

# The Attack on Leviathan: Donald Davidson and the South's Conservatism

by Russell Kirk

*Leviathan* is a Hebrew word signifying "that which gathers itself in folds." In the Old Testament, Leviathan is the great sea-beast: "Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?" In the 17th century, Thomas Hobbes — whom T.S. Eliot calls "that presumptuous little upstart" — made Leviathan the symbol of the state, or rather of mass-society, composed of innumerable little atomic individual human beings.

Today I am concerned not with Hobbes, but with Donald Davidson and his book *The Attack on Leviathan*. In 1938, long before the administration of Lyndon Johnson popularized the slogan "The Great Society," Davidson wrote that his Leviathan is "the idea of the Great Society, organized under a single, complex, but strong and highly centralized national government, motivated ultimately by men's desire for economic welfare of a specific kind rather than their desire for personal liberty." Four decades later, Leviathan looms larger than ever.

The southern states that once formed the Confederacy have been the most conservative region of America, it is generally agreed. Once upon a time, Richard Weaver told me that Middle Tennessee is the most southern part of the South. There in Middle Tennessee, near the town of Pulaski, in 1893, Donald Davidson was born. Surely Davidson was the most redoubtably conservative of those able American men of letters who have been called the Southern Agrarians. As poet, as critic, as historian, and as political thinker, Davidson was a stalwart defender of America's permanent things during an era of radical change.

**Scourging the Centralizers.** I propose to discuss with you Donald Davidson as the latter-day champion of the South's political and social inheritance. Ever since the forming of the Union in 1787, the dominant political tendency in the southern states has been resistance to the centralizing of power. Far more than any other region, the South has set its face against Leviathan — that is, against the swelling omnipotent nation-state, what Tocqueville called "democratic despotism," the political collectivity that reduces men and women to social atoms. In his strong book *The Attack on Leviathan*, published in 1938, Davidson scourged the centralizers — and that at a time when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was doing much as he liked with the United States of America.

Permit me first to say something about Davidson and his writings; and then to discuss the social principles for which the Southern Agrarians and their allies stood.

Browsing in the library at Michigan State College, in 1938, an earnest sophomore, I happened upon a new book, published by the University of North Carolina Press, entitled *The Attack on Leviathan*, subtitled *Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States*. It was written eloquently, and for me it made coherent the misgivings I had felt concerning the political notions popular in the 1930s. The book was so good that I assumed all intelligent

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Americans, or almost all, were reading it. Actually, as I learned years later, the University of North Carolina Press pulped the book's sheets after only a few hundred copies had been sold: clearly an act of discrimination against conservative views. I had a hand in the reprinting of the book by another firm in 1963; and now I aspire to bring out a third printing in the Library of Conservative Thought, which I edit for Transaction Books.

**Opinion Shapers.** Professor Davidson rowed against the tide of opinion among America's intellectuals in 1938. Centralizing nationalism, he argued, is of necessity tyrannical and enslaving. For a specimen of his method and style, take this passage from his chapter on American literature. He has been criticizing Emerson, and he finds that the opinion shapers of New York and Boston during the 1930s are Emerson's heirs:

In our own time, the metropolitan critics are making national prescriptions that are equally partial, though somewhat more confused. In one sentence they assure us that the industrial unification of America is desirable and inevitable; but in the next sentence they declare that the civilization thus produced puts upon us an intolerable spiritual bondage from which the artist cannot escape save through the shibboleths of Marxism and Freudianism. Wearily, they proclaim that America is standardized; but angrily they scorn the rural backwardness of regions that prove to be, after all, less urban than New York. Confidently they announce that America must be industrialized; but they sneer at Mr. Babbitt of the Middle West, the creature of industrialism. They urge the provinces to adopt the intellectual sophistication of the Eastern metropolis; but among themselves they bewail the poverty of the modern temper, which in its sophistication has left them nothing to enjoy.

