

Donald Davidson and "America's Other Lost Generation"

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WILLIAM HUTCHISON in his classic *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* identifies an unusual phenomenon often overlooked by historians of early twentieth-century religion. According to Hutchison, during the 1920s, a handful of "secular humanists" outside the conservative evangelical subculture endorsed fundamentalism's case against modernity. Schooled in what Henry May called "the end of American innocence," these disillusioned intellectuals of Gertrude Stein's "lost generation" displayed a peculiar respect for the mood if not the doctrine of fundamentalism. While rejecting the world view of theistic supernaturalism, they nevertheless admitted that the fundamentalist objection to the cherished assumptions of modern America possessed a measure of moral validity.¹

Among fundamentalism's unbelieving fellow travelers Hutchison lists Southern writer John Crowe Ransom, author of *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (1930) and a leading figure in the Southern Literary Renaissance (1920-1950).² During the 1920s, Ransom helped organize a symposium of social critics drawn from Nashville's highly acclaimed *Fugitive* poetry magazine and the faculty and alumni of his own Vanderbilt University. Notable participants included Allen Tate, Robert

Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks. Known as the Southern Agrarians because of their aggressive opposition to the mass culture of industrialism, the critics mounted arguments against what they perceived as the dehumanizing trends of modernity. In individual works and collaborative efforts such as *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) and *Who Owns America?* (1936), they attacked not only the industrialism of the Northern capitalist and the New South booster but also "the spiritual poverty that marks the age of machines."³

Due to their stress on religious criticism, the Agrarians eventually gained a reputation as advocates for a social restoration of "hierarchical Christian order."⁴ That judgment is largely based upon the preference some Agrarians displayed, near the dissolution of the group, for the metaphysical warrants provided by classical forms of Neo-Orthodox and Neo-Thomist Christian theology.⁵ Curiously, during their most intense phase of activity, the Agrarians chose the more populist movement of fundamentalism as the religious vehicle to embody their critique of modernity. Despite the fact that the chief exponents of Agrarianism were generally unaffiliated with traditional Protestantism, the Agrarian movement recognized fundamentalism as a

powerful mode of protest against oppressive currents in modern culture.

In *God Without Thunder*, perhaps the best known piece of Agrarian religious criticism, Ransom, though a thoroughgoing naturalist himself, made shrewd use of fundamentalism as a key rhetorical device in his idiosyncratic apology for the rights of poetic imagination in an intellectual world that he felt was impoverished by one-dimensional materialism and scientific chauvinism.⁶ In this paper I hope to demonstrate how another Agrarian writer, poet and critic Donald Davidson (1893-1968), similarly adopted 1920s-style fundamentalism as a symbol of counter-cultural social prophecy. Confirming George Marsden's suspicion that Southern writers of the interwar period shared fundamentalists' sense of alienation from mainstream American culture, Davidson's use of fundamentalism reflects the deliberate attempt of a "lost generation" critic of modernity to foster an intellectual affinity with the ultimate outsiders in early twentieth-century religious America—those R. Laurence Moore has provocatively dubbed "America's other Lost Generation."⁷

Much as a poet takes on a fictive persona in the creation of lyric verse, Davidson borrowed the alien voice of fundamentalism in polemical prose to express his anti-modern social criticism. While he agreed with Ransom that the Agrarian symposium was as much "a defense of poetry" as a defense of premodernist culture, Davidson put fundamentalism to different uses in his discourse.⁸ Arguing on humanistic grounds for the cultural value of fundamentalism, Davidson utilized the rhetoric of religious antimodernism in his plea for the survival of America's endangered cultural diversity.

"Like a Midnight Alarm"

Ransom's junior colleague on the Vanderbilt English faculty, Davidson was

hardly predisposed to defend religious faith conservative or otherwise. He was never a regular churchgoer during his own long career, and his works betrayed an agnostic outlook toward religious questions, often exhibiting a "lost generation" nostalgia for a faith no longer affirmed. Like the speaker in his poem *The Tall Men*, Davidson could fondly recall the haunting scenes of a Southern Methodist childhood: a trumpet-playing evangelist "under a canvas tent, a borrowed / Piano tinkling a washed-out music, a sweating / Choir vaguely exalting the youthful blood / Of sinners." He could also convey as one with personal experience the divided mind of a chastened naturalist out of touch with former certainties: "Whatever God is, this man does not guess....Some Great Electron, not yet trapped or seen, / But there or not, whatever our debates."⁹

