a thoroughly Protestant Christian worldview. A classical education, as it was understood in the late nineteenth century, would have emphasized the classical languages as well as the great literature of the western world. His father was a schoolmaster in Pulaski when Donald was born, and he was educated in several schools around the region, including Lynnville Academy and Branham Hughes in Spring Hill before entering Vanderbilt in 1909.²⁷ When Davidson was not in a school that provided instruction in classical languages, his father filled in. Davidson was brought up to appreciate all the classical works of western literature. Biographers Thomas Young and Thomas Inge reveal that Davidson's father read to his children a great deal and that Davidson was "especially impressed with his reading from Bryant's translation of the *Iliad*."²⁸ Poetry was apparently a formative part of Davidson's early education as well. Young and Inge recount Davidson's father quoting long passages from epic works of poetry and drama including Johnson's *Rasselas* and Shakespeare.²⁹

While attending Vanderbilt University, Davidson often had to teach in the local schools to earn money for his own education. From these experiences we can infer the kind of education he received to some extent by considering what he had to teach other students in the Middle Tennessee region. Davidson

Dykeman, *Tennessee: A Bicentennial History* (Nashville: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), 3, 7.

²⁷ T.D. Young and Thomas Inge, *Donald Davidson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), 18-19.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

admitted that “a teacher was expected to handle classes in English, Arithmetic, Plane and Solid Geometry, Greek, Latin, and perhaps History.”³⁰ Of his own education, he said, “In our senior year at Branham & Hughes, we *had to be able* to read the Greek hexameters of Homer’s *Odyssey* aloud, in proper meter, ‘scanning’ them at sight.”³¹ Louise Cowan has written that Davidson “spent his boyhood acquiring a classical foundation that would underlie all his later learning; indeed, the education he received at the Branham and Hughes Preparatory School ... was so rigorous that on first entering Vanderbilt he found his study easy by comparison.”³²

William O. Batts has explained that the primary reason private academies were necessary in Tennessee after 1874 was “to prepare boys for entrance at the new university.”³³ If this is the case, a basic knowledge of the Vanderbilt program of study should give some idea as to what academic standards the preparatory schools in the area maintained in the period of Davidson’s matriculation.

³⁰ Quoted by Thomas Young and M. Thomas Inge, *Donald Davidson*, 23. Young and Inge indicate the original source of the quotation comes from an address delivered to teachers at the Howard School in 1949 entitled “On Teaching Democracy Through Literature” that is part of the Davidson papers at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.

³¹ Donald Davidson, “Donald Davidson’s Notes for an Autobiography: The Early Years,” edited by M. Thomas Inge in *The Vanderbilt Tradition: Essays in Honor of Thomas Daniel Young*, ed. Mark Royden Winchell (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 202.

³² Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959, reprinted 1968), 11 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

³³ William O. Batts, *Private Preparatory Schools for Boys in Tennessee since 1867*, (Nashville: privately published, 1957), 15.

In 1946, Edwin Mims wrote a history of Vanderbilt University that was eventually supplanted by Paul Conkin in 1985. Mims had several obvious goals for his history of the University. The one that intersects with this thesis most is his explanation of the foundation of the University and its educational standards. Mims deplored the conditions of education in the South following the Civil War, explaining that there was a lack of funds and a lack of buildings left in the South for education purposes. In founding Vanderbilt in 1874, the Board of Trustees was placed in a very difficult position in terms of the students it would be able to admit to studies. Landon C. Garland, the first Chancellor of Vanderbilt, had very high expectations of what he thought the new University should desire in students and offer in courses. Paul Conkin states that Garland “assumed that Vanderbilt students would be mature, self-directed young men.”³⁴ He quickly learned that such was not to be the case. Edwin Mims quoted the first Chancellor of the University as saying, “A large proportion of them [students] had been very imperfectly taught.”³⁵ He added:

Not only were their attainments far below our requirements, but, in making such attainments as they had, there had been but little culture of minds. Few had any power of fixed and prolonged attention – or any practical knowledge of the modes of successful study.... If we had stood firmly by our rules, we should have rejected fully two-thirds of those who presented themselves for matriculation.³⁶

³⁴ Paul Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy: A Biography of Vanderbilt University* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1985), 43.

³⁵ Edwin Mims, *History of Vanderbilt University* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1946), 87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Mims explained that the University was forced to admit these students and provide an education for them that was much lower than should have been normal for University education. These students were put in “sub-collegiate classes” which tended to cause a “deterioration of manners and scholarship.”³⁷ Nonetheless, within a year of opening the University was able to describe its standards for matriculation at Vanderbilt. To gain the Bachelor of Arts degree, a student must complete “three years of Latin, Greek, and Mathematics, with a moderate amount of English, Philosophy, History, and Science.” The Bachelor of Science degree allowed the substitution of a modern language for the Greek or Latin and adding two years work in Chemistry, Physics, Natural History, and Geology.³⁸

To help prepare students to enter Vanderbilt at all, the University and faculty encouraged the growth of private academies throughout the South. These private academies would be critical to the preparation of students entering Vanderbilt. Writing in 1946, Mims held forth high praise for some of the schools that had developed in the Middle Tennessee region that had proven themselves capable of sending qualified students to the halls of Vanderbilt. At the top of the list was the Webb School of Bell Buckle; however, also winning high praise from Edwin Mims was the Branham and Hughes School of Spring Hill. Mims said it

³⁷ Ibid. Later, Mims describes the students in the sub-collegiate class as having “no love of study.” Paul Conkin explains, in his 1985 updated volume that these sub-collegiate classes were essentially high-school level and corresponded to the freshman and sophomore years at Vanderbilt at the time. Cf. Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy*, 43.

³⁸ Ibid., 93.

“was more like the Webb School than perhaps any of the others, and for several years furnished a large proportion of its seniors to Vanderbilt.”³⁹ As has already been indicated, Donald Davidson graduated from Branham and Hughes in 1909 and entered Vanderbilt the next year.

By Davidson’s time, Vanderbilt had been able to drop the pre-collegiate departments and offer a full University curriculum. When Chancellor Garland retired in 1893, James H. Kirkland was named his successor. Kirkland assumed the position and vowed to take the high standards set by Garland and raise them even higher. One of the chief tools to accomplish this feat was the creation of an association of colleges and schools to aid in encouraging adequate preparation for Vanderbilt and other collegiate institutions. It was at James Kirkland’s request that members of twelve southern institutions met in Atlanta in 1895 to form the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges. One of the main goals of this new association was to “elevate the standards of scholarship and to effect uniformity of entrance requirements.”⁴⁰ Conkin notes that this move was partially so that all southern colleges could abolish their sub-collegiate classes allowing the colleges to compete “as near equals.”⁴¹

The standards set by Vanderbilt continued to be high and Davidson was clearly well prepared to meet them when he entered the University in 1909. Louise Cowan has noted that the Vanderbilt University of 1903 just six years

³⁹ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 201.

⁴¹ Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy*, 110.

prior to Davidson's arrival "was a stronghold of classical culture, unmatched south of the Mason-Dixon Line."⁴² But the academic preparation Davidson received was only a part of his total formative period. As a typical child growing up in the South at the cusp of the twentieth century, but not too far removed from the values of the nineteenth century, Davidson was indoctrinated in the values of the Old South as well. If Davidson's father saw to it that his son had an excellent classical education, his relatives made sure he got a good dose of the Old South cavalier tradition. He once said, "I learned about the Civil War at my grandmother's knee."⁴³ Davidson recalled hearing the tales of Confederate soldiers at the feet of his uncles and the old men at the country store. He said, "I have sat long hours with these old men, in the country store or by the fireside, and hear their tales."⁴⁴ He also recalled how the old folks, while having little time to "sit in the moonlight and listen to banjos" did manage to "pass on some information to us young folks."⁴⁵

One suspects that for a young man of Middle Tennessee that was about a good a place as any to learn about the Civil War, from the perspective of the Old South. Davidson's grandmother had come from Chapel Hill and took pride in having been from Confederate General Bedford Forrest's birthplace as well as

⁴² Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group*, 6.

⁴³ David J. Harkness, "Tennessee in Literature," *The University of Tennessee Newsletter* (XXVII:2, November, 1949), 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Donald Davidson, "The New South and the Conservative Tradition," *The National Review* (September 10, 1960), 143.

having relatives in Forrest's cavalry. According to Davidson, she had lived through "all the terrors of the Civil War, with armies passing her door, and shooting and burnings carried out before her own eyes."⁴⁶ This latter experience would eventually make its way into his epic poem, the *Tall Men*, as Davidson poetically recounted the shooting of three young boys right outside the window where Davidson's grandmother watched in terror.⁴⁷

Given Davidson's eventual position as prophet of Southern Agrarian values, it is appropriate to examine the forces at work in southern society at the beginning of the twentieth century. This enables us to understand the values he eventually accepted as part of the total fabric of southern culture and identity, even if he rejected them for a time prior to 1925.

Several historians have described the Cavalier mythology as being central to Southern identity in the nineteenth century. James C. Cobb notes that its primary function was originally to explain why there were differences between the North and the South.⁴⁸ William R. Taylor's book, *Cavalier and Yankee*, explains the genesis of the myth in a very comprehensive way as a mechanism for dealing with the changing intellectual forces that separated the South from Europe and drew the North closer to Europe. During the period of the Revolutionary War, Taylor explains, "Virginia and South Carolina had retained

⁴⁶ Harkness, 22.

⁴⁷ Donald Davidson, "The Sod of Battle-Fields," *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), 75-82, esp. 79.

⁴⁸ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 22.

much closer cultural contact with the Old World than had the colonies to the North.” As the nineteenth century began, the South found this situation reversed. He says, “The South gradually lost touch with Europe at the very time that intellectual leaders in the North...were establishing new cultural contacts.”⁴⁹ Taylor maintains that this was, in part, due to the intellectual developments in Europe that separated the North from the South. The North was embracing theological and political liberalism as defined by the French Revolution. This conception was solidified in the term “Yankee” which came to mean an “acquisitive, uncultivated, and amoral” people.⁵⁰ To keep from sliding into the perceived abyss the South created the Cavalier mythology to protect the Old World stability that had been generated before and during the Revolutionary War. The mythology rooted itself in the Romantic tradition of the later eighteenth century. Daniel Singal notes that the South especially elevated the writings of Sir Walter Scott as containing the image of the aristocratic feudal lord. He writes, “Landed southerners, finding it easy to identify with the medieval knights and lords portrayed in the Waverly tales, began acting out fantasies in feudal splendor.”⁵¹ While Donald Davidson later argued that the romanticism of Scott was not sufficient in itself to explain the character of the South, it goes a long way

⁴⁹ William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 37.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 95.

⁵¹ Singal, *The War Within*, 13.

toward understanding the mythology embraced during the 1830's.⁵² Singal actually agrees when he states that Scott's influence "does not begin to explain the tenacity with which southerners grasped the aristocratic myth."⁵³ Instead, he points to the dramatic social and political changes that took place during the Age of Jackson. These changes had a dramatic impact on the Southern states and forced them to withdraw from the cosmopolitan atmosphere that was developing elsewhere in the country. In Taylor's view, this was the beginning of a national character of which the South wished to be excluded.⁵⁴

Inherent in the Age of Jackson were a number of democratizing tendencies that threatened to eclipse the way American and Southern society functioned. First among these was the pressure of democracy. Most of the founding fathers were wary of pure democracy and sought to limit its power in the new country by instituting a republican form of government. This republican shape of government established something of a fiat aristocracy, although many historians have argued whether any aristocracy ever existed in America.⁵⁵ This was upheld vigorously by men like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. William Taylor begins his discussion of the Cavalier mythos in America by drawing upon

⁵² In an essay entitled "In Justice to So Fine a Country," Davidson remarks that Scott's writings were also popular in France and Germany and did not "beget 'chivalrous' tendencies in those societies." Donald Davidson, "In Justice to So Fine a Country," *Still Rebels, Still Yankees and Other Essays*, 184.

⁵³ Singal, *The War Within*, 13.

⁵⁴ Cf. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 17-19.

⁵⁵ Singal notes that whatever American aristocracy may look like, it was nothing like the aristocracy of the Old World. He cites several elements that made up the aristocratic society of Europe, including generational longevity and a permanent class structure. Singal, *The War Within*, 11-12.

letters of both men to show that neither was comfortable, even in the aftermath of the War of 1812, with the direction the country might be taking.⁵⁶ The elevation of the self-made man - the non-aristocratic, uncultivated citizen - who would decide the fate of the country was not something they encouraged. Jefferson's new college was specially designed to prevent this sort of thing from happening at all.

Taylor puts the perfect image in place by asking the very pertinent question on the minds of all Americans at the time: "If men were naturally self-centered and rapacious, bent on pursuing their own private ends, and nature was an amoral or neutral force, then what was there in the classless and open society of America to prevent it from becoming a social jungle the equal of which the civilized world had never seen?"⁵⁷ Singal explains that both the North and the South created very different answers to this question. The North sought both to encourage the democratization of society, as that was the current trend in intellectual Europe, and to limit its effects on society by developing social institutions to combat the negative effects such democratization might have.⁵⁸ The South, on the other hand, in varying degrees retreated into the pre-democratic aristocratic social structures of the previous century. This was done specifically to protect the things Southerners felt were most at risk through the

⁵⁶ Taylor indicates that the biography of Patrick Henry written by William Wirt in which Wirt portrayed Henry as a "self-made man" and made virtues out of "his indolence and lack of formal education" was very displeasing to Jefferson. Wirt made a romantic hero out of Patrick Henry that covered all of his faults. Adams, too, felt that Wirt's book heralded a "new mode of historical writing which smacked of fiction." Taylor, 69.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 98.

