

**A Southern Conservative in the Modern World:  
Donald Davidson’s “Desperate Counsel”**

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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 woman, and we believed in God and good manners. But what will happen to that tradition before the modern doctrine which insists that progress is novelty, is energy, is quantity? . . . Now we are offered 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.

—Donald Davidson, “The Artist as Southerner”

The supremacy of industrialism itself can be repudiated. Industrialism can be deposed as the regulating god of modern society. This is no doubt a desperate counsel. But the artist may well find in it more promise for his cause than in all the talk of progressivists about “mastering the machine.”

—Donald Davidson, “A Mirror for Artists”

The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. Montgomery, AL 1956

Fugitive poet, Agrarian philosopher, champion of sectionalism: Tennessean Donald Grady Davidson (1893-1968) is one of the most compelling and irksome southern conservatives of the twentieth century. In his commitment to an organic understanding of human community, his suspicion of the federal government (he called it “Leviathan”), and his determined critique of industrialism, Davidson stands among the earliest twentieth-century standard bearers of what would become the southern conservative movement.

Davidson’s remarkable career as a poet and public intellectual can be usefully understood as having progressed through two phases. The first was inaugurated in 1925 by the eruption and aftermath of the Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. This cultural and political spectacle plunged Davidson and many of his Vanderbilt colleagues (co-authors with him of *The Fugitive* poetry magazine) into the vagaries of the modern world. With the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* in 1930, Davidson (one of the 12 co-authors) entered a second

phase: his years-long debate with southern progressives, in which he sought to understand, articulate, and defend the distinctiveness of the South (and that of the other regions) as essential to our national distinctiveness and character. In this dispute, Davidson not only attacked the centralized government power he most feared, but he also affirmed the value of local communities and their absolute necessity for the proper cultivation of art, literature, and culture.

For all of its promise and in spite of the hearty cheer it brings to those of us with a conservative bent, Davidson's polemic finally proves rhetorically fractured and morally problematic. Davidson's racism, as well as his unbending commitment to segregation in the South, present the greatest of challenges for readers who would champion his cause, especially those of us who otherwise applaud both his wisdom in critiquing Leviathan and his zeal in promoting a rich vision of human flourishing rooted in the local. Unfortunately, modern conservatives have not always been as discerning in their reading of Davidson as one would hope. In 1989 Russell Kirk presented a major lecture at the Heritage Foundation in praise of Davidson as a southern conservative. Regrettably, Kirk made not one mention of Davidson's inveterate racism and commitment to segregation, both of which constitute major and unavoidable themes in Davidson's writings, particularly his 1938 collection of essays entitled *Attack on Leviathan*, which Kirk praises at length.<sup>1</sup> An intellectually honest treatment of Davidson's Agrarian conservatism, no matter how appreciative it may be otherwise, cannot ignore this deeply flawed aspect of Davidson's thought. Moreover, a thoughtful *Christian* response to Davidson's work, as I hope to offer here, should not shy away from critiquing how Davidson's brand of conservatism falls far short of the New Testament vision of the beloved community. Davidson is often prophetic and even wise in his attack on a progressive vision of centralized government power. His inability to recognize African

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk, Russell. "The Attack on Leviathan: Donald Davidson and the South's Conservatism." The Heritage Foundation Lecture 206. <http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/the-attack-on-leviathan-donald-davidson-and-the-souths-conservatism>. 11 July 1989.

Americans in the South as his neighbors, however, sadly assures the *impossibility* of the sectionally distinctive Agrarian community that he holds up as a humane alternative to the collectivizing and all-consuming modern state. The tragic irony here is that Davidson's moral blindness on race is not merely a private character flaw. Rather, for a man who would seek to reshape his own region's standing and culture, Davidson's racism actually sabotages the heart of his entire project.

In *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (1982), Daniel Singal begins with a persuasive explanation of how the South's latent Victorian tendencies delayed the arrival of modernist sensibilities in the region. Building on Paul Gaston's work in *The New South Creed* (1970), Singal suggests that a combination of factors, chiefly the Cavalier myth and the generally devastated state of affairs in the post-Civil War South, served to galvanize a southern mindset that was decidedly unreceptive to the vagaries of modernity. "By the end of Reconstruction," says Singal, "all that southerners could salvage from their history was the sustaining conviction that, in its day, theirs had been an aristocratic culture infinitely superior to the crass materialistic culture of their enemy. This Cavalier myth, moreover, embodied traits of order, stability, and cohesion that southern society stood in desperate need of" (9). The war generation in the South had held Yankee materialism in high disdain. The boosters of the New South, however, in their breathless enthusiasm to introduce the prosperity and conveniences of industrialism to the region, sought some means of accommodation between old and new values. Thus, Singal suggests, Cavalier and Victorian mythologies were conjoined. The southern code of chivalry, having just lately benefited from the new gilding applied by post-bellum plantation writers like Thomas Nelson Page, was transposed "onto the framework of Victorian belief in morality and industrial progress, a fusion of ideological elements so formidable that it effectively blocked the arrival of intellectual Modernism in the region through the First World War" (9). For Nashville Agrarian Donald

Davidson, this modernism—in any number of its manifestations—precipitated an encounter with the vagaries of philosophical, sociological and racial abstraction. Perhaps as much as any other southerner of his generation, Davidson was aware of the unique times in which he lived. For him, the early twentieth century marked the dawning of a modern epoch that Davidson perceived as an age of abstraction.