Less romantically, Davidson's private letters revealed sentiments of anti-clericalism, anti-institutionalism, and religious ambivalence. "I find myself more repelled than attracted by all clergymen and priests," he wrote to fellow Fugitive poet Allen Tate. "If it were not for them, possibly I could become something-or-other in a religious way." Though he did confess an abstract predilection for old-fashioned sects like the Primitive Baptists, it was Davidson's obsession with the traumatic Scopes trial that determined the religious rhetoric of his Agrarian criticism.¹⁰

Historians of Southern Agrarianism have long identified 1925 as the *annus mirabilis* of the movement.¹¹ Though analysis of the correspondence among the principal Agrarians shows that plans for a southern symposium did not begin to take shape until 1928,¹² the Agrarians themselves in later years pointed to the 1925 Scopes trial as a key event which triggered the transformation of a bookish circle of poets into a band of defiant apologists for Southern tradition. Of all

the Agrarians it was Davidson who made the most explicit link between the Scopes trial and the Agrarian crusade. At the 1956 reunion of the Fugitive poets he traced the first stirrings of the movement to the time "when the Dayton trial set everything aflame."¹³ In lectures at Mercer University the following year he testified to the spiritual significance of the "Dayton unpleasantness" in the development of the Agrarian consciousness. "With its jeering accompaniment of large-scale mockery directed against Tennessee and the South," he said, the Scopes trial "broke in upon our literary concerns like a midnight alarm."

I can hardly speak for others, but for John Ransom and myself, surely, the Dayton episode dramatized, more ominously than any other event easily could, how difficult it was to be a Southerner in the twentieth century, and how much more difficult to be a Southerner and also a writer. It was horrifying to see the cause of liberal education argued in a Tennessee court by a famous agnostic lawyer from Illinois named Clarence Darrow. It was still more horrifying—and frightening—to realize that the South was being exposed to large-scale public detraction and did not know or much care how to answer.¹⁴

Though fueled by resentment toward the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision, which Davidson bitterly opposed until his death, these remarks, thirty years after the Scopes trial, forcefully reveal the enduring quality of the Scopes affair in Davidson's mind as an emblem of the South's vulnerable position in the modern world. Far from a sign of reproach, however, the Dayton "Monkey Trial" became for Davidson a token of devout resistance to a dangerous nationwide trend toward cultural and ideological conformity.

During the period from 1925 to 1930, Davidson developed his answer to what he considered "the organized wrath of the outside world." Convinced that the

condescending attitude of America's intellectuals toward conservative Southern evangelicals was only one aspect of a massive cultural campaign against his section, a "cold Civil War," in other words, Davidson built into his strategy of response the imaginative use of a term popularized by American journalists during the trial.¹⁵ Originally coined in 1920 to designate the conservative party among Northern Baptists, within five years "fundamentalism" was reserved almost exclusively for "the baroque theology of southern hillbillies." Even scholars such as H. Richard Niebuhr bought the wholesale identification of fundamentalism with rural faith.¹⁶

Unlike the nervous Southern progressives, including the administration of Vanderbilt University, who frantically tried to refute the stubborn stereotype and dissociate fundamentalism from Southern culture, Davidson appropriated "fundamentalism" precisely in the terms of its detractors. Transforming it into an instrument of counterattack, he introduced "fundamentalism" into his discourse as a charged synecdoche signifying those distinctively Southern features of his region's culture that he judged severely threatened by Northern industry's drive toward standardization. While the Fugitives in their eagerness to disprove H. L. Mencken's caricature of the South as the "Sahara of the Bozart" had once distanced themselves from regional piety, Davidson realized that after Scopes, "the writer who cuts himself off from a tradition may find himself in a spiritual desert more painful than the Sahara of Mencken's imagination."¹⁷

"The Highest Function of Art"