⁵⁸ Singal, *The War Within*, 14-15.

democratization of society: family, religion and home.⁵⁹ The means by which the South sought to accomplish this were a basic maintenance of the status quo. Charles Reagan Wilson has suggested that to Southerners, “Social concern...meant a conservative interest in the preservation of religious, political, societal, and economic orthodoxy.”⁶⁰

This Cavalier mythology appeared to create, or recreate, an image of the genteel society characterized in the romantic literature of England. The term “Cavalier” itself referred to one of the main branches of soldiers in the English Civil War of the 1640’s. The Puritans were often called Roundheads and were characterized as having settled in the Northeast. Southern settlers had descended from the English Cavaliers, or Royalist supporters of King Charles.⁶¹ They were characterized, Singal asserts, by “self-control, moderation, and refinement”; all qualities needed “to bring stability to his domain.”⁶² Southerners felt the need for stability, seeing the intellectual changes in the North as harbingers of a total collapse of the American nation and “were inclined to see disaster awaiting the South at every turn.”⁶³

This stability was sought in terms of social order, mostly, in the Old South between 1830 and 1861. One of the most obvious pictures of this that Southern

⁵⁹ Cf. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*,98.

⁶⁰ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 9.

⁶¹ Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*,15.

⁶² Singal, *The War Within*,12.

⁶³ Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee*, 63.

historians draw upon is the image of the plantation, arguably a social community in its own right. Planters sought to represent themselves as feudal lords to maximize the amount of control, perceived or actual, they wielded over their plantation. Drew Gilpin Faust's portrayal of James Henry Hammond represents an excellent picture of this kind of plantation control and the ideology behind it. She states that Hammond "cherished a conception of himself as a beneficent master whose guidance and control represented the best of all possible worlds for the uncivilized and backward people entrusted to him by God."⁶⁴ Hammond, and others like him all across the South, considered themselves to be uniquely qualified, by virtue of their Cavalier heritage, to provide a sense of order in the South.

More interestingly perhaps for the purposes of this thesis is the dramatic turn this mythology took after the Civil War when the separate but equally powerful Lost Cause myth was introduced to explain Southern defeat. If the Cavalier was the perfect champion of order and soldiery, how had the democratic, uncultured North gained victory? And how did this combination affect the traditional mindset of Southerners, like Donald Davidson, growing up in the New South period?

The myth of the Lost Cause began almost immediately after the war, if not during the conflict. It has been identified with religion, politics, and military

⁶⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 73.

education but remains an “elusive, nebulous, and ephemeral” idea.⁶⁵ Charles Reagan Wilson has argued that the Lost Cause is a “civil religion” designed to maintain both the religious fervor and ethical values of the virtuous believer.⁶⁶ Gaines Foster has, alternatively, connected the Lost Cause with a celebration of Confederate culture and less of a racial or religious phenomenon at all.⁶⁷

Daniel Singal has connected the Lost Cause to the pervasive myth of the Cavalier in that they both stress the essential goodness of the South and Southern heroes. The Lost Cause, however it is defined, caused the South to treat Confederate soldiers as near divinity as a Christian nation can get: erecting monuments, mountain carvings, and setting aside special days in honor of their sacrifice. Rod Andrew argues that “Lost Cause mythology turned every capable Confederate officer into a legendary hero” and stressed their character as it did so.⁶⁸ The character traits that were most often stressed in Lost Cause celebrations and rituals were “honor, patriotism, duty, respect for the law, sacrifice, and even piety.”⁶⁹

While the Cavalier mythology ought to have died out with Confederate defeat in 1865, the Lost Cause strengthened it and allowed it to continue forward, defining the essential Southern culture for the rest of the nineteenth century. The

⁶⁵ Rod Andrew Jr., *Long Gray Lines: The Southern Military School Tradition, 1839-1915* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 62.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 1-13.

⁶⁷ Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁶⁸ Andrew, 34-35.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 37. Cf. Wilson, 21-24 and Taylor, 97.

Lost Cause allowed Southerners, in Singal's words, "to justify their attempt at secession" with the rationale of preserving their "aristocratic way of life."⁷⁰ In the minds of Lost Cause and Cavalier supporters, the South fought the Civil War to preserve its society, not slavery. The democratic North had put the Southern way of life at stake and the South answered with the only course open to it - secession. The North had responded militarily and the South had attempted to defend itself and been defeated in the process. This did not make the Southern cause wrong, it made it all the more right in the minds of many Southerners.

That Davidson's relatives and others felt the need to educate him about the Civil War and its aftermath gives an indication to the total educational experience he inherited in Middle Tennessee in the years between 1893 and 1909 when he went off to Vanderbilt University. Pride in fighting the Civil War and being in the company of the great Bedford Forrest seemed to have been high on the list of experiences they felt necessary to relate. But no less important were his grandmother's tales of the invading Northern army and the death and destruction they brought with them. When he wrote his second volume of the *Tennessee* in 1948, Davidson made sure to catalog the hostilities he had learnt along with dozens of other tales he had no doubt heard as he researched his history. "From end to end the Tennessee Valley was a wasteland," he began the

⁷⁰ Singal, *The War Within*, 21.

chapter concerned with the aftermath of the Civil War on the region.⁷¹ He continued:

For three years war had been dominant, the armies had trampled back and forth, and the stern invader had had his way. No other part of the South had so long suffered from the continual presence of this invader and from the desperate efforts to repel him. Elsewhere, even in much-harried Virginia, there had been intervals of relief, or, as in the Shenandoah Valley, no real penetration until late in the war. In the Tennessee Valley occupation had been constant, and ravage had been heaped upon ravage.⁷²

Davidson's Cavalier education had clearly given him the framework to be an apologist for the South once his wanderings were done.

The Cavalier heritage provided Davidson with a picture of the South that was at once civil and backward. The tensions between the two categories are no doubt part of his self-imposed exile from the Southern Cavalier heritage while he was a student and part of his tenure at Vanderbilt. The eventual harmonizing of these tensions, or the suppression of them, is of utmost concern to students of agrarianism.

While there is little evidence to support any particular religious devotion on Davidson's part during his early years, the milieu in which he was raised was decidedly Christian. Thus the final element to consider in Davidson's formative years is this Christian influence on the society and culture in which he lived, even if it appeared to have very little impact on him as an individual within society. Religion was never a major part of Davidson's adult life, but its inclusion as an

⁷¹ Davidson, *The Tennessee, Volume II: Civil War to TVA*, 107.

⁷² Ibid.

important factor in Davidson's upbringing is important, for unlike John Crowe Ransom or Allen Tate, Davidson did not have a uniquely religious or theological reaction to the worldview of modernity in 1925.

Though there is scant evidence to support the conclusion, it is possible to suggest that Davidson was a Methodist growing up. Louis Rubin has asserted that "Davidson's people ... were Methodists."⁷³ Methodism was prominent in Middle Tennessee at the time, much more prominent than other Protestant denominations. Louis Rubin has also remarked, "[M]ost of them [the young men who became the Nashville Fugitives and Agrarians] were Methodists....Ransom, Davidson, ... had grown up in southern communities in which the Protestant churches, both Methodist and Baptist, were still a viable and vigorous force."⁷⁴ One history of Tennessee notes, "No religious body exerted more leadership in Tennessee church affairs during the ante bellum period than did the Methodists," and states that every county in Tennessee had one Methodist church with some far exceeding this number.⁷⁵ Maury County, where the Davidsons tended to be located during much of Donald's youth was reported to have twenty-six Methodist congregations. The same volume indicates that Methodists had some of the greatest growth in the years following the war of any denomination in Tennessee,

⁷³ Louis D. Rubin Jr. *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁵ Stanley J. Folmsbee, Robert E. Corlew, and Enoch L. Mitchell, *Tennessee: A Short History* (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1969), 285-87.

despite continued division along sectional lines.⁷⁶ However, another Tennessee history indicates that Southern Baptists “could claim more than 43 percent of the total church membership of the state” from the turn of the century to 1936.⁷⁷ Vanderbilt University itself was partially founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in Tennessee, again indicating the strong Methodist influence in the state. Whether the Davidsons were Methodists, Baptists, or some other sect is not really critical; however, the strong influence of each denomination in the state at that time indicates the pervasive character of religion in public life.

While at Branham and Hughes in 1906, Donald wrote at least one letter indicating he had some involvement in a local Methodist group. This letter reads: “We are going to have a regular treat tomorrow night. I guess you have heard of Miss Ellen Stone, the missionary who was held captive in Turkey so long. She is going to lecture here tomorrow night and will show some of her situations and so on with a magic lantern, a stereopticon....I belong to the Cheerful Workers, a little missionary society, and am very much interested. I hope the children will continue Sunday School. I have not missed a single Sunday since school began.”⁷⁸ Whether the substance of this letter represents actual religious sentiment on Davidson’s part or the felt need to apprise his parents and relations of his obligatory involvement in a religious organization cannot be determined

⁷⁶ Ibid., 419-20.

⁷⁷ Dykeman, 133.

⁷⁸ Davidson to his mother April 1, 1906. Special Collections, The Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville.

from the letter. At any rate, Davidson had some religious involvement, and it was primarily Methodist-run.

While there is very little to study from the Branham and Hughes school to indicate religious tendencies on the part of that institution, again we may surmise from the condition at Vanderbilt and the surrounding Middle Tennessee context that the school was as devoted to theological orthodoxy as any school in the region. The first chancellor of Vanderbilt, Dr. Landon C. Garland gave an address at the inauguration of the university in which he proclaimed that Vanderbilt had been established that “in its halls and academic groves, we might see learning and religion walk hand in hand.”⁷⁹ Louise Cowan quotes Chancellor Kirkland as saying, “We demand first of all that our professors shall be Christian men and competent scholars.”⁸⁰

By 1909 when Donald Davidson graduated from Branham and Hughes Preparatory School, he had obtained a rigorous, classical education that fitted him for successful further study and a familiar Cavalier interpretation of Southern society that imparted the importance of heritage and tradition. This academic and familial education was conducted within a culture saturated with Christian values and beliefs that would be a part of Davidson’s writing for the rest of his life.

⁷⁹ Mims, *History of Vanderbilt University*, 65.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Cowan, *The Fugitive Group*, 7.

CHAPTER TWO: THE VANDERBILT YEARS AND A MOVE TOWARD MODERNISM

After graduation from Branham and Hughes in 1909, Davidson desired to attend Vanderbilt University, but could not afford it. He became the recipient of a loan fund connected with the Webb school in nearby Bell Buckle that had been created to assist its graduates in entering college. Having worked the summer for William Webb, Davidson gained a recommendation to receive the \$100 award and was able to enter Vanderbilt with “a \$100 loan and a little odd cash.”⁸¹ This was not nearly enough money, as Davidson soon realized. He was forced to take odd jobs just to make it through the freshman year.⁸² Slowly, Davidson worked his way through Vanderbilt and inched closer to the Bachelor of Arts degree at the end of his studies. Not until 1917 did Davidson graduate and that only by receiving credits through officer’s training for the First World War.

The more important aspects of his stay at Vanderbilt were not the classes he took or the grades he received. The more lasting elements of his university days took place outside of the classroom, though not wholly removed from the personalities of the classroom. His instructor, John Crowe Ransom, with whom Davidson was to have a long-lasting, if not altogether untroubled, friendship for the rest of his life, and some of his classmates undertook the challenge of filling

⁸¹ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 9. See also Mark Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*, 23.

⁸² Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 9.

in the various gaps they found in Davidson's preparatory education by introducing him to the literature of the modern world. He remembered, "it was my friend Alec Stevenson who first led me to Joseph Conrad's novels." Others gave him access to the writings of Dostoevsky, Ibsen, Maupassant and a host of other modern writers.⁸³ These hints of the variety of modern literature first captured Davidson's attention and his imagination. He began attending an "intellectual association" made up of various members of his undergraduate class and some professors. In his opinion it was "juvenile and collegiate" but it made him hunger for something more.⁸⁴

The real value of this initial "intellectual association" was that it furthered the essential classical education of his youth yet simultaneously introduced him to the literature of the modern world. Davidson recalled, "It would never have occurred to any of us that the higher learning could be obtained *only* through the instruction of a specialist in a regularly accredited course."⁸⁵ The classical education he had received as a boy in Middle Tennessee and at Branham and Hughes prepared him to teach himself, as it were, the things he desired to learn. Learning was never restricted to the classroom, but took place wherever a few undergraduates and perhaps a professor met to discuss ideas.

The classroom had its place, as Davidson also recollected. He enjoyed the fact that Edwin Mims gave him "subjects to study" in American literature, not

⁸³ Ibid., 10-11.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 10. Italics in original.

just “books to read.”⁸⁶ He seems to have been utterly shocked that authors like Poe, Lowell, or Samuel Johnson would be studied in his university setting. He seemed to feel these authors were more appropriate for individual study.

This establishment of the essential worth of his classical education as a young man carried him straight into his synthesis with modernity. The initial “intellectual association” soon morphed into the regular meetings at the home of Sidney Mtttron Hirsch. Hirsch, whom Davidson and other historians generally refer to as a Jewish mystic, afforded Davidson his first real look into the modern world.⁸⁷ During the course of the conversations at the Hirsch apartment, Davidson felt himself “destined to be but a shy guest at the feast of the world’s great culture” while the conversation ranged from poetry and philosophy to Kantian categories and Hegelian thought.⁸⁸ The end result, however, was that poetry was elevated to an almost religious standing in their midst. According to Louise Cowan, the “members of the Fugitive circle came to view poetry as having a universal character and to assume that all educated men – not merely a select few – should be interested in reading and writing verse.”⁸⁹ Poetry would maintain this elevated position in Davidson’s psyche for the rest of his life, and eventually he would give himself over to its protection as he re-synthesized this new doctrine into his classical orthodoxy.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group*, xvii.

It did not seem to surprise Davidson when John Crowe Ransom, his senior and teacher, produced a poem one day while strolling around Vanderbilt. Davidson recalled the timidity with which Ransom read this first poem to him, saying that he was blushing as he produced the paper upon which the poem was written.⁹⁰ Ransom read the poem to Davidson, who listened enthusiastically. In Davidson's later recollection, this event marked the beginning of the "Fugitive movement."⁹¹

At this point in his life, Davidson felt no need to consciously reject the Southern heritage his classical education had bequeathed him. He was simply engaged in the process that most students encounter in their college experience - synthesizing the world of his youth with the broader domain that the university often presents. While Davidson's classical education prepared him to encounter new ideas and equipped him with the tools of learning that he might further educate himself, the literature of the modern world provided him with a sense of otherness that he had not really experienced until this moment in his life.