For nineteenth-century southern intellectuals, the abstractions that had proved most troublesome over the course of the antebellum and postwar periods had centered mostly on matters of aesthetics and politics. Such writers as William Gilmore Simms, Edgar Allan Poe, and Thomas Nelson Page expended most of their polemical energy in their respective encounters with the politically charged abstractions of the slavery defense and states' rights, the philosophical abstractions of the New England Transcendentalists, and the mythical abstractions of the Lost Cause. The new world that confronted Davidson and his contemporaries, however, raised questions of a different order and degree. An energetic skepticism toward traditional values; a bias that favored urban culture over and against rural life; the preeminence of industrial concerns—all of these “modern” tendencies forced the issue for the conservative southerner Davidson. For this twentieth-century southerner, who came of age during the South's transition into the modern world, the ongoing confrontation with abstraction was now taking place within an entirely different context: a new age of impersonal scientific ideas and “progressive” social programs that challenged southern myths of identity and history at their most basic level.

Before we can understand his engagement with the problems of modernity, it is helpful to understand Davidson's own education in a certain kind of modernism as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University. During a time of great intellectual and artistic ferment in Nashville, Tennessee, Davidson (after serving in World War I) enjoyed the fellowship of his friends and fellow

poets, and slowly, if often skeptically, became versed in literary high modernism, especially under the tutelage of Allen Tate. Beyond Tate's wide reading, Davidson and his peers also benefited from an extraordinary apprenticeship—at once classical and *Avant-garde*—in all manner of philosophy and poetry under Nashville's resident Jewish mystic Sidney Hirsch. In the midst of absorbing these ideas and seeking to apply them to their art, Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Davidson were continuing to write poems that, while experimental in technique, remained somewhat conventional in a thematic sense. In their flight from the “high-caste Brahmins of the Old South,” they produced what Edmund Wilson described at the time as “a new literature that is as free from the flowers of rhetoric as it is from the formulas of gallantry. . . . Although it has sloughed off these demodé trappings, it has kept much of the grace and distinction with which they were formerly worn” (193-194). The world of their poetry was at once fanciful and mature, rendered in the technically innovative garb of modernism, but nonetheless a far cry from the fragmented visions of Eliot and Pound. Curiously, the horrors of World War I appear to have had little, if any, direct impact on the tone of the Fugitives' poetry, especially in comparison to their contemporaries in “the lost generation.” Instead of confronting their war experiences as did Hemingway, Cummings, and others, veterans Davidson and Ransom seldom if ever dwelt on the war. In a peculiar sense, theirs was a flight into poetry and out of the immediate concerns of the modern world. Nevertheless, this avoidance of modernist despair was not yet tied in any significant way to the southern heritage of the Fugitives. Even though they stubbornly resisted the doubt and malaise that had seized England and the continent, these men had not at this point become self-conscious about the relationship of their southernness to their thoroughgoing ambivalence towards modern ideas.

All of this changed in 1925. The trial of John T. Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee, for teaching evolution to high school students, confronted Tate, Ransom, and Davidson—especially Davidson—

with a dramatic spectacle that quickly disrupted what had been a tenuous dissociation between modernity and their southern heritage. Davidson took a while to articulate his own reaction to the trial, at least publicly. When he finally did refer to Dayton in print, however, his comments can only be described as understated, even oblique. Nearly a year after the fact, in a piece for the May 15, 1926 edition of *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Davidson finally broached the subject in an essay called “The Artist as Southerner.” For the most part he maintained his stated focus, giving thoughtful consideration to the special vocation of the southern writer. By and large Davidson’s musings here reflect a period of transition in his thinking about the function of the writer and his relationship to his native culture. In 1922, along with Tate and Ransom, Davidson had been instrumental in articulating a distinctive vision for the Fugitives. He appears to have been much more interested in establishing a marked distance between these young poets and the maudlin regional literary tradition of which they were unwilling heirs than in any self-conscious identification with the region itself.<sup>2</sup>

Now, four years later and in the wake of Dayton, Davidson begins to develop his concept of what he calls “the autochthonous writer,” for whom “local materials come as fresh and immediate themes, to which they can easily give a character of the universal rather than the merely provincial” (782). Writing barely two years after the demise of *The Fugitive*, Davidson here clearly remains at a far remove from the partisan southern fervor that would characterize his work in the 1930s. Still, the germs of some of his later ideas are apparent in this early work. Even if his notion of the autochthonous writer embraces the value of universality over provincialism, Davidson nevertheless

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<sup>2</sup> The preface to the first number of *The Fugitive* contained this famous statement of repudiation: “Official exception having been taken by the sovereign people to the mint julep, a literary phase known rather euphemistically as Southern Literature has expired, like any other stream whose source is stopped up. The demise was not untimely: Among other advantages, THE FUGITIVE is enabled to come to birth in Nashville, Tennessee, under a star not entirely unsympathetic. THE FUGITIVE flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South. Without raising the question of whether the blood in the veins of its editors runs red, they at any rate are not advertising it as blue.” *The Fugitive: April, 1922 – December 1925*. Nashville: Fugitive, 1922. 1.

indicates that the writer's relationship to his community and its values should be harmonious rather than critical or adversarial.

This view is confirmed in his first allusion—in very indirect fashion—to the Scopes trial and its chief antagonists: the Tennessee fundamentalists. “Fundamentalism,” says Davidson “in one aspect, is blind and belligerent ignorance” (783). However, he continues, “in another, it represents a fierce clinging to poetic supernaturalism against the encroachments of cold logic; it stands for moral seriousness” (783). By itself such analysis is not terribly controversial; it is certainly not Menckenesque in its critical stance, nor is it reactionary in its mild defense of a religiously conservative worldview that would privilege the organic and supernatural over and against “cold logic.” Rather it is simply in keeping with the vision Davidson is developing of the artist as southerner. Davidson's remarks indicate a subtle but significant sympathy with the indigenous folk of his region. In his refusal to join the fray that had made his fellow Tennesseans an easy target for the rest of the country, Davidson demonstrates in practice the theory that he argues for in this essay: The writer who identifies himself with his native community, instead of seeking some objective and critical vantage point outside of it, will be most successful in recognizing the universally valuable principle in the local reality.