Davidson's first published reference to fundamentalism appeared in his 1926 *Saturday Review of Literature* article "The Artist as Southerner." There he dealt with what would become a conventional Agrarian theme: the Southern writer's

desire for a living tradition to nourish art. Neither the "moonlight and magnolias" legacy of Old South sentimentalism nor the trite civic optimism of New South boosterism, Davidson declared, could furnish the arts with a proper environment in which to thrive. Much less could the philistinism of the Klansman or the moralism of the fundamentalist offer anything even close to a substitute for vital culture. Consequently, Davidson pictured the Southern artist as "an alien particle in the body politic." At the same time, however, he suggested that the artist's salvation may lie in the dialectical acceptance of the culture's meager resources. For Davidson, the religion of the Dayton anti-evolutionists became a figure of what the benighted South could grant the artist:

Fundamentalism, in one aspect, is blind and belligerent ignorance; in another, it represents a fierce clinging to poetic supernaturalism against the encroachments of cold logic; it stands for moral seriousness. The Southerner should hesitate to scorn these qualities, for, however much they may now be perverted to bigoted and unfruitful uses, they belong in the bone and sinew of his nature as they once belonged to Milton, who was both Puritan and Cavalier. To obscure them by a show of sophistication is to play the coward; to give them a positive transmutation is the highest function of art.¹⁸

Treating fundamentalism as something of a native folk art, Davidson asserted the value of indigenous culture whatever its limitations. As other Southerners had once turned the humiliation of past defeat into a mythic Lost Cause, modeled in part on the Miltonic theodicy of failed English Puritanism, Davidson grasped the alleged backwardness of fundamentalism as a rude virtue by which the remnants of stable local culture in America could shield themselves from the artificial spirituality of the age.¹⁹

Within the next year Davidson devel-

oped these thoughts into what would become his mature Agrarian message. As the Fugitive poets exchanged letters laying the groundwork for the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, Davidson increasingly focused his criticism on the disturbing tendency of modern industrialism to function as the governing metaphor for every aspect of national life. He saw mass-produced commodities giving way to mass-produced values, thereby driving America perilously close to eliminating the sense of regional pluralism upon which the meaning of the country, in his opinion, depended. In the same way that fundamentalist theologian J. Gresham Machen feared modern democracy's power to "make of America one huge 'Main Street,' where spiritual adventure will be discouraged,"²⁰ Davidson harbored a gloomy vision of the nation's future uniformity.

With his 1928 essay "First Fruits of Dayton" Davidson launched his career-long "intellectual offensive" against what he believed to be America's encroaching totalitarian culture. Writing in *Forum* magazine to an audience weaned on polite notions of progress, he rendered fundamentalism variously as a type of backwoods personalism and as a spiritual version of States Rights doctrine, announcing the heresy that anti-evolution laws were the very sort of progress America desperately needed to halt the eventual repression of cultural diversity. Its intellectual infirmities notwithstanding, Davidson maintained that fundamentalism possessed the rare genius to expose the national drift toward intellectual homogeneity and identify the central question of modern culture: "how far science, which is determining our physical ways of life, shall be permitted also to determine our philosophy of life."²¹

In Davidson's thought fundamentalism emerged as a timely witness against the leveling of the American cultural landscape. For him the "crime" of the Dayton

affair consisted not in its violation of divine revelation, but in its reckless sacrifice of regional particularity. When the South and Middle West become axiological twins and Charleston threatens to imitate Pittsburgh, Davidson prophesied, then the uncivil fundamentalist may be the only American who can discern the true significance of provincialism—"not insularity and bigotry of mind, but differentiation."²² In an argument he would perfect for *The Attack on Leviathan* (1938), Davidson used the provocative language of fundamentalism to shock America's intellectual elite into recognizing the inherent merit of "local originality and independence."²³ By doing so he made a unique contribution to the language of dissent characterizing twentieth-century anti-modernism. Though he would later inform his Agrarianism with a strident agenda of racial segregation, in the immediate aftermath of the Scopes trial Davidson located the cultural value of fundamentalism, laying aside all claims to eternal truth, in its propensity to remind Americans of "the moral obligation to discover the uses of variety."²⁴

Conclusion

In the years following the First World War, fundamentalism found few friends in the American intellectual community. As R. Laurence Moore has put it, the dominant culture regarded fundamentalists as "the Mormons of the twentieth century,"²⁵ antagonistic nonconformists resisting the main currents of national life. Southerners, too, felt America to be an inhospitable environment for social or intellectual pluralism. Self-righteous critics, amazed to see religion front-page news, expanded their ridicule of fundamentalists crudities to include diatribes against "the land of lynchings, Ku Klux Klan, night rider, mountain feud, [and] voodoo murder."²⁶