A continuous process of taking classes and teaching in local schools to make money to attend Vanderbilt plagued Davidson until 1917. The First World War engulfed Europe in 1914, but the United States did not become officially involved until 1917 after the sinking of the RMS Lusitania and the Zimmerman Telegram incident. The event of the war was perhaps the final stage of synthesis

⁹⁰ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 14.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

for Davidson, who applied for officer's training as soon as war was declared. The war allowed him to put into practice any remaining vestiges of the Cavalier tradition, that warrior-statesman, about whom he had grown up hearing stories.

Davidson's actual experience of the war was quite minimal, compared with the experience of many other Americans. His time was spent more in training than in combat. In a letter to Thomas Inge, one of Davidson's biographers, he claimed to have traveled more during his training for the war than he had ever traveled in his life. "I had never traveled before," he wrote in 1966.⁹² He spent time in Camp Jackson, South Carolina; Camp Sevier in Greenville, South Carolina, Fort Sill, Oklahoma; and New York City. He spent some time training in non-combat areas of France as well. He actually only spent "a total of about six weeks at the front" and only participated in the final offensive of the American Expeditionary Force in the last two weeks of the war.⁹³ This fact may somewhat account for his lack of exposure to the stimuli that so disillusioned other American soldiers, especially the artists and writers that comprised the Lost Generation.

According to Davidson, he spent the summer of 1917 in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia at the First Officers Training Camp.⁹⁴ It was his happy circumstance that John Crowe Ransom was also there. According to Davidson, on Sundays they sat "in a grove of pines on the battlefield of Chickamauga, at the foot of

⁹² Donald Davidson, "Donald Davidson's Notes for an Autobiography: The Early Years," 210

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 209-210.

⁹⁴ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 14.

Snodgrass Hill” and talked of poetry in between training exercises.⁹⁵ He later told a story in which General John T. Wilder, a veteran of the Battle of Chickamauga, addressed the young men training on the battlefield. Wilder gave a speech which was intended to rouse the fighting spirit of the young soldiers. He explained how, in 1863, with superior weaponry, he and his Union forces had slaughtered Confederate forces. Davidson wrote, “It did not seem to matter to General Wilder that the young men before him were descendants of the Confederate soldiers whom he had so gleefully slaughtered in 1863 with his Sharp’s repeating rifles.”⁹⁶ Instead, the speech was intended to whip the new soldiers into a fury by informing them that they would soon have the glory of killing Germans in Europe as he had killed Confederate soldiers in 1863. This event may have cracked the veneer of Davidson’s antipathy to his southern heritage at the time or it may only be the years of reflection having worked on his memories of the event. In either case, the beginnings of his retreat from the confines of modernity’s factory to the agrarian fields of Tennessee began in Davidson’s World War One experience, though it would be years before he understood it.⁹⁷

While Ransom and Davidson were training together in Chickamauga, Ransom gave Davidson some more poetry to read. These poems eventually made up Ransom’s first volume of poetry that was published in 1919 as *Poems*

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁹⁷ Lewis P. Simpson has remarked that Davidson “would come to interpret his First World War experience as a revelation of the Truth of his homeland, or of the American that is the South.” Lewis P. Simpson, introduction to *Still Rebels, Still Yankees and Other Essays* by Donald Davidson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), vii.

about God. Davidson managed to take them with him to France and took great pleasure in reading them while deployed in Europe.

Davidson returned to America in 1919, landing at Charleston harbor in South Carolina. The First World War was over, and America had been victorious over the Central Powers. One would expect the First World War to have had a similar effect on an aspiring young modernist poet like Donald Davidson as it did on the host of other American artists and writers who fought in that war. However Davidson, far from becoming enamored of European culture and art, or immediately disillusioned with the war, as so many others were, returned from the war ready to take up a position teaching literature and resume conversation with the Hirsch group.

The reason for this can be summarized by suggesting that Davidson did not replace the Old South heritage of his youth so much as he synthesized a modernist worldview into his heritage. Writing in 1957, Davidson recalled reading the poems of John Crowe Ransom during World War One. He said, "When I read those poems in France, by candlelight in some peasant's house in the Cote d'Or or Yonne, or some ruined village near the Western Front, they still blurred my exploring, eager eyes, even though at that distance I could more gratefully recognize in them the Tennessee country I had left."⁹⁸ Some semblance of a southern identity had already manifested itself in Davidson's consciousness by this point in his life. Thus, in 1925, he did not have to go off on some tangential

⁹⁸ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 15.

course to find the Southerner in himself, so much as he had to decide the worth of holding to the modernist side of his identity. Ultimately he decided it was not. This suggestion reconciles many scholarly attitudes toward Davidson at this particular time of his life as well. Daniel Joseph Singal argues that the Dayton Trial was not significant for Davidson's identity as a Southerner, citing that his first major Southern essay, "The Artist as Southerner," was written in 1924, even though it was not published until 1926.⁹⁹ When Davidson penned the "Artist as Southerner," he was not so much looking to find his identity as a Southerner as perhaps attempting to reestablish the connections he had left behind. One sees many of these themes in the poetry that made up his 1924 publication, *An Outland Piper*.¹⁰⁰ When he wrote to Allen Tate in 1923 about the expected contract for this first book, Davidson told Tate that he was trying "to strike a balance between the best of the old and the new" in his poetry.¹⁰¹

It is indeed one of the grand designs of history that so many persons, so well-suited to poetic expression should gather at one place at one time. Allen Tate was cognizant of this even in his lifetime, saying, "I think that I may disregard the claims of propriety and say quite plainly that, so far as I know, there was never so much talent, knowledge, and character accidentally brought

⁹⁹ Singal, *The War Within*, 200-201.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Louis D. Rubin's comments on Davidson's first volume of poetry in *The Wary Fugitives*, 143-51.

¹⁰¹ Davidson to Tate, June 26, 1923 in Fain and Young, *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 73.

together at one American place in our time.”¹⁰² Davidson also agreed with Tate’s thinking: “Why did a Fugitive group arise on the Vanderbilt campus in Nashville, Tennessee, and nowhere else?”¹⁰³ Historians tend to remark on this circumstance whenever renaissance of any kind develops. Speaking of the Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Paul Johnson declares, “[T]hat is the nature of culture. We can give all kinds of satisfying explanations of why and when the Renaissance occurred and how it transmitted itself. But there is no explaining Dante, no explaining Chaucer. Genius suddenly comes to life, and speaks out of a vacuum.”¹⁰⁴ In her own way of tackling this problem, Louise Cowan has described Vanderbilt as a “focal point” where “opposing ideas and beliefs can come together in close contact.”¹⁰⁵ This environment, in and of itself, was fundamental to the creation of the Fugitive movement. Cowan has further stated that “no other school, north or south, could have so provided the Fugitives with the opportunities for understanding, for rejection, and for affirmation.”¹⁰⁶ In a sense, understanding, rejection and affirmation are the dominant means of analyzing the period from 1920 to 1924 for Davidson and the other Fugitive poets. All three categories relate intimately with the synthesis between the Old South worldview Davidson received from his family and the modernist worldview

¹⁰² Allen Tate, “The Fugitive—1922-1925,” *Memoirs and Opinions, 1926-1974* (Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1975), 33-34.

¹⁰³ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Johnson, *The Renaissance* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 51.

¹⁰⁵ Cowan, *The Fugitive Group*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

to which he had been introduced through his studies at Vanderbilt from 1909 to 1917. All three categories must be considered as he developed the modernism of Vanderbilt and the other members of the soon-to-be Fugitive Group and shifted away from his notions of traditionalism.

In Davidson's experience, modernism was chiefly a literary movement. His experiences in class and out between 1909 and 1917 indicate that he chiefly understood the writing of Dostoyevsky, Conrad and others to be the fullest expression of modernism. While Davidson was in France, he wrote to his wife frequently asking for books to be shipped over to him. One volume he asked for by name was Amy Lowell's *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*.¹⁰⁷ This volume seems to have been somewhat influential to Davidson's developing attitudes toward poetry in the war. While he read Ransom's poems and Lowell's analysis of modern poetry, he began writing his own poems.¹⁰⁸ Lowell's analysis of modern poetry gives us much to consider. From Lowell, Davidson learned to spurn his traditional Christian heritage. Lowell found the Christian, especially Puritan, mentality of poetry to be stifling. In her essay on Edwin Arlington Robinson, she spoke of Puritanism as "a weakness" and "a poison, sapping the springs of life at their source."¹⁰⁹ Another lesson Davidson learned from Lowell

¹⁰⁷ Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917, reprinted 1920). Cf. Inge and Young, *Donald Davidson*, 29. See also Cowan, *Fugitive Group*, 31.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Inge and Young, *Donald Davidson*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ Lowell, *Tendencies*, 26.

was the concern for straightforward speech and brevity.¹¹⁰ This lesson becomes clear in Davidson's own memoir of the Fugitive days, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, where he states that the Fugitives abhorred "looseness of expression" and this often led to "what we sometimes called a 'packed' line. The poet ... strove to weed out anything 'loose.'"¹¹¹ Being straightforward as well as brief made the Fugitives, and Davidson in particular, attempt to say as much as possible in as little space as possible. It is also quite possible that Davidson first considered the plight of traditional society against materialism in the pages of Lowell's book, though this thought did not come to fruition until late in the Fugitive movement.¹¹²

Modern poetry, Davidson soon came to realize, represented an antithetical reaction to the formal poetry of the nineteenth century. Not only was modern poetry reacting against the literary standards of the Victorian world, but also against some of the thematic standards as well. For Davidson and the other Fugitives, this soon came to mean a violent reaction against the content of Southern poetry as they had known it in school. They determined not to write the sentimental hagiography that had permeated Southern literature since the end of the Civil War.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 31-32.

¹¹¹ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 22.

¹¹² Often Lowell comments on the idea that the overly material culture of America has made art, especially poetry, of secondary importance. She states, "America...was given over to materialism, and materialism could never produce art." Lowell, *Tendencies*, 6-7.

A good example of the kind of poetry Davidson and the others were consciously trying to avoid would be Henry Timrod's "Ode" which was sung when decorating the graves of Confederate soldiers in Charleston, South Carolina at the Magnolia Cemetery.

Sleep sweetly in your humble graves,
Sleep, martyrs of a fallen cause;
Though yet no marble column craves
The pilgrim here to pause.

In seeds of laurel in the earth
The blossom of your fame is blown,
And somewhere, waiting for its birth,
The shaft is in the stone!

Meanwhile, behalf the tardy years
Which keep in trust your storied tombs,
Behold! your sisters bring their tears,
And these memorial blooms.

Small tributes! but your shades will smile
More proudly on these wreaths to-day,
Than when some cannon-moulded pile
Shall overlook this bay.

Stoop, angels, hither from the skies!
There is no holier spot of ground
Than where defeated valor lies,
By mourning beauty crowned!¹¹³

In this characteristically Southern poem, Timrod celebrates the heroism of the soldiers, the "martyrs of a lost cause" and the sacredness of the place "where defeated valor lies." He also celebrates the extreme gentility of the fallen soldiers who do not need "marble columns" to prove their virtue.

¹¹³ Henry Timrod, "Ode," *Southern Prose and Poetry for Schools* ed. Edwin Mims and Bruce Payne (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1910), 273.

All of this was repugnant to the Fugitive group, who, as Davidson later quoted, “flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South.”¹¹⁴ Davidson wanted his poetry to be “judged on its own merits” rather than because it was supposed to be Southern poetry.¹¹⁵ The very notion of the Fugitive, Davidson later said, “lies perhaps in the sentiment of the editors ... to flee from the extremes of conventionalism, whether old or new.”¹¹⁶ It was in this frame of mind that the men who became the Fugitives rejected traditional literature and grasped for modernism. But they did not all know exactly what modernism was or how it would operate in the world of poetry and literature. Tate, for example, was taken with T.S. Eliot and recommended him highly to Davidson. Upon purchasing a volume of Eliot, Davidson wondered whether he had wasted his money.¹¹⁷ Davidson never really understood Eliot even though Tate thought he was a pinnacle of modern thought. John Crowe Ransom’s influences included Robert Frost, though he later complained about Frost’s style.¹¹⁸ Despite the wide range of influences each had working on them from the outside, it was the internal influence that created the dynamic environment in which *The Fugitive* was born.

¹¹⁴ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 5.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Cowan, *The Fugitive Group*, 44.

¹¹⁷ Davidson to Tate, June 17, 1922 in Fain and Young *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 4.

¹¹⁸ Ransom also apparently owed his first publication, *Poems about God* to Frost, who was reviewing manuscripts for Henry Holt and Company. Cf. Rubin, *Wary Fugitives*, 16-17.

Once everyone had returned to Vanderbilt after the war, they began meeting with Hirsch and the others again. This time the meetings took a decidedly more poetic turn, away from the philosophic conversations before the war.¹¹⁹ Davidson loved the way their meetings were conducted. He recalled, “The very nature of our meetings ... influenced Fugitive habits of composition.”¹²⁰ Everyone would bring a poem, with carbon copies for others, and read it aloud. Criticism would then take a discursive form. Davidson even recalled that “this process of intensive criticism ... carried into our private conversation between meetings.”¹²¹ He felt it was the most beneficial way to discuss their poetry because “it allowed deliberation.”¹²²

These experiments in poetic expression soon found public expression in the literary magazine, the *Fugitive*. *The Fugitive* was first published in 1922 at the suggestion of Sidney Hirsch.¹²³ The first edition appeared in April and contained poems by most of the group. Davidson’s entry to the inaugural issue was “The Demon Brother,” a poem that eventually found its way into his first volume of poetry, *An Outland Piper*, though it was missing its first and last stanza by the time *An Outland Piper* was published. The poem is helpful for understanding the direction Davidson’s thinking was heading even in 1922.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Cowan, *The Fugitive Group*, 31.

¹²⁰ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 21.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 22

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Cowan, *The Fugitive Group*, 44. Cowan and others also indicate that the name “Fugitive” was suggested by Alec Stevenson as a tribute of sorts to Hirsch, after a poem he had read to the group recently.