In his next mention of Dayton, Davidson assumes a decidedly more polemical tone, which, though still very measured, begins to explore more directly the concerns that would occupy him for the next four decades. In June 1928 Davidson wrote a piece titled “First Fruits of Dayton: The Intellectual Evolution in Dixie” for *Forum* magazine. Davidson begins by arguing for the diversity of the South and the subsequent danger of attempting to generalize or abstract it. “The difficulty of understanding the South,” he suggests, “is increased by the very variety of conditions in this section.

. . . Hence the South is thickly sown with contradictions” (897). To substantiate his claim, Davidson offers an extensive catalog:

Gaudy filling stations edge their way among ancestral mansions. The Du Ponts build a rayon factory a few miles from the ancient residence of Andrew Jackson. North Carolina harbors . . . journalists as different as Gerald Johnson and Josephus Daniels. Atlanta produces Coca Cola and Frances Newman. . . . Think of . . . magnolias and billboards, colonial mansions and real estate developments, paved roads and pig tracks, horse races and Methodist conferences—and you have symbols that are a rebuke to quick conclusions. (897)

In his impassioned defense of sectionalism during the 1930s, especially in reaction against what he deems the dangerous generalizations and abstractions of progressive social planners, Davidson will argue at great length and in detail for the diversity of America. What is vital to note here is that Davidson was from the start suspicious of any abstract treatment of humanity in the mass. What he would call “sectionalism” would be for him a means of protecting, even cultivating, some distinctiveness. The genesis of these later ideas are clearly to be found in “First Fruits of Dayton,” wherein he offers a notably concrete and convincing portrait of the diversity of the South itself.

While his tone remains measured, Davidson was beginning to realize the larger stakes surrounding the Scopes case. Rooted in abstract scientific and social theories that had a lot to say about humanity in the mass but offered very little wisdom regarding individual people and their local communities, modern thought was beginning to take on significance and power that could bring about distressing results, especially in terms of progressive social planning. “Once we had in the South,” he continues in “The Artist as Southerner,” “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 woman, and we believed in God and good manners” (902). In other words, Davidson might have said, once the South was much more like the one to be found in the works of plantation mythologist Thomas Nelson Page. “But what will happen to that tradition,” he asks



“before the modern doctrine which insists that progress is novelty, is energy, is quantity? . . . Now we are offered 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” (902).

Davidson’s enumeration of these *isms* is only one of his earliest salvos against what he suspected were programmatic or schematized abstractions—that is, *ideas* antithetical to experience. Still, if he is troubled by these trends, Davidson is not yet alarmed, and his tone remains reasonable; it is largely free of the shrill defensiveness that will hamstring his later work. In fact, he proceeds in the essay to call for intellectual leadership in the South, whose task should be “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” (902).

During this first phase, then, Davidson assumes a winsome and even good-natured tone, while at the same time maintaining a principled stance, rooted in a traditionalist’s view of the South. According to Louis D. Rubin in his study, *The Wary Fugitives*, Davidson hardly evidences “the ferocity with which [he] would later champion the cause of the South against the metropolis, though all the themes are there. He was still feeling his way; the important thing, however, was that events in Dayton, Tennessee . . . had gotten him to thinking seriously about himself as a Southerner, and to examining his relationship to the place of his birth and his residence” (155). And yet it is very important to keep in mind that Davidson’s posture at this point is a public one—one into which the Scopes trial perhaps forced him and his peers out of poetry and into the harsh reality of modern American culture. To recognize the public nature of Davidson’s response to Dayton and his musings on its importance to the South is to understand that Davidson’s thought and writings assume the vital quality of self-consciousness. John Shelton Reed convincingly argues this very point in the course of comparing the sectionalism of the Agrarians with other nationalist movements. For “cultural

nationalists” like the Agrarians, Reed suggests, “their tradition is not something that is second nature. Their experiences have left them like beached fish, aware for the first time of water. Their acceptance of tradition, their nationality itself, must be willed. In Tate’s marvelously ambiguous phrase, they must take hold of their tradition ‘by violence’” (*Band of Prophets* 61).

Of course, for any southerner, to become self-conscious about one’s tradition was to confront the race problem. A devout segregationist in the solid South of 1930, Davidson regarded race to be a closed question that had little immediate bearing on the Agrarian program. Because few, if any, of the Agrarians considered them coequals worthy of the rights and responsibilities of full citizenship, black southerners were conveniently ignored in the Agrarian call for broad cultural and economic reform rooted in rural, traditional life, and founded upon a reaffirmation of humane values. Nevertheless, having granted the sad fact of Davidson’s racism, we would do well not to dismiss outright his exhaustive critique of industrialism and modern culture. As the southern poet and latter-day liberal Agrarian Wendell Berry wrote in the *Oxford American* in 1999,

Donald Davidson was to the last a segregationist—which brings us, as readers [of *I’ll Take My Stand*] to trial, just as it does Davidson. We must decide whether to deal with this issue according to the rules of political correctness or according to the rules of critical discourse. The enterprise of political correctness deals in a political merchandise of general categories, invoking judgment without trial, whereas critical discourse must try to deal intelligently with the fact that people who are wrong about one thing may be right about another. And in fact Donald Davidson the segregationist contributed to *I’ll Take My Stand* an excellent essay on the meaning of the arts in an industrial society. (65)

in the face of what he would famously call Leviathan, the centralizing and abstracting monster of government and science, especially of sociology, Davidson would argue at great length (and often very convincingly) for the viability and authenticity of a sectional program and methodology for understanding the South.