Due in part to their own unwanted

outsider status the intellectuals comprising the Southern Agrarian movement, poets by instinct and training, negotiated a natural partnership with the rhetorical strategies of postwar fundamentalism. There was not a "defense" of fundamentalism, as some have mistakenly supposed,²⁷ but the subversive transformation of intractable fundamentalism into a plastic term of defiance during the culture wars of their age. The "intellectual collaboration" that William Hutchison detected between fundamentalists and discontented secular humanists was nowhere more evident than in Donald Davidson's Agrarian use of fundamentalist motifs to support a critique of the industrial culture threatening the regional subculture of his traditional South. Like the period musicians who incorporated discordant sounds into their avant-garde compositions, Davidson adopted the putative vulgarity of fundamentalism's voice to render his judgment on the perceived intolerance of modern America.

This feature of Davidson's Agrarian project is marked by two striking ironies. First, as he formulated his distinctive use of fundamentalism, he did so with little firsthand knowledge of the religious movement itself. Like many intellectuals in his generation Davidson confused fundamentalism with those strains in the Southern revivalist tradition associated with the frontier piety of the Southern highlands and what Charles Reagan Wilson has called the Southern civil religion of the Lost Cause.²⁸ Largely unaware of the Northern and urban origins of fundamentalism, which recent studies have discussed at length,²⁹ Davidson blindly accepted the harsh and often inaccurate stereotype of fundamentalism advanced by contemporary opponents of conservative Protestantism. As a result, he and other Agrarian writers inadvertently succeeded in perpetuating fundamentalism's negative association with intolerance and

anti-intellectualism. Perhaps for this reason, the Agrarian works in religious criticism, while vigorously reviewed in religious and secular journals of a liberal cast, were virtually ignored by publications claiming fundamentalist credentials.³⁰

Secondly, though Davidson offered favorable assessments of fundamentalism at the very time that he personally repudiated the familiar doctrines constituting traditional Christianity, it was precisely his unbelief that rendered him free to recognize a pragmatic merit in fundamentalism undiscernible to other American intellectuals whose vested interests in the liberal tradition of theology and public philosophy prevented them from seeing fundamentalism's prophetic potential. Analogous to Perry Miller's well-known "discovery" of the Puritans in the 1930s,³¹ Davidson's willingness to venture a literary endorsement of fundamentalism exhibited what his friend Allen Tate once described as "our modern unbelieving belief."³²

Just as the Harvard atheist would subtly use the genius of strict New England Calvinism to question contemporary American assumptions of confident optimism, Davidson, without embracing or even sufficiently understanding the fundamentalist creed, suggested that militant fundamentalism might possess a message for progressive America. In subsequent years, of course, some members of the original Agrarian symposium would resort to more acceptable forms of theological legitimation for their cultural criticism. During the turbulent decade of the 1920s, however, fundamentalism functioned within Davidson's Agrarian discourse as a prophetic sign of contradiction.