*Old man, what are you looking for?
Why do you tremble so, at the window peering in?
-A Brother of mine! That's what I'm looking for!
Someone I sought and lost of noble kin.*

I heard strange pipes when I was young,
Piping to songs of an outland tongue.
I heard, and was agape to see
How like that piper was to me,
Playing a tune to the rabble's whim
He marched away; I followed
For something in his rolling eye
Plucked at my senses mightily,
And something in that outland tongue
Drew me away, - for I was young!
And over the town he piping went;
Roofs clapped, and windows blazed to see
That alien piper, so like me.
I followed till the pipes trilled sweet
At the winding end of a unknown street,
And none of all the mob was nigh,
Nor door nor window cracked an eye.
And - "Follow me no more," he said,
"Though I be of thy father bred,
And though I speak from thine own blood,
Yet I am but of demon brood;
And follow not my piping sweet
To find the walking world a cheat;
And cherish not my outland grace,
Nor pride in likeness to my face -
I am thy demon Brother," he said,
And into the shadow sped.

I heard, but I could not forget,
And through the world I follow yet,
And many a time I pause and sigh,
Thinking I hear his melody;
And peer at all men's character
To find that image so like me;
And wonder that his piping sweet
Left me to know a world's deceit, -
Left me to seek an unknown kin
Through all the streets I travel in.

*Old Man, is it songs you are looking for?
Music lost in the leaf that the year has shed?
-A Brother of mine! That's what I am looking for!
The sight of a kinsman's face before I am dead.¹²⁴*

Davidson's quest is framed with questions of heritage and subtle feelings of being lost. His poem betrays some part of himself that may have already been seeking a way back home. Nonetheless, it also represents the nearly flawless synthesis of modernity with the traditionalism of his upbringing. It concerns itself with heritage and yet is framed in the non-sentimental style that the *Fugitives* sought so diligently.

The *Fugitive* ran until December, 1925. The group decided to stop printing more because of the amount of time required for the project than any lack of interest on the part of the group or lack of funds. Davidson had done the editing of the magazine from its inception until the beginning of 1925, when John Crowe Ransom took over.

Davidson grew more and more modern as the *Fugitive* wore on, writing poetry that expressed modernism in its subject matter as well as the form of his verse. In "Naiad," for example, Davidson explored some semi-erotic themes as he narrates a skinny dipping incident gone horribly bad. The young lady, who is the subject of the poem, feels oppressed by her environment: "It irked that soggy

¹²⁴ Donald Davidson, "A Demon Brother," *The Fugitive* 1:1 (April, 1922), 6-7. I have quoted the original form of the poem from *The Fugitive* magazine because Louis Rubin indicates that some editing between the poem as it appeared in the first volume of the *Fugitive* and the form appearing afterwards has taken place. I thought it important to include the two framing stanzas as they show much of Davidson's questioning spirit throughout the poem.

wool kept flesh from water.” She gives herself over to the eroticism of nakedness in solitude.

And strange desire unsheathed her tender breast.
All ancient beauty sang upon the flood,
And she made her beauty naked for that behest.¹²⁵

But Davidson was clear that simple eroticism is not what makes poetry modern. When writing for the *Nashville Tennessean's* book page, Davidson reviewed a collection of poems that he defined as “modern” poetry and was kind enough to tell his readers why. In his opinion, modern poetry is characterized by a “mingling of the rough with the gentle,” an “urge to examine life’s realities,” and a “desire to exalt the lives of obscure and homely persons.”¹²⁶ Modern poetry also “cultivates a vague yearning after something” which is generally called beauty.¹²⁷ With this kind of definition, it is quite easy to see the modernity evident in Davidson’s own work, from “The Demon Brother” to “Naiad.” In this frame of mind, even the poetry of his transition period from Fugitive to Agrarian would be characteristically modern.

Davidson’s years as a student at Vanderbilt University, his time in the First World War, and his return to Vanderbilt as a teacher provide the chronological background for the amazing changes that were taking place in his psyche. These years transformed him from a plain Southern white boy from Middle Tennessee

¹²⁵ Donald Davidson, “Naiad,” *An Outland Piper* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 39-40.

¹²⁶ Donald Davidson, *The Spyglass: Views and Reviews* edited by John Tyree Fain (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1963), 101.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

into a modern intellectual who did not just write poetry but published it. The self-conscious rejection of all that symbolized the Old South, while short-lived, was an important part of the narrative that helps explain the man Donald Davidson was to become as the modern world encroached upon the South.

CHAPTER THREE: THE TALL MAN

On July 10, 1925 life in Tennessee changed forever. That was the day that opening arguments were heard in the Rhea County Court House in Dayton, Tennessee in the matter of The State of Tennessee v. John T. Scopes. The infamous “Monkey Trial,” as H.L. Menken called it, forever changed, or confirmed, the way Northerners looked at the South and even how some Southerners looked at their home. Donald Davidson was among those who lived in the South and dramatically changed many of his assumptions about Southern character and identity based, in part, on the events of the Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee.

In 1859 Charles Darwin published the findings of his scientific explorations from the past several years. *On The Origin of Species* suggested that natural selection governs the existence of animal population on Earth. The general theme of Darwin’s writings, made explicit in *The Descent of Man* was that mankind descended by natural selection from earlier forms of primate mammals. This has been called, more generally, the theory of biological evolution. This theory upset the status quo of nineteenth century intellectual life in a way that few other books have ever done. Its effects have been felt from biology and theology to politics and economics.

While Darwinism and evolution made significant inroads to American universities during the later nineteenth century, it was the early twentieth century

that saw the full flowering of evolutionary ideas on American college campuses. The primary reaction from American universities was rejection. Theological orthodoxy was more deeply entrenched in American than European universities. The continental philosophy of Immanuel Kant and others had paved the road for Darwin and evolution decades before the publication of Darwin's book. Once in America, however, the theory of biological evolution quickly took over Northern universities like Harvard and Yale, but took longer reaching into the Southern mind. In 1878 Vanderbilt University had fired geologist Alexander Winchell over issues related to his theory of polygenesis. Paul Conkin notes, "he wrote about the numerous humans who occupied the earth before the Christian deity created a biblical Adam."¹²⁸ Winchell's own theories were, in the minds of Vanderbilt's administration and board, connected with the Darwinian controversy. The University of Tennessee also dismissed several faculty members for teaching contrary to orthodox belief.¹²⁹

The close relationship of science and religion in Southern educational institutions made for a difficult synthesis between the theory of evolution and the traditional Christian explanation of the origins of the universe, and especially mankind. In the North, at about this same time, a movement known as Fundamentalism grew up in response to both external scientific claims against Christianity and internal issues known collectively as higher criticism.

¹²⁸ Paul K. Conkin, *Gone with the Ivy*, 61. See also Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 76.

¹²⁹ Cf. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South: 1913-1945*, 204.

Fundamentalism became characterized by R.A. Torrey's twelve volume set of essays, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. Fundamentalism quickly spread to the South, championed by such Populist leaders as William Jennings Bryan.¹³⁰

In January, 1925, in response to concerns over the teaching of evolution in Tennessee public schools, John Butler of Macon County, Tennessee, proposed anti-evolution legislation to the state legislature that would make teaching evolution in Tennessee schools a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$500. The law proposed:

That it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals, and all other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.¹³¹

Many in the state legislature did not expect the law to pass, but still voted for it, expecting Governor Austin Peay to veto the bill. When the governor did not, but instead signed it into law, the state was set for a showdown between science and religion, or as Donald Davidson would later put it, between tradition and anti-tradition that would characterize the South and his thinking about it for the next forty years.¹³²

¹³⁰ For more background on Fundamentalism in America, see George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South: 1913-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 196-207. See also George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹³¹ Quoted in Davidson, *The Tennessee vol.2 from Civil War to TVA* (New York: Rhineheart & Company, 1948), 197-98.

¹³² Donald Davidson, *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, xvii.

The anti-evolution law of Tennessee gained national exposure as the American Civil Liberties Union decried it as a violation of free speech. In Dayton, Tennessee a few well-intentioned men decided to put it to the test and create some tourism for the little town. They convinced the young science teacher, John T. Scopes, to be arrested for having taught evolution in violation of the new law and stand trial for the offense. Within days a case that should have been a minor event turned into a media circus that would forever change Tennessee history. Much of this media circus was fueled by the editorials and articles of Henry Louis Mencken. Mencken had lambasted the South before. In his “The Sahara of the Bozart,” published in 1920, Mencken had already dismissed the South for its backwardness, saying “it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally as the Sahara Desert.”¹³³ Interestingly, at this point in time, Edward Shapiro indicates that the men who would become the Southern Agrarians, including Donald Davidson, agreed with and cheered for Mencken’s “attack on Southern philistinism and babbitttry.”¹³⁴

When Mencken descended upon the little town of Dayton for the Scopes Trial in 1925 it was his intention to put religious fanaticism on display for the entire world to see and to scoff at the region that tolerated such barbarism.¹³⁵ In

¹³³ Henry Louis Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” in *Prejudices, Second Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), 136.

¹³⁴ Edward S. Shapiro, “The Southern Agrarians, H.L. Mencken, and the Quest for Southern Identity,” *American Studies* 13:2 (1972): 76.

¹³⁵ Fred C. Hobson, *Serpent in Eden: H.L. Mencken and the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 147-48.

many ways, it has been reported, the whole event was “Mencken’s show.”¹³⁶ Mencken’s paper had provided the bail money for Scopes. Mencken had also convinced Clarence Darrow to take up the defense of Scopes.

Offering his services to the State of Tennessee as prosecutor, William Jennings Bryan also joined the trial. The trial lasted eleven days and put on quite a show for those watching. The trial itself consisted “almost entirely of arguments between opposing counsel on points of law and verbal combats in which the clash between religion and science, rather than the guilt or innocence of Scopes, was the issue.”¹³⁷ In the end Scopes was found guilty of teaching evolution and fined \$100, which he never paid.¹³⁸

The reaction to the Scopes trial across Tennessee was violent. Edwin Mims of Vanderbilt University published *The Advancing South* in 1926 with a mind to argue that the judgment against Tennessee was not reflective of the entire state.¹³⁹ It was perhaps true of Dayton, but not the entire state. Mims also wrote several articles defending the culture of the South, especially Tennessee. James C. Cobb has said that Mims’s book argues “that the Scopes Trial was by no means representative of contemporary conditions” in the South.¹⁴⁰ Vanderbilt

¹³⁶ Ibid., 147.

¹³⁷ Davidson, *The Tennessee*, vol. 2, 200.

¹³⁸ The verdict was appealed to the Tennessee Supreme Court and the verdict of the lower court was overturned on grounds that the jury should have set the fine, not the judge. However the entire case was labeled *nolle prosequi* (do not pursue), since Scopes was no longer employed by the State of Tennessee.

¹³⁹ Edwin Mims, *The Advancing South: Stories of Progress and Reaction* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1926).

¹⁴⁰ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South*, 115.

Chancellor James Kirkland, addressing a great crowd at the semi-centennial celebration in 1925 announced, "The answer to the episode at Dayton is the building of new laboratories in the Vanderbilt campus for the teaching of science."¹⁴¹

Another reaction also gained ground within the state of Tennessee. In Nashville, three men watched the situation unfold in Dayton and each had similar, but ultimately different reactions to the court case. John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate each had uniquely religious reactions to the display of modernity inherent in the Scopes Trial.

Ransom protested the decision at Dayton and the scientific worldview that orchestrated the decision in his book, *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy*. Ransom used the book to argue that to allow science to define God and religion is essentially to strip God of everything that would make divinity divine. He recognized, more fully in 1930 in the wake of the Scopes trial than in 1925 in the afterglow of the last edition of the *Fugitive*, that modernity, with science at the helm, stripped God of all that would make a god godlike. A God without thunder is no god at all. Ransom argued that God must be the god of all things, not just good things.

When we compare [our new religion] with the old orthodoxy we see its limitations quickly. Scientists are behind the new religion: a meeker breed

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Mims, *History of Vanderbilt*, 397.

of men was behind the old. The new God is limited as the author of good only, and our sense of evil has suffered an almost total amnesia.¹⁴²

Louis Rubin has argued that Ransom's book "developed into a vigorous attack on the assumptions of science, and a reaffirmation of the need for supernaturalism."¹⁴³ We shall see that Tate and Davidson had similar reactions to the causes, but framed their solutions in very different ways.

Tate's response to the Dayton incident was more drawn out, and eventually more permanent, than Ransom's. Tate had certain immediate responses, chief among them a retreat to the cultural symbols of the Old South and identification with them. These responses showed up in his poetry, which took a decidedly more provincial turn around this time. His "Ode to the Confederate Dead" appeared in 1927, though he began it in 1925.¹⁴⁴ In 1928 his first book, a biography of Stonewall Jackson was published. Davidson said of Tate's Jackson biography, "No one would have dreamed that Allen Tate's first volume would be a narrative about Stonewall Jackson."¹⁴⁵ Over time, Tate converted to Roman Catholicism, a commitment he had toyed with most of his life.

Donald Davidson did not have a distinctly religious response to the Dayton trial or to the attack the South received as a part of it. While later in his life he

¹⁴² John Crowe Ransom, *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930; reprint, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1965), 165 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹⁴³ Rubin, *The Wary Fugitives*, 55.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁴⁵ Donald Davidson, *The Spyglass*, 201.

used the terminology of religion to describe some of his thinking, he did not do so at the time. Instead his response showed itself in four very specific works: the *Spyglass*, “The Artist as Southerner,” *The Tall Men*, and “First Fruits of Dayton,” all of which show an organic transition from the Fugitive poet to the Southern Agrarian.

Davidson’s book page in the *Nashville Tennessean* showed a changing in his conscious thought concerning the South as well. From 1926 to 1930 Davidson self-consciously used the book page to “advance the cause of the South whenever book reviewing or literary discussion could, with honesty, serve that purpose.”¹⁴⁶ The book review page began in 1924, so there is no opportunity to compare reviews from before the shift in his attitude toward the South began. Nonetheless, he used the book page to attack H.L. Mencken as often as he could, making sure his audience understood what, from his perspective, Mencken’s presuppositions were. He accused Mencken of operating from premises of “modern biology, behavioristic psychology and the like” which Davidson argued backed up his claim that “inferior men can never really become superior men.”¹⁴⁷ Davidson defended Southern writers who wrote what he considered excellent Southern literature and attacked those whose work reflected too much the desires of New York publishers. Of Stark Young, he wrote, “Of the many people writing novels about the South, Stark Young is, so far

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 126-31.

as I know, the only one who sees the Southern way of life as a whole and communicates it with the grace and conviction that it deserves.”¹⁴⁸ Of Frances Newman he wrote, “Frances Newman apparently thinks she is going to make us think she is thinking (if I may borrow her style for a moment) by simply making all her sentences walk on stilts. It is a pretentious way of being dull.”¹⁴⁹ John Tyree Fain has noted a “change of interest from poetry to social criticism” that took place during the “brief period between the last number of *The Fugitive* (December, 1925) and the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930).”¹⁵⁰ Davidson claimed that in the absence of the *Fugitive*, “The Book Page became more than a book page because of the ideas, hopes, pressures, enterprises...that engaged us all from about 1925 to 1930 and later.”¹⁵¹ While there is nothing with which to compare the book page, it is evident that Davidson used it to develop his own thinking and understanding of the South in the period from 1924 to 1930.