As Berry suggests, Davidson's "A Mirror for Artists" is valuable in its own right. Moreover, for our larger purposes here, it is helpful in the process of understanding the direction he was beginning to pursue. This contribution to the Agrarian manifesto marks the beginning of Davidson's considerable investment—intellectual and emotional in nature—in Agrarianism *as a program*. In the degree of his belief in and commitment to the ideas outlined in *I'll Take My Stand's* "Statement of Principles," Davidson was unique, and even early on, this uncompromising spirit set him apart from Tate, Ransom, and the others. The distance between them would only increase over the next several years. Much more realistic in his expectations, Tate would always value the symposium chiefly for its affirmation of traditional and humane values in the face of a deracinating and dehumanizing modernity. With a similar measure of emotional detachment Ransom, Lytle, and Wade regarded *I'll Take My Stand* as an opportunity to reassert the value of southern tradition and folkways, as practiced and held dear by both the yeomanry and the planters as well as their respective descendants. From the beginning, Agrarianism was all this and more for Davidson. It quickly grew beyond a means to an end, and became an end in itself. Thus, as he developed his ideas about Agrarianism and the sectional program which could be used to implement them, Davidson allowed it a scope and power that far exceeded the intentions or expectations of his peers.

According to Rubin, Davidson's "involvement in the idea of Agrarianism was so complete in its manifestations that it came to dominate everything he did and thought" (*Fugitives* 153). The consequences of this total embrace of the Agrarian program were many and varied. Davidson's poetry, for example, grew increasingly provincial, especially in the sense that it centered on homely materials as a means of offering an argument for the supremacy of those values. As he thereby pursued his own principle of the autochthonous writer, even his own colleagues bemoaned the

result.<sup>3</sup> If his friends were able to maintain some measure of detachment between their Agrarian values and their artistic prerogatives, this only accentuated Davidson's inability or lack of desire even to make such an attempt. Thus, in Rubin's estimation,

the turn to Agrarianism for Davidson was not merely the discovery of a theme; it was also, and to the ultimate disadvantage of his poetry, the move from dialectic to rhetoric, from—to use Yeats's formulation—the quarrel with oneself to the quarrel with others. From this point onward in his career, Davidson largely ceased to explore the nature of his personal relationship to what he publicly believed in, and began to define himself rhetorically in accordance with such a belief. (162-63)

Davidson's "A Mirror for Artists" constitutes his first effort to articulate both his view of the South and the southern writer's priority in the face of industrialism. Especially as it contrasts with "First Fruits of Dayton" and "The Artist as Southerner," Davidson's first Agrarian essay shows clearly just how rapidly his shift from dialectic to rhetoric took place.

Singal suspects that this unequivocal embrace of Agrarianism as a program—a controllable, definable, and finally abstract *ism*—had chiefly to do with Davidson's significant uneasiness in the face of what he regarded as the growing uncertainty and abstraction in the world around him.

Davidson's investment in *I'll Take My Stand* and in Agrarianism, as well as in sectionalism, was, in Singal's estimation, an effort to "banish ambivalence once and for all" (220). At the same time, however, in light of the self-consciousness with which Davidson had to confront this problem, we have to meet Davidson's claims here with a healthy sense of skepticism. Given that he held himself to be the most committed of all the Agrarians, we might expect in this essay a clearer picture of Agrarian life as it would serve the interests of art throughout the land. After all, in "A Mirror for Artists" Davidson suggests that the South is most important as an exemplar which remains "for the

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<sup>3</sup> This reaction is borne out in Davidson's correspondence with Tate during much of the 1920s and 1930s, which has as much to do with poetry as it does with Agrarianism. See John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young, eds. The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1974.

most part stable, religious, and agrarian” (29). In the face of the uncertainties of modernity and the abstraction and impersonality of science and technology, however, Davidson ironically seeks refuge in a system of ideas—an *ism*, a statement of principles—that, while definitely better suited to his world view, are just as abstract and just as detrimental to experience. “For all his talk of championing Agrarianism,” says Singal,

it is noteworthy that [Davidson] gives the Agrarian existence far less concrete and detailed treatment than one might expect. Compared with the symposium essay by Andrew Nelson Lytle graphically entitled “The Hind Tit,” Davidson’s piece is cast primarily in abstract terms. We find nothing like Lytle’s injunction to “throw out the radio and take down the fiddle from the wall.” For in actuality Davidson cared little about rural life—unlike Lytle he never had nor would reside on a farm. What concerned him most was resolving the cultural conflict inside him, along with the fervent southern patriotism he was barely able to suppress. (227)

As he prepares to critique his country and its infatuation with the art of industry, Davidson is clearly motivated by more than field and plow. His real struggle is to resolve the intellectual conflict within himself even as he seeks to win the cultural, partisan, and public conflict in which he is engaged.

The work that best embodies Davidson’s strengths and weaknesses in the war within as well as in the culture war is *Attack on Leviathan* (1938). *Attack* is the culmination of Davidson’s nearly decade-long critique of and counter-offensive against what he literally regarded as a northern attack “more abusive and unrelenting than anything since the last Federal soldier was withdrawn from their soil. During the 1920s there was no single institution, like slavery, upon which attacks could be centered. They had a vaguer objective in the so-called backwardness, or ‘cultural lag,’ of the South” (315). Although it contains many of the most important of Davidson’s polemical essays on sectionalism and regionalism, *Attack* is not finally intended to be a reactionary document. At the outset of the book he claims “only the layman’s right to judge warring interpretations of American life and history, to set them beside the reality of experience, immediate or remembered, and then to

choose for himself whom his soul will believe” (v). Though we would be foolish to expect Davidson to maintain such a posture throughout *Attack*, in the spirit of Wendell Berry we should first regard this book as a whole, agreeing for the moment at least to look beyond the issue of race—which will inevitably arise nonetheless—in an effort to understand Davidson’s larger concerns.