1. William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Durham, 1992), 257-287. Cf. Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time 1912-1917* (Oxford, 1979), 129n. On fundamentalism as a "mood" in addition to a religious movement see George M. Marsden, "Evangelical and Fundamental Christianity," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987 ed. 2. John Crowe Ransom, *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* (Hamden, Conn., 1965). Cf. Thomas Daniel Young, *Gentleman in a Dustcoat* (Baton Rouge, 1976). 3. Quoted from the first version of the Agrarian "Statement of Principles" in Virginia J. Rock, "The Making and Meaning of *I'll Take My Stand*: A Study in Utopian Conservatism, 1925-1939," diss., University of Minnesota, 1961, 465. The two classic statements of Southern Agrarian doctrine are *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge, 1977) and Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, eds., *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (Boston, 1936). 4. Richard H. King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (Oxford, Eng., 1980), 62. Cf. Lewis P. Simpson, *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge, 1983), 65-75. 5. Cf. Cleanth Brooks' use of Protestant Neo-Orthodoxy in "A Plea to the Protestant Churches," *Who Owns America?* 323-333 and "The Enduring Faith," *Why the South Will Survive*, by Fifteen Southerners (Athens, Ga., 1981), 200-211. Allen Tate's debt to Roman Catholic neo-scholasticism is evident in *The Forlorn Demon: Didactic and Critical Essays* (Chicago, 1953). 6. Cf. Kieran Quinlan, *John Crowe Ransom's Secular Faith* (Baton Rouge, 1989). 7. George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1991), 200. R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York, 1986), 163. 8. Rob Roy Purdy, ed., *Fugitives' Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3-5, 1956* (Nashville, 1959), 181. 9. Donald Davidson, *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems* (New York, 1938), 122, 125. 10. Donald Davidson to Allen Tate, 29 July 1929. John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young, eds., *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* (Athens, 1974), 227, 354. Cf. Thomas Daniel Young and M. Thomas Inge, *Donald Davidson* (New York, 1971), 131. 11. Cf. John M. Bradbury, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account* (Chapel Hill, 1958), 11. Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (Baton Rouge, 1959), 206-208. John L. Stewart, *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians* (Princeton, 1965), 109 ff. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 194-195. Alex Karanikas, *Tillers of a Myth: Southern Agrarians as Social and Literary Critics* (Madison, Wis., 1966), 26, 145. Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., ed., *Controversy in the Twenties: Fundamentalism, Modernism, and Evolution* (Nashville, 1969), 13-14, 335. See also Thomas

Daniel Young, "The Agrarians," *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., et al. (Baton Rouge, 1985), 429. William C. Havard, "Agrarians, Vanderbilt," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, 1989 ed. 12. Cf. Daniel Joseph Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 200-201, 398 n. 5. Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville, 1988), 24 ff. 13. *Fugitives' Reunion*, 199. 14. Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens, 1958), 30, 40. 15. Donald Davidson, *The Tennessee* (Nashville, 1992), II, 196. Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, 34. 16. David Harrell, "Fundamentalism," *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, 1989 ed. Cf. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (Oxford, Eng., 1980), 107, 119. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929; Cleveland, 1968), 184-186. 17. Davidson quoted in Fred C. Hobson, Jr., *Serpent in Eden: H. L. Mencken and the South* (Chapel Hill, 1974), 160. 18. Donald Davidson, "The Artist as Southerner," *Saturday Review of Literature* (May 15, 1926), 782-783. 19. Cf. Donald Davidson, "I'll Take My Stand: A History," *American Review* 5 (Summer 1935), 308. Charles Reagan Wilson, "'God's Project': The Southern Civil Religion, 1920-1980," *Religion and the Life of the Nation*, ed. Rowland A. Sherrill (Urbana, 1990), 64-83. 20. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, 1946), 15. 21. Donald Davidson, "First Fruits of Dayton: The Intellectual Evolution in Dixie," *Forum* 79 (June 1928), 898. 22. Davidson, "First

Fruits of Dayton," 905-906. 23. Donald Davidson, *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States* (Gloucester, Mass., 1962), 131. 24. Davidson, "First Fruits of Dayton," 906. 25. Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, 169. 26. Donald Davidson, "Critic's Almanac," *Tennessean* (2 June 1929). Quoted in Donald Davidson, *The Spyglass: Views and Reviews, 1924-1930*, ed. John Tyree Fain (Nashville, 1963), 208. 27. Cf. Thomas Daniel Young, "From Fugitives to Agrarians," *Mississippi Quarterly* 33 (Fall 1980), 421 and *Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Reconsidered* (Athens, Ga., 1982), 4. 28. Cf. Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens, Ga., 1980). 29. Cf. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 179, 188, 202. Nancy T. Ammerman, "North American Protestant Fundamentalism," *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago, 1991), 17 ff. Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, 160. 30. For example, the only religious journals to review Ransom's *God Without Thunder* were *Christian Century* (47 [3 December 1930], 1490-1491), *Commonweal* (13 [4 February 1931], 385-386) and *Living Church* (85 [12 September 1931], 657). 31. On Perry Miller as a "believing unbeliever" see Lewis Perry, *Intellectual Life in America: A History* (New York, 1984), 393-395 and Reinhold Niebuhr, "Perry Miller and Our Embarrassment," *Harvard Review* 2 (Winter-Spring 1964), 49. 32. Allen Tate, *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago, 1959), 357.