Another important action was to complete the manuscript for “The Artist as Southerner.”¹⁵² The *Saturday Review of Literature* published his article on May 15, 1926. Singal and other historians consider this Davidson’s seminal work,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 34-39

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 26-29.

¹⁵⁰ John Tyree Fain, introduction to *The Spyglass* by Donald Davidson (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1963), v.

¹⁵¹ Quoted in Fain, introduction to *The Spyglass*, v.

¹⁵² Singal claims that Davidson had begun work on this essay two months prior to the Dayton Trial, but did not send it in for publication until a year after the trial was complete. This certainly does not mean Davidson’s thoughts were fully formed at this time, but does lend credence to the idea that the change in attitude toward the South was more of a gradual evolution that the Scopes Trial brought to fruition. Singal, *The War Within*, 201.

even though he had been writing and publishing since 1922.¹⁵³ It is seminal in that it is characteristic of the tone Davidson would take for the rest of his life. In “The Artist as Southerner,” Davidson deals with the concerns Dayton raised in his mind by asking “what does it mean to be a Southerner and yet be a writer; what is the Southern character, if such exists, and is it communicating itself to literature in any recognizable and valuable way?”¹⁵⁴ His answer is that while most people recognize the traits of Southerners, it is nearly impossible to find any of these traits in Southern literature. Davidson feels it ought to be as easy to spot a Southern writer being Southern as it is to recognize the New England-ness of Robert Frost. Southerners are afraid to write like Southerners, according to Davidson.

This apprehension has two main causes. First, the Southern writer is essentially ashamed to be Southern, being “overwhelmed by a set of complex inhibitions that make him extremely self-conscious in his attitude toward his own habitat.”¹⁵⁵ Second, the Southern writer feels that what typically characterizes Southernness in literature has been done poorly in the past nor does he wish to be identified with it. Davidson goes on to say:

[H]e is more likely to remember emphatically the rhymes of the puerile Confederate songsters, and feel an impulsive distaste for a subject of a sort that has already been boggled too many times. He will hesitate to

¹⁵³ Singal, *The War Within*, 201.

¹⁵⁴ Davidson, “The Artist as Southerner,” 781.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 781-2.

engage himself with a tradition already sicklied over with sentimentalism.¹⁵⁶

Though he does not use his own name, Davidson had no qualms pointing to his own poetry, and that of other Fugitives, “poetry with very little of the local scene in it,” as representative of this case.¹⁵⁷ As evidence of this he draws attention to John Crowe Ransom, whom he felt was more comfortable in “mediaeval and remotely historical themes than in celebrating local deities and customs.”¹⁵⁸

A Southern writer must use “the materials that are most immediate” but “that fact alone will not guarantee him as a genuinely autochthonous writer.”¹⁵⁹ Rather, to be a truly Southern writer, the artist must, like Robert Frost or Thomas Hardy, have a universal scope to his writing. “Robert Frost’s birches and ax-halves, though they may incidentally be New England, are more definitely the phenomena of the universe as it is familiar to all men.”¹⁶⁰ The Southern writer has failed to accomplish this, Davidson argued. All that the Southern writer, in 1926, had accomplished was writing “about negroes, mountaineers, or poor whites.” But this, Davidson said, is a “rather unconvincing sort of Southernness” because it “borrows from a traditionally romantic subject-matter and adds to its

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 782.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 781-82.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 782.

own character the ingredients thus confessedly not within itself.”¹⁶¹ Thus the Southerner “runs the risk of being emptily local and sentimental” or “taking extra care to be non-sentimental, becomes splenetic, austere, remote.”¹⁶²

The solution, Davidson argued, is for the Southerner to embrace the qualities of “exuberance, sensitiveness, liveliness of imagination, warmth of temper” that will ultimately lead to “a satisfactory self-realization.”¹⁶³ This will not occur in simply negative reactions. The Southern writer must not define his identity by what he does not want to be, but must use positive affirmations of his character. He said, “In sum, the Southern character, properly realized, might display an affirmative zest and abandon now lacking in American art.”¹⁶⁴

Davidson later told Allen Tate that he had “been going on a spiritual ‘Secession,’”¹⁶⁵ ever since he wrote this article. He said it “made me examine my own mind.”¹⁶⁶ The article clearly reflects a change in Davidson’s thinking about the importance of a distinctly Southern identity in Southern writing. The fact that he criticizes his own writing, as a Fugitive poet, brings out the realization that he has operated under wrong assumptions for much of his literary career. *Modern* writing should not reflect “a dissociation of the artist from his environment.”¹⁶⁷ As

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 782-83.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 783.

¹⁶⁵ Davidson to Tate, March 4, 1927 in Fain and Young *Literary Correspondence*, 193.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Davidson, “The Artist as Southerner,” 782.

Davidson came to understand this in the period between the Scopes Trial and the publication of *I'll Take My Stand*, he sought to embody this approach in more of his own poetry.

His next poetic expression, *The Tall Men* was completed in 1927 and was “intended to be a dramatic visualization of a modern Southerner, trapped in a distasteful urban environment, subjecting the phenomenon of the disordered present to a comparison with the heroic past.”¹⁶⁸ As Davidson was preparing it, he told his friend, Allen Tate, that he intended it to “present what I intend to be a fairly complex portrait of a person (say myself) definitely located in Tennessee, sensitive to what is going on as well as what has gone on for some hundreds of years.”¹⁶⁹

The first two poems Davidson completed in *The Tall Men* were the first and last of the series.¹⁷⁰ “The Long Street” forms the prologue to the series and sets the tone for the entire series, although “Fire on Belmont Street,” the final poem of the series, fulfills the final purpose of the author in that these poems will express confusion and aimlessness. Davidson won the Southern Prize of the Poetry Society at South Carolina for “Fire on Belmont Street” in 1926.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 42.

¹⁶⁹ Davidson to Tate, March 29, 1926 in Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, 162.

¹⁷⁰ *The Tall Men* was published several times. For ease of citation, I shall use the version that appears in *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938).

¹⁷¹ Rubin, *The Wary Fugitives*, 164.

“The Long Street” pictures a person pacing a street in the summer of a city, wondering “what once was here.” He remembers the grass that is no longer there.

Only the blind stone roots of the dull street
And the steel thews of houses flourish here,
And the baked curve of asphalt, smooth, trodden,
Covers dead earth that once as quick with grass.
Snuffling the ground with acrid breath the motors
Fret the long street. Steel answers steel. Dust whirls.
Skulls hurry past with the pale flesh yet clinging
And a little hair.¹⁷²

The isolation of Davidson’s pacing man is apparent in the poem and is reminiscent of “A Demon Brother.”

The final poem in the series, “Fire on Belmont Street,” is more obvious in its attack on the values of the modern world.

He was a worthy citizen of the town.
‘Where is the fire?’ he babbled as he ran.
‘The fire! The fire!’ Spat between pursy breaths
He dropped his question, stuck his gross right hand
Against his watch-chain, ran, and stared, and sobbed,
*Out Belmont Street? My God, that’s where I live!*¹⁷³

While fire burns some nameless part of the city, the “worthy citizen” is concerned only for his own house. The poem goes on to admonish all the people of the town that they are not behaving as their ancestors would have them behave. The fire is not a physical danger; it is the metaphorical representation of “the wrath of heaven at the urban industrial wasteland that the modern citizenry

¹⁷² Davidson, “The Long Street,” in *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems*, 64.

¹⁷³ Davidson, “Fire on Belmont Street,” in *Lee and the Mountains and Other Poems*, 134.

have made.”¹⁷⁴ Davidson played on the well-known image of smoke in the city. Normally where smoke is present, there is fire. In the modern industrial city, however, smoke is merely the by-product of industrial progress, rising from the skyline. It does not indicate harm from destruction, at least not the kind the average citizen would recognize. So he includes the rally cry,

‘Citizens, awake! Fire is upon you, fire
That will not rest, invisible fire that feeds
On your quick brains, your beds, your homes, your
Steeple,
Fire in your sons’ veins and in your daughters’,
Fire like a dream of Hell in all your world.’¹⁷⁵

Then in a final episode meant to remind readers of biblical apocalyptic writing, Davidson suggests the remedy that would cure the modern world of its industrial plague:

‘Rush out into the night, take nothing with you,
Only your naked selves, your naked hearts.
Fly from the wrath of fire to the hills
Where water is and the slow peace of time.’¹⁷⁶

Sandwiched in between these two poems, Davidson includes a masterful work of poetry that begs the reader to consider his modern world set against the heroic, colonial past. Davidson attempted to find his Southern identity in the “tall men” of Tennessee history. He looked to men like John Sevier, Andrew Jackson, and Davy Crockett who “had to cross the widest parts of the Appalachian range ... and finally opening into limestone basins, like the Blue Grass of Kentucky and

¹⁷⁴ Rubin, *The Wary Fugitives*, 165.

¹⁷⁵ Davidson, “Fire on Belmont Street,” in *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems*, 136.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

the Middle Basin of Tennessee, which in turn gave way to broken lands, everywhere heavily forested, that leveled gradually into plains or deltas.”¹⁷⁷ Davidson strove to connect with his heritage through these poems, and indelibly came away with a commitment to the Southern heritage that he had once felt so restrictive to his life as a Southern artist. We see in *The Tall Men* an affirmation that it is not the steel and concrete of the modern city that gives life or meaning. Davidson had already begun thinking in an anti-modern circuit. “What did you die for?” questions the narrator, in the course of one of the poems:

Nothing indeed nothing!
The seed of the white man grows on Indian graves,
Waxing in steel and stone, nursing the fire
That eats and blackens till he has no life
But in the fire that eats him. White man, remember,
Brother, remember Hnaef and his sixty warriors
Greedy for battle-joy. Remember the rifles
Talking men’s talk into the Tennessee darkness
And the long-haired hunters watching the Tennessee hills
In the land of bog rivers for something.¹⁷⁸

In contrast, Davidson pointed to figures like Andrew Jackson.

What makes men live but honor? I have felt
The bullet biting next to my heart and yet
I kept my life for honor’s sake and killed
My enemy

.....
Then all the people knew
That I was of their breed and trusted me.
Cowards and lies and little men will pass,
But honor, by the Eternal, will endure.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Donald Davidson, “Lands That Were Golden II: The Two Old Wests,” *The American Review* 4 (November, 1934), 33.

¹⁷⁸ Davidson, “Fire on Belmont Street,” in *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems*, 137.

¹⁷⁹ Davidson, “The Tall Men,” in *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems*, 72.

Honor! That proto-typical southern virtue, documented by Bertram Wyatt-Brown in *Honor and Violence in the Old South*, is one of the marks of Southern identity that Davidson reaches back to find.¹⁸⁰ But where Wyatt-Brown contends that “the principles of honor were the means to create and bind together a privileged group and to classify the ranks of its members for the purposes of establishing order and group cohesion,” Davidson found honor to be one of the virtues most worth imitating in modern life.¹⁸¹ Indeed, in Davidson’s estimation, it was worth dying for.

Again, we see a clear movement from the Davidson who fled from all things Southern as a Fugitive poet to the Davidson of the later 1920’s. He explained much of this in 1957 by saying that as Fugitive poets, “we were somehow within the general Southern tradition in having attachments that could be taken as a matter of course.”¹⁸² What took place between 1925 and 1930 was a re-evaluation of his Southern heritage and a conscious decision that his heritage mattered more than he had previously recognized.

Davidson also wrote “First Fruits of Dayton” in 1928 in which he discusses his perspective of the South in light of the Scopes Trial. It represents the final step in his conversion from Fugitive poet to Southern Agrarian. In this essay, Davidson argued that progress needs to be defined before programs are enacted

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁸¹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Andrew Jackson’s Honor,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 17:1 (Spring, 1997), 1.

¹⁸² Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 5.

to industrialize the South. Failing to wrestle with the complex issues of provincialism will create a South that ceases to be Southern.

In the wake of the Scopes Trial, politicians and educational institutions were calling for a more progressive South, where anti-evolution laws and the like would be a thing of the past. The proposals ranged from “denunciations and satire all the way to boastful symposia which detail the surprising phenomena of the New South in terms of such physical and cashable matters as water power, climate, mineral resources, and cheap labor.”¹⁸³ Davidson argued that in order to correctly assess the social issues of the Scopes Trial, one must define progress. In his opinion, Southern educational institutions were the key to whatever form of progress the South was going to have, already implying that Southern progress should not come from outside the South.

“Southern educational institutions are the nuclei from which ideas work outward, impregnating the commonwealth of social thought,” Davidson wrote.¹⁸⁴ He also argued, “It is the quality of intellectual progress ... that we should consider most attentively.”¹⁸⁵ What is progress and how is it to be integrated into the social fabric of any given region? Progress must be of a societal and communal nature, not merely a sterile mercantile or scientific form of progress.