As we begin to consider Davidson’s most earnest concerns, a brief consideration of origins is in order. Which came first, sectionalism or regionalism? The term “sectionalism,” as it applies to antebellum American politics, is the more historical term. While Davidson never apologized about the historical connotations, this old sectionalism was not quite the same in practice as the new, even if it shared many of the same principles that had inspired the creation of the Confederate States of America. Still, in *Attack* Davidson is clearly reacting to something that was not there before, especially during his Fugitive days. We have previously observed that the ascendancy of a new way of thinking—manifested in sociology, psychology, progressive social reform—had forced him to consider questions that had before been entirely moot and beyond consideration. If not for the progressive formulation of government-controlled regionalism based on abstract sociological methodology, Davidson would have likely never become self-conscious about his sectionalist outlook, much less written so extensively about it. By the early 1930s, however, Davidson was convinced that a regionalism akin to even ultimately “successful” federal projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority would be detrimental not only to the southern artist but also to the organic character, the history, and the overall cultural distinctiveness of the South itself. Thus in *Attack*, Davidson proves to be a “citizen” first, having left his “perch as an artist,” in order to engage in a defense of Agrarian sectionalism over and against centralizing regionalism.

More than a critique of regionalism specifically, however, *Attack* is a compilation of Davidson’s attack on sociology and the cultural trends of which he believed sociology to be the most

disturbing and abstraction-prone manifestation. In “First Fruits of Dayton,” Davidson had made some measured reference to modern “isms”—“behaviorism” and “liberalism”—in the course of arguing for the diversity and organicity of southern culture. Now, in the decade following *I’ll Take My Stand*, his tone grows much more strident, and more than any person or nation, the object of his animus is perhaps the most abstract of sciences—sociology—and its programmatic aims, particularly as they are directed toward the lagging South.

Davidson’s objection to sociology and the larger mindset of which it was one important manifestation rests on at least two fears: first, modern science’s reduction of human experience generally; and second, the destruction—by sociologically driven programmatic and reform efforts—of southern distinctiveness specifically. His proposed antidote, of course, is sectionalism, an approach to culture and government that for Davidson is very much tied up with his Agrarian zeal, and which argues for the necessary primacy of the states and regions over a centralized and controlling national government.

The *Attack* essay that perhaps best demonstrates Davidson’s impatience with the sociological impulse behind regionalism is titled “A Sociologist in Eden.” Before encountering the essay itself, however, we would do well to place it in context, especially relative to Davidson’s own frame of mind at the time. The years after 1930 were not easy for Davidson. Following *I’ll Take My Stand*, his fellow Agrarians began to pursue projects of a less polemical nature, and Davidson began to feel isolated—a dynamic that he would battle and resent for the rest of his life. Apart from these relational challenges, in 1932, Wesley Hall, the Vanderbilt dormitory in which Davidson and his family had lived for several years, burned down. According to Michael O’Brien’s account of the event, “the blaze carried off most of their possessions. Books, correspondence, a First World War diary, back numbers of the *Fugitive* were consumed” (194). Out of concern for Davidson, his friend

and fellow Agrarian John Donald Wade urged him to take a sabbatical at Wade's family home in Marshallville, Georgia.

His sojourn in rural Georgia marked a renaissance of sorts in Davidson's life and work. "The area around Marshallville," reports O'Brien, "was a revelation to him. Davidson's South had been the semi-frontier regions of middle Tennessee. The plantation culture of Macon County surprised and pleased him with its reminiscence of the Old South" (194). In a letter to Andrew Lytle written in October 1932, Davidson is clearly enamored with this little Georgia town:

Marshallville is a grand place to rusticate. . . . I lead a quiet life—cultivate a garden, wander about, read and (I hope) write, enjoy the people and the landscape. This is a really agrarian section—quite the Old South in tone and in deed. There are horses, mules, wagons, negroes, plantations, good soil, good people, good manners—and there *used to be* money. I like it all tremendously. (qtd. in O'Brien 194)

Beyond the personal renewal it provided him, Davidson's year in Marshallville was a key point in his development of his ideas about the South, especially "his confidence . . . in the integrity of the ordinary Southerner" (195). On a broader level, Davidson also left Marshallville with a rejuvenated view of the ordinary South, and from this point on, his interest and investment in sectionalism would be much more pronounced than it had been previously.

A couple of years later, UNC Chapel Hill-trained sociologist Arthur Raper also happened to visit Macon County, which was one of two black-belt Georgia counties he was studying in the course of his work on a book titled *Preface to Peasantry*. Macon County and Greene County had also been the subject of his doctoral fieldwork, which he had begun in 1927. Published by the University of North Carolina Press in 1936, *Preface to Peasantry* constituted Raper's return to this subject matter, and it is typical of the Chapel Hill fare that would most pique Davidson during the 1930s. In the first chapter of *Preface*, Raper offers a harsh critique of the very land and community that had so endeared themselves to Davidson: "The collapse of the plantation system, rendered



inevitable by its exploitation of land and labor, leaves in its wake depleted soil, shoddy livestock, inadequate farm equipment, crude agricultural practices, crippled institutions, a defeated and impoverished people” (3). Having made this diagnosis, Raper proceeds with a thorough sociological analysis—measuring and charting everything from “Household Furnishings and Sanitation” to “Factors Regulating Negro Landownership” to “Hotels and Cafes.”

Davidson titled his review of *Preface to Peasantry*, “A Sociologist in Eden.” As the title suggests, he envisions Raper’s visit to Georgia as a satanic invasion of paradise. From the outset it is clear that Davidson took Raper’s study of Macon County very personally:

How vain was my concern, how feeble my conception of the all-seeing eye of sociology! I now discover that the wise serpent, the Light-Bringer himself, was in the region before and after my visit, not for purposes of temptation so much as to focus upon Eden the central blaze of a high-powered social-scientific investigation. (179)

Davidson’s chief objection to Raper’s approach is the inherently abstract nature of his methodology. Sociology as practiced by Raper and others in the Chapel Hill school is “dangerous,” he argues, because it is incapable of studying places and people like those found in middle Georgia “without indulging in abstractions which to the lay reader seem to dehumanize” (197, 185). “Absorbed in their abstractions,” Davidson complains later in the review, sociologists who view the South with “urban eyes . . . sometimes do not realize how great structures of fact may be invalidated by wrong assumptions” (197). In the face of these “great structures of fact,” which he obviously views as misguided and even satanic, Davidson hits upon a theme that will characterize much of his writing for the next several years: As modern and predominantly urban forces, sociology and the centralized state that it serves are to be resisted and held suspect at every turn.