Southern progress should look Southern. Davidson was concerned that a Northern formula for progress strictly imposed on the South would obliterate the

¹⁸³ Donald Davidson, “First Fruits of Dayton, 36.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

essential characteristics of Southernness. "To make Charleston over into the precise image of Pittsburgh would be a crime worse than the Dayton crime."¹⁸⁶

The South, as he saw it, was not necessarily opposed to progress through business, but he felt such progress should be carefully crafted with a mind to the preservation of Southern identity. "Surely it is the business of Southern leaders not merely to be progressive, but to study how to adapt the ways of progress to certain peculiarities of the Southern people which do not yet deserve to perish from the earth," Davidson pleaded.¹⁸⁷ The theme of adapting progress was a crusade from which Davidson would never really admit defeat, even when it was obvious his cause was doomed. It is the very foundation of his agrarian conversion. Adaptation is a constant theme in his poetry and criticism before 1925. His very notion of modernism was one of adaptation. He wrote to Tate in 1923 that he desired his poetry to "strike a balance between the best of the old and the new."¹⁸⁸ Davidson had believed that the virtues of modernity could be adapted to life in the South and overshadow all the sentimentalism and shallow romanticism that characterized recent Southern literature. He saw in the Dayton trial that the real values of modernity were not adaptive to the conditions of life anywhere. Modernity does not adapt, it devours! Davidson asks, "What will

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁸⁸ Davidson to Tate, June 26, 1923, in Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, 73.

happen to [our traditions] before the modern doctrine which insists that progress is novelty, is energy, is quantity?"¹⁸⁹

Davidson declared: "Once we had in the South ... a tradition of repose and *noblesse oblige*, ways of quiet, cultured life not surpassed anywhere....Once we had romantic notions about the beauty and goodness of women, and we even believed in God and good manners."¹⁹⁰ These things are doomed in the face of the modernity Davidson saw in the Scopes Trial. All that remained was "biology, behaviorism, a handful of fossils, a tabloid newspaper, Mencken's essay on the liver as the seat of artistic inspiration ... the vague, elusive thing called liberalism."¹⁹¹ What would be attractive about such a proposal? Davidson spent the rest of his life trying to convince people that there was a better way of life.

One can easily see that the heritage of the South is a major concern for Davidson in this essay. The South must keep some semblance of its heritage, even if it industrializes and makes progress. Provincialism is a good thing, in certain amounts: "The South has been damned for its provincialism, but there never was a time when the South needed its provincialism more – if by provincialism is meant its heritage of individual character, the whole bundle of ways that make the South Southern."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Davidson, "First Fruits," 44.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., 46.

Finally, the root issue for Davidson in his transition from a poet with modernist leanings to an agrarian attacking modernity was art and the lack of beauty that he now saw inherent in modernity. Davidson argued, “The weakness of the liberal cause is its lack of flavor, which is the result of its dry insistence on purely intellectual things....The souls of men refuse to be stirred by logarithmic arrangements of ideas.”¹⁹³ Davidson later said, “The general public does not know that science is opposed to poetry.”¹⁹⁴

Ultimately, between 1923 and 1930, Davidson reevaluated the modernism he had once embraced as the path to a valuable literature and art in modern society. In the wake of the Scopes Trial, Davidson determined, as did John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, that modernism had no ability or desire to adapt itself to the culture of any particular region, but instead to invade and overthrow any vestiges of tradition and heritage it found there. As James C. Cobb has pointed out, “In the wake of the Scopes Trial...the ‘Fugitive Group’ began to sense that their region’s future as a distinctive culture was endangered not only by the efforts of Mencken ... but by the earnest efforts of its own disciples of ‘progress.’”¹⁹⁵ These men were not willing to see the South be made into an emotionless and sterile land. They felt they had no choice but to stand up for the South and defend its heritage as they understood it. The results of this conviction

¹⁹³ Ibid. 46.

¹⁹⁴ Donald Davidson, “Poetry as Tradition,” in *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, 8.

¹⁹⁵ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South*, 116.

came about in 1930 when *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* was published.

CHAPTER FOUR: TAKING HIS STAND

DAVIDSON AGAINST LEVIATHAN

I'll Take My Stand was published in 1930, just months after the stock market crash that heralded the onset of the Great Depression. No doubt because of this fact, critics were and continue to be critical of Davidson and the other Agrarians for what appeared to be another reaction to the Great Depression. Even at the time the Agrarians felt that they were being misunderstood. Davidson said, "We did not think of industrialism and agrarianism in terms that our critics have used."¹⁹⁶ Davidson further lamented that "they [the critics] have been unable to see the purposes of *I'll Take My Stand* in the proper context."¹⁹⁷ Davidson once said, "Whatever else may be said of 'I'll Take My Stand,' it has this unique distinction: it has been refuted by more people who have never read it – or even seen a copy – than any other book in American history."¹⁹⁸ The Agrarians, so Davidson later said, were not advocating any plan for the South that encouraged a return to the romantic notions they had avoided for so many years. Nor were they suggesting a return to antebellum Southern politics. "Nobody now proposes for the South, or for any other community in this country,

¹⁹⁶ Davidson, "*I'll Take My Stand: A History*," 303.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Davidson, "The 'Mystery' of the Agrarians," 6.

an independent political destiny,” they wrote in the Statement of Principles.¹⁹⁹ They were not neo-Confederates, as some early critics had indicated.²⁰⁰

Davidson also indicated that *I'll Take My Stand* was the only unified statement ever made by the group. After that symposium was completed “they performed as individuals, for the most part, acting independently of one another.”²⁰¹ He did admit that some members of the group, including himself, went on to write for another symposium edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate. This volume was published in 1936 as *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence*. It was not a uniquely “Agrarian” symposium, however, as it included several viewpoints, among them the English Distributists.²⁰² Davidson had seemed to harbor an idea that a second symposium would follow where the “principles and ideas” of *I'll Take My Stand* could be turned into “specific application.”²⁰³ In a letter to Tate in 1943, Davidson lamented that *Who Owns America* had “displaced a sequel to *I'll Take My Stand*.”²⁰⁴ In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, the same year, Davidson argued that “whoever wants to know what the Agrarians have said and are still saying must therefore undertake an extensive course of reading....”²⁰⁵ Davidson had a voluminous output of

¹⁹⁹ Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*, xlii.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 46-7.

²⁰¹ Davidson, “The ‘Mystery’ of the Agrarians,” 6.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 7 For more on the Distributists, see Edward S. Shapiro, “The American Distributists and the New Deal” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1968).

²⁰³ Davidson, “*I'll Take My Stand: A History*,” 303, 318.

²⁰⁴ Davidson to Tate, January 2, 1943 in Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence*, 329.

²⁰⁵ Davidson, “The ‘Mystery’ of the Agrarians,” 7.

material from 1930 well into the 1940's in journals like the *American Review*, as well as several books. Taking Davidson's advice, we will endeavor to understand the Agrarian movement from Davidson's perspective.

To Donald Davidson, Agrarianism represented a comprehensive attack on the fundamental character of modernism. Daniel Joseph Singal has argued that modernism was a clear break with a Victorian culture of the previous century that had relied heavily on a separation of values into antithetical spheres of thought. Modernism, Singal argues, seeks "to bring together that which the previous culture tried to keep separate."²⁰⁶ Recognizing that any definition would be imperfect, Singal has further given some structure to this complex pattern of modernism. He lists five basic marks of the modernist worldview:

The recognition of man's irrational nature, the acceptance of an open and unpredictable universe, the notion of conflict as inherently virtuous, the tolerance of uncertainty, and the drive toward probing criticism--all are part of the Modernist effort to reintegrate the human consciousness and thus to liberate man from the restrictive culture of enforced innocence with which the century began.²⁰⁷

While he maintained allegiance to at least one of these characteristics, Davidson adopted the Agrarian worldview to counter the elements of the modernist worldview he felt were incompatible with "a balanced life."²⁰⁸ The modernist worldview was opposed to a uniquely Southern identity. To the extent industrialization had made significant inroads to the South since the end of

²⁰⁶ Daniel Joseph Singal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," *American Quarterly* 39:1 (Spring, 1987), 13.

²⁰⁷ Singal, *The War Within*, 8.

²⁰⁸ Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," *I'll Take My Stand*, 51.

military Reconstruction, Southern identity had been devalued among the men and women, and especially the youth, of the South. Not only this, but the modernist worldview was totally opposed to the Southern heritage, as Davidson saw it. Modernism, as he considered in various essays, was intent upon devouring the culture of the South and its rich heritage. Likening modernism to the sirens of Odysseus, Davidson was so bold as to call industrial society cannibalistic.²⁰⁹ Finally, the worldview of modernism was disastrously driven by a deification of industrialism and progress. In *I'll Take My Stand*, Davidson argued, "Industrialism can be deposed as the regulating god of modern society."²¹⁰ Some historians have considered this last point to be crucial to Agrarianism. "If there was a central idea in agrarianism," Michael O'Brien has said, "it was an abhorrence of industrialism and a repudiation of the Victorian faith in progress and science."²¹¹

Davidson attempted to counter all these perceived faults of the worldview of modernity with the Agrarian way of life. At each of these points, Davidson argued, Agrarianism provided a solution to the fault inherent in the modern worldview. It was only through application of this Agrarian worldview that the identity and heritage of the South could be saved. Only the Agrarian way of life offered any real challenge to the progressivism overtaking the modern world.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," *I'll Take My Stand*, 30.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

²¹¹ Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South: 1920-1941* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 14.

Davidson thought Southern identity had come under fire by the worldview of modernism. The constant attacks of H.L. Mencken in the 1920's and the promises of industrialism threatened to strip the Southerner of anything that made him uniquely Southern. As he had come to believe by 1926 when he published "The Artist as Southerner," the Southerner needed the reassurance that his identity was valid in a world of constant change and flux. Agrarianism had the potential to restore that Southern identity which was in danger of becoming extinct through the operations of the worldview of modernity.

The worldview of modernity seemed to require Southerners to be ashamed of being Southerners, to distance themselves from their environment and embrace the shifting cultural values of modernity. Agrarianism allowed the Southerner to embrace the regional distinctiveness of his past and express it with exuberance. A great concern for him was that "the South should explore its own mind and rediscover itself."²¹² He was concerned that Southern writers should strive to be more Southern and no longer lose themselves in "modern literary patterns."²¹³ While they "cannot help being contemporary," they should nonetheless, "not be any the less Southern."²¹⁴ A healthy dose of provincialism was necessary to maintain contact with the identity and heritage that each artist possessed.

²¹² Davidson, *The Spyglass*, 5-6.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Historian Edward Shapiro has made the point that, according to the Agrarians, “Southern cultural excellencies” relied on “precisely the religious and rural character” that Mencken so despised, for “her emphasis on leisure and the enjoyment of life, her code of manners, her folklore and arts and crafts, her delight in conversation and good food”²¹⁵ Agrarianism provided a way to reach back and take hold of the identity that was being so easily and frequently trampled. To Davidson this was absolutely necessary. John Shelton Reed has suggested that “the essayists of *I’ll Take My Stand* were clearly concerned to forge a view of the South’s past and its future that southerners did not have to be ashamed of, one that might even win some respect outside the region.”²¹⁶ Paul Murphy has also remarked that “Davidson considered Agrarianism to be a defensive statement of faith and a source of identity.”²¹⁷ In a sense, while Tate and Ransom turned to religion for solace after 1925, Davidson turned to the South. The South *became* his religion and Agrarianism his confessional statement.

Another problem that Agrarianism solved for Davidson was loss of heritage. As Davidson believed, modernity did not adapt itself to the heritage and traditions in place in any region, but sought to overrun the region and implant its

²¹⁵ Edward S. Shapiro, “The Southern Agrarians, H.L. Mencken, and the Quest for Southern Identity” *American Studies* 13:2 (1971), 79.

²¹⁶ John Shelton Reed, “For Dixieland: The Sectionalism of *I’ll Take My Stand*” in *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years* ed. By William C. Harvard and Walter Sullivan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 47.

²¹⁷ Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 31.

own values and goals. To Davidson, the loss of the heritage of the South was unacceptable. Tied up in the heritage of the South was everything that made the South a distinct place and gave men a sense of place.

As early as *An Outland Piper* (1924), Davidson was showing concern for heritage in the face of industrial growth and progress. The poem "Old Harp" reflects on the present conditions of men; "Once he sang of old, old things / In tongues men have forgot."²¹⁸ By 1930 the situation was more distinct. In "A Mirror for Artists," Davidson maintained that "for a century and a half, the South has preserved its agrarian economy."²¹⁹ This fact makes possible the assertion that "the Southern people have long cultivated a historical consciousness that permeates manners, localities, institutions, the very words and cadence of social intercourse."²²⁰

In 1938 Davidson published his third volume of poetry, *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems*. The volume contained the entirety of *The Tall Men* and several poems written after 1931 that represented his maturing thought. A *New York Times* review of the volume praised Davidson saying, "[I]t is better to have writers believing something, even if it is only the superior virtues and beauties of Lee's South, than to have them wandering wholly in a wasteland," as well as for being "as devoted to the older tools [of poetry] as he is to the older

²¹⁸ Donald Davidson, "Old Harp," in *An Outland Piper* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 6.

²¹⁹ Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," in *I'll Take My Stand*, 53.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

way of life.”²²¹ Thomas Inge said that Davidson “is continuing his journey down the Long Street” in *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems*.²²² Davidson used the poems in this new volume to continue the metaphor of the Southerner seeking the heritage that was lost. He achieves this chiefly through portraits of three Southern heroes: Lee, Forrest and Jackson. Each figure is meant to remind the reader of the rich heritage the South possesses.

God too late
Unseals to certain eyes the drift
Of time and the hopes of men and a sacred cause.
The fortune of the Lees goes with the land
Whose sons will keep it still.²²³

But then, we must remember the South to which Davidson looked. Davidson’s view of Southern history was one colored by his traditional upbringing, which has been argued was largely based in the Cavalier tradition of the Old South. Because of this, Davidson tended to see the South as an idealized and romantic metaphor.

In the South the eighteenth-century social inheritance flowered into a gracious civilization that, despite its defects, was actually a civilization, true and indigenous, well diffused, well established. Its culture was sound and realistic in that it was not at war with its own economic foundations. It did not need to be paraded loudly; it was not thought about particularly. The manners of planters and countrymen did not require them to change their beliefs and temper in going from cornfield to drawing-room, from cotton rows to church or frolic. They were the same persons everywhere.²²⁴

²²¹ Phyllis McGinley, “A Tribute to the Persistence of Poets,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1949, BR5.

²²² Thomas Inge and Daniel Young, *Donald Davidson*, 93.

²²³ Donald Davidson, “Lee in the Mountains,” *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), 4.

²²⁴ Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” *I’ll Take My Stand*, 53.

These elements certainly color his argument about what the Agrarian worldview was supposed to restore to the Southern character.

In the first place, Davidson's view of the South was heavily predicated on a philosophy of regionalism culled from, or at least strengthened by, the historical analysis of Frederick Jackson Turner. At the beginning of *The Attack on Leviathan*, Davidson argued, "There is no escape from the fact that the American nation is spread over a continental area, and that in the spreading process it has established local concentrations which have geographic bounds."²²⁵ Davidson used Turner's posthumous *The Significance of Sections in American History* and argued with Turner, "Sections are more important than states in shaping the underlying forces of American history."²²⁶

Davidson's primary focus became that sections, or regions as he renamed them for political expediency, ought to determine much of their own character, even to the point of political control.²²⁷ Davidson argued that this would assist the making of economic decisions that would affect the whole nation. Regional governments could respect the regional nature of the nation and not impose economic liabilities or requirements on sections that would receive no benefit from their decisions. This, of course, is reminiscent of traditional Southern rhetoric from the Lost Cause myth that suggested the tariff was really behind the

²²⁵ Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan*, 5.

²²⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of Sections in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), 183.

²²⁷ Cf. Donald Davidson, "That This Nation May Endure-The Need for Political Regionalism," *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* ed. Herbert Agar and Allen Tate (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1936; reprint, Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 149-176.

Civil War and that slavery had very little to do with the conflict. Furthermore, Turner's research for his sectionalism theory was based on many of the same premises of his earlier frontier thesis, which has undergone serious criticism in recent years by historians skeptical of such a broad theory.²²⁸

Another aspect of Davidson's understanding of Southern history was supplied by U.B. Phillips. Phillips' major study, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, was a staple for the entire group of Agrarians.²²⁹ Davidson reviewed it in 1929 as part of *The Critic's Almanac*.²³⁰ Davidson digested a key idea from Phillips' volume:

Ways of life in the Old South were no mere importations or engrafting. They grew naturally out of practice to meet local situations and were not devised according to some golden theory produced by a grand cabinet of philosophers.²³¹

From this we can begin to see how Southern heritage operated in Davidson's mind. It was no carefully formulated construct for mass control of populations. He would later quarrel with W.J. Cash's "Proto-Dorian" label, essentially designed to argue that the South was intent upon class control, as well.²³² The other major idea that Davidson takes from his reading of Phillips'

²²⁸ For a fuller consideration of Turner, see Ray Billington, *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966; reprint Huntington, New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1977).

²²⁹ Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1946).

²³⁰ Davidson's book column, *The Spyglass* was renamed *The Critic's Almanac* in 1928.

²³¹ Davidson, *The Spyglass*, 214.

²³² Cf. Donald Davidson, "Mr. Cash and the Proto-Dorian South," in *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, 191-212. In his essay on Cash's famous book, Davidson argues that Cash's terms are too simple for the complex system he is trying to explain, calling "Proto-Dorian" "a rhetorical figure" that

book was that plantation life had been pretty congenial to all involved, “especially for the Negroes.”²³³ The plantation was “a factory, a school, a parish, a pageant, a variety show, a matrimonial bureau, a nursery, a divorce court, a hierarchy – not without grievous episodes but surprisingly unsevere....”²³⁴ Davidson took plantation life to be a metaphor for the rural experience of small-town life. It provided the same heritage he desired to see maintained. While he and the other Agrarians belittled the scholarship which saw the plantation as the only kind of genteel existence in the antebellum South, he did appreciate the simplicity of life it provided.

One other source of Davidson’s view of Southern heritage comes from Frank L. Owsley. Though a contemporary of Davidson’s, as well as a contributor to *I’ll Take My Stand*, Owsley’s teaching on the South had a significant effect on the way Davidson saw his own history. According to the teaching of Owsley, “the bulk of the Southern population from the Revolution to the Civil War” was made up of “landowning farmers who belonged neither to the plantation economy nor to the destitute and frequently degraded poor-white class.”²³⁵ Not only this, but Owsley taught that slavery “was no essential part of the agrarian civilization of

“does not provide a good foundation for an interpretation of three centuries of Southern history,” and “Savage Ideal,” an “effective vituperation” 201.

²³³ Davidson, *The Spyglass*, 215.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), viii,

the South – though the Southerners under attack assumed that it was.”²³⁶ Owsley’s influence caused Davidson to understand the South “not as a slave society at all but as a traditional, agrarian society inhabited by ‘plain folk’ who had created a unified, homogenous culture: a kind of extended family, clan, or tribe.”²³⁷

Sadly, Davidson’s views on heritage overlooked or ignored much of the way antebellum Southern society really operated. As Charles P. Roland put it, the actual history of the South “was often twisted in the southern mind, exaggerated by time and telling, by prejudice and pride. The legendary Old South became an idyllic land of kind and gracious masters and obedient and happy slaves.”²³⁸ Even his friend Allen Tate eventually broke common ground with Davidson and argued, “Mr. Davidson’s Old South has always seemed to me to leave about half of the Old South out of the account: the half, or third, or whatever the figures were, that included the Negro.”²³⁹

Nonetheless, Davidson saw the Southern heritage as threatened by the worldview of modernity and believed Agrarianism to be the remedy for the way of life he believed to exist in the South. “[O]nly in an agrarian society,” he wrote in

²³⁶ Frank L. Owsley, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, 76.

²³⁷ Mark G. Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 6.

²³⁸ Charles P. Roland, “The South of the Agrarians,” *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years* ed. By William C. Harvard and Walter Sullivan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 19-20.

²³⁹ Allen Tate, *Memoirs and Opinions*, 37-8.

I'll Take My Stand, "does there remain much hope of a balanced life...."²⁴⁰ A balanced life was the supposed product of Davidson's Agrarian society. A balanced life was one that recognized the value of the machine, but did not let it rule the farm. Davidson pointed out on more than one occasion that "agrarians want to cut the economic system to fit the society rather than the society to fit the economic system."²⁴¹

Finally, the Statement of Principles at the beginning of *I'll Take My Stand* set the disagreement between Davidson and modernism out plainly. According to Davidson, the argument was between Agrarianism and Industrialism.²⁴² Davidson later called this statement a "firm declaration of complete antithesis between the Agrarian and the Industrial...."²⁴³ Davidson's own essay in *I'll Take My Stand* was written from the artistic standpoint, as a great many of his essays and articles were. "What is the industrial theory of the arts?," Davidson asked rhetorically at the beginning of "A Mirror for Artists."²⁴⁴ His concern was that "the making of an industrial society will extinguish the meaning of the arts, as

²⁴⁰ Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," in *I'll Take My Stand*, 51.

²⁴¹ Donald Davidson, "The Class Approach to Southern Problems," *The Southern Review* 5 (1939-1940), 270. Cf. Davidson, "*I'll Take My Stand: A History*," 310-11.

²⁴² "Statement of Principles," *I'll Take My Stand*, xli. It is regularly acknowledged that Ransom wrote the statement of principles for the book, but in a letter to Allen Tate dated Dec. 29, 1929 Davidson said "Ransom, Lytle, and I are working on a sort of Credo or Manifesto, which will serve to acquaint contributors with our aims and to furnish a definite line for articles to follow.... This Credo, in its final form, can be used as a foreword to the volume...." Davidson to Tate, Dec. 29, 1929, in Fain and Young, *Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974): 247. See also Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," *I'll Take My Stand*, 52 and *Southern Writers*, 46.

²⁴³ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 46.

²⁴⁴ Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," in *I'll Take My Stand*, 28.

humanity has known them in the past.”²⁴⁵ It is, of course, Davidson’s main contention that “the South, as a distinct, provincial region, offers terms of life favorable to the artist...”²⁴⁶ When we take into account that Davidson was not just speaking of professional artists, but that every man and woman who was brought up in a rigorous humanistic curriculum would be predisposed to the arts, we can see how far-reaching Davidson’s claim really is.

Industrialism was the all-encompassing Leviathan of modern society and represented “the decision of society to invest its resources in the applied sciences.”²⁴⁷ As such it was the most dangerous element of modernity. It was the most dangerous because it was the most appealing. Southern liberals had been advocating a transition to modern industrialism in the South since the turn of the twentieth century. In the Dayton trial they got a perfect boost for their program of reform. Davidson even said, “The Dayton trial ... played right into the hands of the liberals.”²⁴⁸ The solution to the South’s troubles, they declared, was progress. He also said the younger generation “had been fully exposed to all the loose precepts of modernism and were inclined to accept without question its fashionable notions.”²⁴⁹ He went on to say,

As a matter of course they believed that culture comes out of books; that wealth is the road to success and that it is to be achieved only by

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 56-7.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 50; “Symposium: The Agrarians Today,” *Shenandoah* 3 (Summer 1952), 17.

²⁴⁸ Davidson, *Attack on Leviathan*, 280.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

industrial expansion; ... progress is real and depends on science; that beauty is better than morality; that politics is unimportant; that education really educates.²⁵⁰

Industrialism reorganizes society “according to theories of material progress.”²⁵¹ Furthermore, “its entire view of government, art, religion, education, whatever-you-please, is bound to be colored by a basically selfish philosophy.”²⁵²

Industrialism had a philosophy of life that was drastically at odds with what Davidson considered to be the Southern, or Agrarian, way of life. The philosophy of life put forth by Industrialism as progress assumed that “labor is bad and men ought to do as little of it as possible.”²⁵³ This creates a world where we have a “separation of our lives into two distinct parts, of which one is all labor ... and the other all play.”²⁵⁴ This does not lead to a harmonious life, or one characterized at all by leisure. The kind of leisure offered by modern industrial progress is either “pure sloth,” “utter passivity,” or “another kind of labor.”²⁵⁵ Against this philosophy, Davidson advanced the Agrarian position that “work and play are not at odds,” but that the two should “harmoniously blend and interchange.”²⁵⁶

Industrialism, Davidson felt, was as aggressive as Sherman, and created as much confusion and destruction as his march to the sea had in previous

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” *I’ll Take My Stand*, 31.

²⁵² Davidson, *The Spyglass*, 231.

²⁵³ Ibid., 237.

²⁵⁴ Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 34.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 34-5.

²⁵⁶ Davidson, *The Spyglass*, 237.

years. "Industrialism ... began Sherman's march to the sea all over again. It plied ugliness upon wreckage and threw the old arrangements out of kilter."²⁵⁷

Science, the tool of the modernist worldview, had thrown the whole of society into disorder. One of the most horrific of issues to Davidson was that "to the scientists, there was only biological life; value judgments were meaningless."²⁵⁸

Writing in 1935, he said,

We believed that life determines economics, or ought to do so, and that economics is no more than an instrument, around use of which should gather many more motives than economic ones. The evil of industrial economics was that it squeezed all human motives into one narrow channel and then looked for humanitarian means to repair the injury.²⁵⁹

Only the South, Davidson felt, had escaped and was in the position of pointing out the dangers ahead to the rest of the nation. But the rest of the nation was ultimately unwilling to listen.

The answer, Davidson maintained, was not to rid the world of all machines. The Agrarians agreed that "an agrarian society is hardly one that has no use at all for industries...."²⁶⁰ The solution was to bring the use of machines into a proper balance with the other aspects of civilization. It was important to recognize that the two systems, Industrialism and Agrarianism, were at odds and only one of them held any prospects for harmonious existence. If the South, or

²⁵⁷ Davidson, *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, 241.

²⁵⁸ Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South*, 186.

²⁵⁹ Davidson, "I'll Take My Stand: A History," 310-11.

²⁶⁰ Twelve Southerners, "Statement of Principles," *I'll Take My Stand*, I-II; Davidson, "Agrarianism and Politics," 115; "I'll Take My Stand: A History," 313.

any other region feeling the sting of industrial progress, would reclaim the agrarian way of life, the culture might be saved.

The best way to reclaim that agrarian culture was to adopt policies that encouraged farming and other local industries. The Agrarians agreed, "The theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations, and that therefore it should have the economic preference and enlist the maximum number of workers."²⁶¹ Davidson quickly understood that any form of agrarianism would require political action in the modern world. His answer to this issue was the philosophy of regionalism, which amounted to political agrarianism.

Regionalism was based loosely on the sectional and regional theories of Frederick Jackson Turner, discussed already. It suggested a "revision of our political framework what will permit regional governments to function adequately; and that will enable the national government to ... prevent the kind of regional exploitation, disguised as paternalism, now being practiced on the South."²⁶² Davidson began moving in this direction very shortly after *I'll Take My Stand* was published. By 1938, when *The Attack on Leviathan* was published, he was

²⁶¹ Twelve Southerners, "Statement of Principles," *I'll Take My Stand*, li.

²⁶² Davidson, "*I'll Take My Stand: A History*," 319.

convinced it was absolutely necessary.²⁶³ His essay in *Who Owns America?* was also in line with his theory of regional reform.²⁶⁴

Other Agrarians also believed that public policy would be necessary for Agrarianism to flourish in the modern world. The closest they ever came to a proposal, however, was Frank Owsley's "The Pillars of Agrarianism," where he suggested five steps that would have to be agreed upon and enacted to have a politically agrarian society.

The five pillars on which it would appear that an agrarian society must rest are: 1) The restoration of the people to the land and the land to the people by the government purchasing lands held by loan companies, insurance companies, banks, absentee landlords, and planters whose estates are hopelessly encumbered with debt, and granting to the landless tenants, who are sufficiently able and responsible to own and conserve the land, a homestead of 80 acres with sufficient stock to cultivate the farm, and cash enough to feed and clothe the family for one year; 2) The preservation and restoration of the soil by the use of fines and escheat, and by making land practically inalienable and non-mortgageable - that is by restoring a modified feudal tenure where the state had a paramount interest in the land and could exact certain services and duties from those who possessed the land; 3) The establishment of a balanced agriculture where subsistence crops are the first consideration and the money crops are of secondary importance; 4) The establishment of a just political economy, where agriculture is placed upon an equal basis with industry, finance, and commerce; 5) The creation of regional governments possessed of more autonomy than the states, which will sustain the political economy fitted for each region, and which will prevent much sectional friction and sectional exploitation.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ See Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan*, 102-128.

²⁶⁴ See "That This Nation May Endure – The Need for Political Regionalism," *Who Owns America?*, 149-176.