If “A Sociologist in Eden” had been somewhat shrill in its reaction against such forces, *Attack on Leviathan* would on the whole be characterized by its measured but relentless critique of

the same. Indeed, in the very first chapter of *Attack*, which is titled “The Diversity of America,” Davidson bemoans the very fact of the “Leviathan” itself, a centralized government, which “is an exceedingly abstract device” and does not recognize the natural and organic sectional divisions into which the nation falls. “The states and the Federal government,” he says, “represent conceptions or organizations rather than organicisms. . . . The real and concrete thing does not express itself overtly in the abstract conception” (6). Instead of this scientific treatment, Davidson calls for a sectionalist approach, which is “a revolt against the excessive centralism of the machine age, a tendency running counter to the cosmopolitanism that for many years uprooted and abstracted art” (11). Of the possibility that such a response to and critique of progress appears reactionary or old fashioned, Davidson is certainly aware:

In its undeniable nostalgia this sectionalism contains a realistic answer to the question: Whom shall my soul believe? Worn out with abstraction and novelty . . . some Americans have said: I will believe the old folks at home, who have kept alive through many treacherous outmodings some good secret of life. Such moderns prefer to grasp the particular. . . . They seek spiritual and cultural autonomy. (11-12)

As a modern who preferred the particular, Davidson certainly feared the totalizing and reductive instinct that he observed in the sociological mode. His greater fear, however, had to do with the formidable threat to the South’s very character, often euphemistically referred to as “the southern way of life.” For Davidson, the sectionalist approach was foremost a means of preserving the distinctiveness of the South, a section that he viewed and valued as being traditional, religious, and largely agrarian—a clear and much cherished alternative to “the pseudo-culture of the world-city.” In facing this second fear, Davidson shifts into a more reactionary mode, both in the tone and theme of his polemic. In “Still Rebels, Still Yankees,” an essay he first published in 1933, and which he chose to republish in *Attack*, Davidson complains that northern crusaders “asked no questions about the genius of place. Wherever they went on their missions of social justice, they carried with

them a legend of the future, more dangerously abstract than the legend of the past” (134). Davidson very evidently views place and social attitudes as being connected. Society and social mores are organic, borne out of the unique physical attributes of each section, and outsiders’ efforts at reform and uplift are often driven by abstract ideals bearing no relation to the concrete actuality of the section.

That this is indeed Davidson’s firm conviction is confirmed in another essay, also written in 1934 and included in *Attack*, in which Davidson offers a harsh critique of New York and its impact on national culture. The extent of his diatribe, which touches not only upon race and abstraction but the sexual perils of the European parlors as well, is best appreciated by considering a longer excerpt:

What the regions of the hinterland did not see at the time was that New York was beginning a spiritual secession from the America of which it had been an organic part. In its population it was already a foreign city, with an amazing preponderance of *heterogeneous new racial stocks* (emphasis added). . . . Thus it happened that New York transmitted, to the one people on earth who were freest of class-consciousness, the Marxian theory of the war of the classes. To the least neurotic and most energetic of races it offered the Freudian doctrine of repressions and complexes. To a people the greater part of whom were schooled in Protestant religion and morality New York presented, with a knowing leer, under the guise of literary classics, the works of voluptuaries and perverts, the teeming pages of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and all the choicest remains of the literary bordellos of the ancient and modern world. German Expressionism, French Dadaism, the erotic primitivism of D.H. Lawrence, the gigantic fin de siècle pedantries and experimentalisms of Gertrude Stein and various Parisian coteries—these furnished most of the catchwords for all the clever people. (163)

Markedly shifting his tone and theme, Davidson begins to sound increasingly xenophobic, driven by racial concerns as much or more than anything else. To recall Rubin’s comprehension of Davidson’s shift from dialectic to rhetoric, more than any debate over the vagaries of regionalism or sectionalism, race—specifically white racial purity—drove Davidson to pursue a politically didactic mode. A key factor in understanding all of this is that for Davidson a number of assumptions were

always there, and they predate *Attack on Leviathan*. Even though they are not yet conscious, or certainly not his main concern, Davidson's views on race are evident early on.

To understand Davidson's conscious (and tragic) confrontation with race, it is useful to look back to a few of these antecedents. One of his strongest statements on race comes in what is his most important long poem, *The Tall Men* (1927). In section VI of "The Geography of the Brain," which is the fourth poem of the nine that comprise *The Tall Men*, Davidson addresses the "Negro" directly:

Black man, when you and I were young together,  
We knew each other's hearts. Though I am no longer  
A child, and you perhaps unfortunately  
Are no longer a child, we still understand  
Better maybe than others. There is a wall  
Between us, anciently erected. Once  
It might have been crossed, men say. But now I cannot  
Forget that I was master, and you can hardly  
Forget that you were slave. We did not build  
The ancient wall, but there it painfully is.  
Let us not bruise our foreheads on the wall. (VI, 1-11)

Even as he presumes familiarity with this unnamed "black man," Davidson obviously takes much for granted in his understanding of black southerners. The most important aspect of his thinking to be realized here is his absolute commitment to racial separateness, even in the midst of a poem the chief purpose of which is to celebrate the history and heritage of the men who pioneered the Tennessee frontier. According to Rubin, the conjoining of these concerns "represents, as does nothing else that Tate, Ransom, or Warren were writing in verse at the time, the direct assertion that the matter of [Davidson's] Tennessee heritage is specifically bound up with the advocacy of the traditional southern racial beliefs" (174). "The Geography of the Brain" extends far beyond frontier heroism. Davidson clearly has in mind the ritual and tradition of an entire culture which clearly mandates the separate place and function of blacks and whites. As it functions on a mythical level in Davidson's

poem, this image of the South provides an important foregrounding for what is to come in Davidson's more direct and consciously polemical writings on race.