²⁶⁵ Frank L. Owsley, "The Pillars of Agrarianism," *The Agrarians and the New Deal*, 210-11.

Though he was not fond of most New Deal programs, Davidson initially thought the newly created Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) showed promise in enacting agrarian policy, saying it represented “definite steps taken toward regional planning by the Federal government.”²⁶⁶ He was disabused of this notion fairly quickly, however, as the TVA began funding Northern industrial projects along the Tennessee River. He became concerned that the TVA would open up “the Tennessee Valley territory to a rush of Northern industry....”²⁶⁷ He fumed about this and blasted the organization in his second volume to *The Tennessee*, published in 1948. He devoted nearly seven chapters to the issues of forming the organization, running the organization, and the problems encountered in Tennessee and northern Alabama because of the TVA. Edward Shapiro has said that Davidson believed the TVA “wished to replace an agrarian economy with industrialism.”²⁶⁸ The Authority, according to Davidson, was more concerned with “the benefits that would accrue, in terms of industrial and social engineering” than with the families that would be displaced during construction of the many dams necessary for the TVA project.²⁶⁹

Regionalism was not an issue limited to Davidson or the Agrarians in the early twentieth century, but Davidson did use it consistently with his Agrarian program. It was the closest he ever came to being practical in his thinking and

²⁶⁶ Donald Davidson, “Regionalism as Social Science,” *The Southern Review* 3 (1937-1938), 219.

²⁶⁷ Donald Davidson, “On Being in Hock to the North,” *Free America* 3 (May, 1939), 4.

²⁶⁸ Edward S. Shapiro, “The Southern Agrarians and the Tennessee Valley Authority,” *American Quarterly* 22:4 (Winter, 1970), 804.

²⁶⁹ Davidson, *The Tennessee vol. 2: Civil War to TVA*, 237-8.

not simply philosophical. Regionalism was, for Davidson, a way to “limit the industrial monopoly that endowed one region with a virtual right of conquest over another.”²⁷⁰ It was, in short, political Agrarianism.

The concept of Regionalism never became a reality, though historian Robert Dorman has suggested that the hopes of various groups, including the Agrarians were riding on it in the early twentieth century: “The region, it was hoped, would provide the physical framework for the creation of new kinds of cities, small-scale, planned, delimited, and existing in balance with wilderness and a restored and rejuvenated rural economy.”²⁷¹ Ultimately, Mark Winchell argues, Regionalism failed due to the fact that after the Second World War “more diverse populations have come to inhabit the traditional geographic regions.”²⁷² This suggests that Davidson’s theory of Regionalism was predicated on the ethnic population inhabiting the regions at the time. Davidson either seems to overlook the very possibility that people might move from one region to another, or he did recognize this, and had desires to prevent it from happening.

In 1925, two months before the Dayton trial that was to provide the touchstone for much of Davidson’s public career, he began an article concerned with the difficulties of being a Southern artist in the South in the twentieth century. A year after the Dayton trial he completed the piece, and it was

²⁷⁰ Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South*, 199.

²⁷¹ Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xii-xiii.

²⁷² Winchell, *Where No Flag Flies*, 216.

published by *The Saturday Review of Literature*. A basic analysis of this piece exists in the foregoing pages, but it is important to remember the foundational elements. In "The Artist as Southerner," Davidson noted the circumstances under which a uniquely Southern art could exist. It did not consist, he held, in simply writing *about* the South. Southern art presupposed a commitment *to* the South as well, saying "to be Southern should mean much to any writer who has had the courage and endurance to remain in his own country and fight the battle out."²⁷³

His own contribution to the symposium, *I'll Take My Stand*, contained a massive indictment of modernism's ability to generate or provide conditions for true art. By treating the arts as simply a commodity, Davidson argues, modernism is "changing the conditions of life that have given art a meaning."²⁷⁴ Art is much more than another market; it cannot be just bought and sold like other goods. Art has a character that makes it unique among the products of the world. Art, here, is taken to mean not just the visual or performance arts, but any product of the rational mind which seeks to represent the external world. As such, the arts, Davidson says, "belong as a matter of course in the routine" of life.²⁷⁵ The arts would include the visual and performing arts, but also the liberal arts. Art is, in fact, the product of a liberal mind, acting in harmony with culture, and cultivated by leisure.

²⁷³ Davidson, "The Artist as Southerner," 783.

²⁷⁴ Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," 29.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

The arts are the product of a liberally educated mind. That is, they concern themselves with the product of a liberal education. From the Greeks through to the twentieth century, a liberal education was intended to produce a man capable “to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices both private and public of peace and war.”²⁷⁶ “The humanities,” Davidson said, “could be expected to foster the arts....”²⁷⁷ But the humanities were steadily disappearing from the curriculum of schools even as liberally focused as Vanderbilt. Paul Conkin says of the education at Vanderbilt, “The College of Arts and Science at Vanderbilt, until after World War I, adhered almost rigidly to a classical curriculum.”²⁷⁸ This meant, of course, that students in the Bachelor of Arts program took Greek and Latin, English literature, Philosophy, and Modern Languages. The First World War changed something fundamental in America’s educational establishment. A general shift away from the humanities took place after 1919 at Vanderbilt.²⁷⁹ Louise Cowan describes this as “a new philosophy of education ... focusing on the recipients of knowledge rather than the disciplines themselves, with a consequent democratization of attitude, so that the aims of education were made subject to timeliness and opportunism, and standards began their long downward plunge.”²⁸⁰ As things stood in 1930, Davidson was compelled to declare,

²⁷⁶ John Milton, *Tractate of Education* ed. Edward E. Morris (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1895), 9.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁷⁸ Paul Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians*, 4.

²⁷⁹ Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 37.

²⁸⁰ Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group*, 33.

“Education can do comparatively little to aid the cause of the arts as long as it must turn out graduates into an industrialized society which demands specialists in vocational, technical, and scientific subjects.”²⁸¹

The arts were to be conducted in harmony with the culture around them. True art, according to Davidson, was art that respected its environment and appreciated its surroundings. This was why Davidson found it so monstrous that Southern artists could not feel at home among the material surroundings of their Southern heritage. Davidson lamented, “[A] poet cannot be ‘Southern’ without behaving like a fool; and if he tries not to be a fool, he will not be recognizably ‘Southern.’”²⁸² The South ought to present, Davidson thought, the best model of a culture that could foster the arts, precisely because of its agrarian background. Its provincialism ought to work in its favor to create a really harmonious art. “The South has always had a native architecture, adapted from classic models into something distinctly Southern; and nothing more clearly and satisfyingly belongs where it is, or better expresses the beauty and stability of an ordered life, than its old country homes....”²⁸³ In order for art to have the meaning it had accumulated over the course of Western Civilization, it needed to be the product of a stable society where, “the goodness of life was measured by a scale of values having little to do with the material values of industrialism; where men were never too far

²⁸¹ Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 37.

²⁸² Davidson, “The Southern Poet and His Tradition,” *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 40 (May, 1932), 96.

²⁸³ Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 55.

removed from nature to forget that the chief subject of art, in the final sense, is nature.”²⁸⁴

The industrial world, working out the worldview of modernity, on the other hand, produces art that has been bought, hired, and manufactured, none of which is the representative of true art.²⁸⁵ The products of industrial art, he foresaw in prophetic tones, would be “Symphony concerts, heavily endowed and directed by world-famous experts” that could be “broadcast to millions.”²⁸⁶ Retail clerks would be able to purchase prints of paintings and cheap copies of Shakespeare’s plays with introductions by respected literary minds.²⁸⁷ And all classes of people would live in “beautiful homes adorned with designs approved by the best interior designers.”²⁸⁸ Modernism’s hidden assumption is that the art produced by industrialism will be good art. Davidson was not quite confident that this was so. The simple fact that art is to be mass-produced and made readily available to all classes of consumer made Davidson consider what kind of art will be consumed. Would the retail clerk read Shakespeare because she could? Would people go to symphony concerts because they were available? Davidson’s answer, equally prophetic, was no, they would not. The retail clerk would read “the comic strip with her bowl of patent cereal” and listen to jazz.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 29.

²⁸⁵ Cf. Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 28.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 32.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 33.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 33-4.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 35.

In point of fact, Davidson maintained, this is practically predestined to take place because “it is just as easy to distribute bad art – in fact, it is much easier, because bad art is more profitable.”²⁹⁰ The industrial machine, mass-producing art for everyone will undoubtedly cater to the “lowest common denominator.”²⁹¹ The economic assumptions that drive the industrial worldview will guarantee that only what sells will be manufactured.

In Davidson’s later, more mature, thought, he argued that industrialism created the distinction between high culture and low culture. Low culture, Davidson observed, derived from popular folklore, while high culture typically became art.²⁹² In Davidson’s mind, however, the two should be inseparable. “The popular lore ought to pass readily into the art,” he said in “Yeats and the Centaur.”²⁹³ More than that, Davidson believed the two ought to have a balance. Our notions of high art and low art have come about because we do not have balance anymore: “When the ‘high art’ and the ‘low art’ of a nation or a society are out of proper relationship to each other, the ‘high art’ becomes too ‘artsy,’ and the ‘low art’ too ‘low.’”²⁹⁴ Thus he could say that “the distance between the literary poet of today and jukebox ... would be a fair measure of the cultural

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Cf. Davidson, *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, 23-30.

²⁹³ Ibid., 25.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 26.

distance between the finest poetry of the twentieth century and the general audience.”²⁹⁵

True art was only able to be developed in a culture that valued leisure. Leisure, as Davidson understood it, represented a frame of mind that saw an essential unity between work and play, rather than a distinction.²⁹⁶ James S. Taylor has argued that the Greco-Roman conception of leisure was a contemplative spirit ready to advance itself. Indeed, the Greek word for leisure was *skole*, which easily becomes the English word “school.”²⁹⁷ Taylor argues, like Davidson, “To be placed at a 45° angle in a reclining chair, drink in one hand, remote control in the other, in front of the television, is not leisure but something closer to sloth of mind and body.”²⁹⁸

Between 1930 and the mid-1940’s Davidson advocated a return to the agrarian way of life as he found it in the South for the remedy to the industrial theory of art. Industrial art was not good art, it was not true art. True art required, at the very least, a liberally educated mind, a sense of harmony with nature, and a contemplative spirit. The modernist worldview did not provide any of these things.

Regardless of how modern scholars may quibble with Davidson over his politics, his romantic notions of the South, or his view of art, one must be

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁹⁶ Cf. Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists,” 32-4; Statement of Principles, *I’ll Take My Stand*, xlv-xlv.

²⁹⁷ Cf. James S. Taylor, *Poetic Knowledge: The Recovery of Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 14-15.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 14-15.

continually struck by the fact that *I'll Take My Stand* is still read and considered a landmark book in Southern history. One must also be shocked at how correct Davidson and the other Agrarians were in their predictions of how industrialism would change the way we think about such notions as community, art, and land.

After 1930, the war on Modernity that Donald Davidson engaged in presupposed three fundamental issues. A uniquely Southern identity was valuable, the traditional Southern heritage was fundamental to a balanced and harmonious life, and Industrialism was hostile to both of these and would destroy everything that made the South a distinct region. Davidson's involvement in the symposium, *I'll Take My Stand*, developed out of his own understanding of Agrarianism as a way of life that could solve all three of these issues. As it developed through his further writings, Agrarianism came to include a political program of Regionalism as well. Finally, the common strand in Davidson's critique of modernism was that it lacked the necessary conditions for true art. In all these cases, Davidson always maintained that his quarrel "was not with industry or science in their proper role, but with industrialism as a tyrant enslaving and ruling science itself, and with it religion, the arts, education, the state, thus reducing all principles to one principle, the economic, and becoming a destroyer, ready to break the continuity of human history and threatening the very existence of human society."²⁹⁹

²⁹⁹ Davidson, *Southern Writers*, 57-8.

CONCLUSION

In 1956, at an address to the Alpha of Tennessee Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, Donald Davidson summarized much of his experience in the previous thirty years as coming to realize:

A civilization cannot feed and flourish upon perishable things. Only imperishable things at its center can give it life. Nothing is more imperishable than poetry. In comparison, the material works of science and industry are but fleeting trifles. No civilization of the past has ever lived without poetry. Our civilization can hardly be an exception.³⁰⁰

As much as anything else, this statement frames the attack on modernity that took the form of the Agrarian movement of the 1930's. Richard Weaver has said that the Southern Agrarians "arose in opposition to an aggressive element of New South men" who "had written off ante-bellum civilization as a mistake...and had hastened to get on with a new way of life."³⁰¹ Their primary means of doing this, Weaver said, was to accept "completely the doctrine of progress," causing them to "want more factories, more of everything which would make the South a replica of Lowell and Schenectady and Youngstown with a consequent swelling of bank deposits and payrolls."³⁰² When *I'll Take My Stand* was published,

³⁰⁰ Davidson, "Poetry as Tradition," *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, 4-5.

³⁰¹ Richard M. Weaver, "Agrarianism in Exile," in *The Southern Essays of Richard Weaver* ed. George M. Curtis III and James J. Thompson, Jr. (Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1987), 29.

³⁰² Richard M. Weaver, "The Tennessee Agrarians," in *The Southern Essays of Richard Weaver* ed. George M. Curtis III and James J. Thompson, Jr. (Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund, 1987), 11.

Davidson and the other Agrarians “put before the public in plain terms the case for a return to a more stable order of society.”³⁰³

But why did Davidson want a stable society? It is clear from the argument in the preceding pages that Davidson felt the worldview of modernity at odds with the traditional Southern society in which he had been raised, but this does not explain the sudden shift that took place around 1925. It does not explain why a man would make the kind of change in his outlook that Donald Davidson made concerning the South and Southern traditions.

In the final analysis, one must return to some of Davidson’s foundational documents of Agrarian thought and compare them with some of his most mature thoughts on the subject. When we do, we will find that the overarching rationale for his involvement in the Agrarian movement of the 1930s is a presuppositional commitment to art as the basis of any true society. Thus we will find that his conversion from modernist Fugitive poet to Southern Agrarian takes the form of a worldview conflict in which art plays the deciding role. The worldview of modernity simply could not account for true art, as Davidson conceived it, so he fell back to what, in his estimation, was the best society for creating art, the Agrarian South.

³⁰³ Weaver, “Agrarianism in Exile,” 37.

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