This image of a segregated South is inextricably linked to another—one that Davidson paints in the section following his address to the black man. “Rich is the land,” he says,

Rich and impregnable as this magnolia-bloom  
Buried among dark lacquered leaves. Breathe not  
Into the golden heart, so deep, of this lush flower  
Lest it blacken. Take now only its perfume  
Drifting so invisibly, seized for a moment  
Only, magic only of moonlight lost  
And unassailable love that perished here —  
Where moonlight builds tall pillars of a house  
Lording a shadowy park . . . .

Here are  
In a glass case, pistols that killed a man  
For honor's sake. Here music was, and here  
Am I beside a failing mansion, looking  
For a face I hardly know and thinking I see  
The ghosts of gentlemen who died for honor. (VII, 4-12; 25-30)

That Davidson, who just a few years previous to writing *The Tall Men* had supposedly sought to distance himself and his fellow Fugitives from the “moonlight and magnolia” school of southern poetry, would indulge in such reflections without the least bit of irony is apt demonstration of where his poetry and his polemic were heading even as early as 1927. Even if we take into account Davidson's appreciation for folk culture (which is evident in *The Tall Men* and other poems), there can be little doubt that the South he had in mind as he confronts the progressive regionalists was not too different from the South of the Lost Cause romanticized in Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia*.

Undoubtedly, then, a mythical, racially-constructed, and finally abstract image of the South was behind much of Davidson's otherwise admirable advocacy of Agrarianism. In pursuit of his sectionalist argument Davidson conflates his critique of sociology and modern culture with his more

specific concern over southern racial orthodoxy, an area in which he was increasingly realizing the threat posed by progressive social crusaders. One of the most important essays Davidson wrote in this period provides a useful marker in his turn from a thoughtful regionalist discussion to a heightened concern with southern white racial purity and hegemony. In “Gulliver With Hay Fever,” first published in 1937, he forcefully addresses the race question and leaves little doubt regarding his views on the proper place of black and white in the South. Much like he had done the year before in “Sociologist in Eden,” Davidson takes the occasion of a book review to proffer his views. The book, written by a Yale research named John Dollard, was entitled *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, and in it Dollard used his impressions of Indianola, Mississippi, to construct yet another sociology of the South, much like Arthur Raper had done in Davidson’s beloved Macon County.

In chapters ranging from “White Caste Aggression Against Negroes” and “Defensive Beliefs of the White Caste” to “The Sexual Gain,” Dollard offers a critique of social relations, with, not surprisingly, a heightened focus on race. Davidson’s initial remarks on what he sarcastically called a “sociological *Gulliver’s Travels*” mark a new phase in the virulence of his polemic. More importantly they demonstrate for the first time Davidson’s inconsistency in his disdain for some abstractions and his unself-conscious embrace of others. Assuming a posture similar to that in “A Sociologist in Eden,” Davidson professes sincere incredulity at the South Dollard has discovered. In Dollard’s book, Davidson says, “Familiar things have suddenly taken on a pasty, unreal, complexion. The world has assumed a dizzy effervescence, like the nauseous, boiling stir of termites under a lifted plank. Still worse, the perspective has altered sickeningly” (“Gulliver with Hayfever” 152). As was the case for Gulliver himself, Davidson suggests, “all that was big has become little. All that was little has swelled up fantastically” (152).

Dollard's chief presupposition as a sociologist, Davidson complains, is that "Southerntown is abnormal and queer. . . . He, the sociologist, is not queer, and sociology is not queer. And what is queer about Southerntown? There are two races in it, white and black, that live together and yet are separate in certain fundamental relationships" (153). Although the terms he chooses are almost ironic in their understatement, Davidson's reference to the necessary separateness of whites and blacks is somewhat of a watershed in his career as a man of letters. "For the first time," says Fred Hobson, "the cause that Davidson was to champion the rest of his life surfaced, and when he turned to race, Davidson came close to losing control" (230). Indeed, the racial abstractions that had long been lurking beneath the surface of much of Davidson's work finally emerge here in striking terms.

Particularly with regard to blood and sexuality, Davidson launches into what would prove to be a decades-long tirade driven by the power of a number of old but virulent racial stereotypes. In critiquing Dollard's observations regarding "the bi-racial sexual code" (Davidson's term), Davidson says that the sociologist is well "outside the realm of authenticated fact," especially in his assertion of the frequency of miscegenation between white men and black women.<sup>4</sup> The undisputed facts in Southerntown as Davidson enumerates them clearly demonstrate and define his endorsement of the same abstract, blood-ridden code proffered by nineteenth-century southern apologists. The obvious facts, says Davidson, are that

intermarriage between the races is forbidden by state laws in the South; that almost no white men openly cross the line between the races, and cannot do so, even surreptitiously, without risking severe social disapproval; that a child of mixed blood in the South is always a Negro, no matter how slight the proportion of Negro blood; and that, above all, white women never consort with Negro men, and that the penalty of an approach by a Negro man to a white woman is swift, inexorable, and extreme. Such facts as these are well known. In the Southern view they represent the traditional will of white society to preserve its racial integrity. (164)

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<sup>4</sup> Lillian Smith provides an extensive and provocative discussion of sexuality and southern racial codes. See Killers of the Dream. New York: W.W. Norton, 1949. 114-155.

Taken at face value, Davidson's argument is really not that remarkable, especially coming from a white southerner in the 1930s. His overt concern with matters of blood and sexuality, however, especially as they are conjoined in the notion of "racial integrity" (a harrowing term in the 1930s), are particularly noteworthy examples of the grasp of racial abstractions as they began to establish a chokehold on his work. After scouring the work of the regionalists for any hint of sociological abstraction, which he claimed was borne out of a dangerously modern and scientific worldview, Davidson is completely unself-conscious in premising his critique of Dollard on ideas that far surpass the methodology or philosophy of the sociologists in their abstractedness. According to Hobson, Davidson's review of *Caste and Class* "did him no credit. He appeared in the light that his enemies often cast him and even some of his fellow Agrarians had come to see him—prudish, narrow, suspicious of modernism in any form, the defender of white supremacy above all else. That essay anticipated the direction of much of his writing for the next quarter-century" (230). To an unprecedented degree, Davidson here demonstrates his unequivocal belief in a perniciously abstract, racist, and ill-used social construct, one that critic Thadious Davis argues is most clearly communicated in the term "Negro." As it is distinguished from current racial nomenclature—i.e., designations such as black or African American—Davis asserts that "Negro" is "the white man's own creation," a cynical and dehumanizing social construct (2). Although Davidson certainly does not create "Negro," he certainly embraces and endorses it in full measure, especially in his concern over abstract ideas of black blood and white.

Even if he is unwittingly caught up in abstractions, however, Davidson remains pragmatic. His primary purpose is simply to maintain the status quo in southern racial arrangements. More than a conciliatory effort to find some middle ground between the Old South and New, Davidson's arguments increasingly demonstrate his absolute commitment to segregation. Even in an essay with



such an innocuous and bland sounding title as “Federation or Disunion: The Political Economy of Regionalism,” which he wrote around the same time as “Gulliver With Hayfever” and subsequently republished in *Attack*, Davidson speaks of the necessity of affording the sections a certain amount of protection from Federal interference, which he refers to as “regional” or “Northeastern” imperialism (113, 117).

As is often the case, his argument in “Federation or Disunion” begins reasonably. Having convincingly described the South’s colonial status in relation to the North in the several decades following the Civil War, Davidson suggests that under a sectionalist approach, the sections would be given “power to tax or at least to regulate . . . capital and enterprises that attempt national monopoly; power . . . to control to some degree credit and money; power to safeguard educational systems against the rule of external interests and of propaganda aimed at the very life of regional cultures” (126). This is all well and good, and, in light of his earlier arguments, plausible at the very least. It is at this very point, however, that Davidson arrives at what increasingly proves to be the *raison d’être* for his sectionalist argument. Having just made his pitch for the sections generally to have the protections inherent in the power to tax or to control money or education, Davidson goes on to mention a protection that would be afforded his particular section. The South, he says, would be granted “power . . . to preserve its bi-racial social system without the furtive evasion or raw violence to which it is now driven when sniped at with weapons of Federal legality” (126). No power or authority is finally more important to Davidson than the power of the southern states to protect themselves from intermingling with “Negro”—not “the Negro” or even “Negroes”—but the abstract social construct that proved in Davidson’s mind to be larger and more threatening than any one person or group of people.

The South's entrance into the modern world was all but accomplished by the end of World War II. During the 1930s, however, the question was still open, even if most southerners could imagine only one route for the South.<sup>5</sup> The conclusion has long been foregone, but *Attack* is an important register of a dissenting opinion, which, save for the bugbear of race, holds some retrospective value even today. This is not to say, however, that Davidson has much of a chance of becoming fashionable again. As O'Brien observes,

the Whiggery of conventional American historiography has never served well those who have resisted progress, and Davidson has been a victim of this. . . . For seen within the Southern tradition, *Leviathan* was a desperate gesture of compromise. Davidson offered to split the difference between the South and the nation: America should be regional, and the regions should be American. He was taking up a middle position between his Confederate heritage and the New South school. He offered a cultural renewal of the Compromise of 1877, which he judged had been broken in the 1920s. (*Idea* 204)

For reasons mostly out of his control, Davidson's desperate gesture was met with failure. We are remiss, however, not to consider that his personal moral failing was nevertheless very great. Donald Davidson was certainly not the first southerner (or American) to be tripped up by the vagaries of the race question. His failure to see black Americans as his neighbors was wrong and deeply regrettable. Beyond being a twice-told tale of moral failure, however, Davidson's retreat into the tragic distances created by racist abstractions is perhaps even more significant as a cautionary tale. On so many levels, his critique of the *zeitgeist* of modernity was noble and even prescient. Readers like Russell Kirk are right to see him as a keen critic and perhaps even a prophet who foresaw the rise of big government. On the most concrete and important of matters, however, Davidson was sadly mistaken. In extolling a humane and Agrarian alternative to the bitter and impersonal forces that were

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<sup>5</sup> For more on those who tried to shape the region in the late 1930s and 1940s, particularly regarding Civil Rights matters, see John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day: the Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*. New York: Knopf, 1994.

ascendant in his own day, Davidson's great failure was not only his inability to recognize his black neighbors as *people*. More than that, he refused to recognize them as a *particular* people most familiar with and adapted to some of his dearest Agrarian principles. Indeed, the black southerner, particularly the black southern writer, given "his emphasis on family and community, his essentially concrete vision, his feeling for place, his immersion in history and what it produced" might have proved to be Davidson's most stalwart ally in any effort to preserve a valuable way of life (Hobson, *Southern Writer* 101). The greatest and saddest irony is that with the aid of his black neighbors, Davidson might have found a means of revitalizing certain Agrarian values in viable and meaningful ways. Instead, long before his death in 1968, he became a lonely victim of abstraction, and the modern world he had long resisted gave way to an ill-defined but all too real "post-modernity" that must have been even more incomprehensible to him.

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