Now could one write, in this year of 1989, a better description of the mentality of such American intellectuals? One might substitute, of course, the phrase "the industrial unification of the world" for that of America; for nowadays the whole of the world must be subjected to those environmental mischiefs and social discontents that already have worked immense harm in the "developed countries."

**Sword of Imagination.** Davidson was bold enough to defend the agricultural economy against industrial aggrandizement. (Parenthetically, it seems worth remarking that in recent years the dollar volume of agricultural produce in the industrial state of Michigan has exceeded the dollar volume of manufactured products.) Bolder still, he took up the cause of his own region, the South, against the nationalizers of New York and Washington. He appreciated, too, other American regions: New England, the Great Plains, the Lake States, the Pacific coast. But it was the South which required the service of Davidson's sword of imagination.

"Can principles enunciated as Southern principles, of whatever cast, get a hearing?" he inquired in *The Attack on Leviathan*.

...It seems to be a rule that the more special the program and the more remote it is from Southern principles, the greater the likelihood of its being discussed and promulgated. Southerners who wish to engage in public discussion in terms that do not happen to be of common report in the New York newspapers are likely to be met, at the levels where one would least expect it, with the tactics of

distortion, abuse, polite tut-tutting, angry discrimination and so on down to the baser devices of journalistic lynching which compose the modern propagandist's stock in trade. This is an easy and comparatively certain means of discrediting an opponent and of thus denying him a hearing. It is also a fatal means. For if such approaches to public questions are encouraged and condoned, then confusion has done its work well, the days of free and open discussion of ideas is over in the South, only matters of crass expediency can come into the public forum at all, and we face the miserable prospect of becoming the most inert and passive section of the United States, or else of falling into blind and violent divisions whose pent-up forces will hurl us at each other's throats. Then will Jefferson's prophetic vision come true. We shall take to eating one another, as they do in Europe.

Such matters have not much improved since Davidson wrote those sentences, half a century past: the South continues to be treated by Congress as if it were a subject province (in voter registration especially), and the New York newspapers remain ungenerous.

**Urban Symbol.** New York City was to Donald Davidson the abomination of desolation. He and his wife spent their summers at Middlebury College in Vermont; and Davidson took extraordinary pains to avoid passing through New York City en route. For that matter, he detested sprawling modern cities generally, Nashville included, though he found it necessary to reside most of his life in the neighborhood of Vanderbilt University. To his volume of poems *The Tall Men* (published in 1927) Davidson had a prologue, "The Long Street," the antithesis of the rural Tennessee of yesteryear, that land of heroes. That Long Street — I think of devastated Woodward Avenue in Detroit — is the symbol of a dehumanized urban industrial culture:

The grass cannot remember; trees cannot  
Remember what once was here. But even so,  
They too are here no longer. Where is the grass?  
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 was quick with grass,  
Snuffing 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.

Thirty-five years later, Davidson published another volume of verse, to which he transferred the title *The Long Street*. In his poem "Old Sailor's Choice" he describes Ulysses's voyage to hell and beyond. Contrary to the counsels of a modern Circe, Ulysses chooses Charybdis over Scylla, though modern men lust for Scylla's deadly embrace, "the monstrous lips, the darting neck of their love-death." Davidson describes the ensnaring monster Scylla, a very modern horror:

Within her cliffs of sheer synthetic rock  
She glides on steely pathways. Plastic walls  
Checkered in pseudo-marble cavern her lair.  
These throw you off guard. "How," you ask,

Can anything go wrong where all is right —  
Rectangular, side-ruled, and functional?

Mercy, pity, peace can be manufactured.  
Scylla can end your pain  
Now that the State decrees a tax increase  
And no one can complain.  
The neat-cut stencil echoes the brisk type.  
Machines do the rest. The postage is metered.  
And there is your release:  
Well-packaged, mercy, pity, peace.  
And I saw the stretching neck and the grinning teeth  
In the soundproof room where artificial daylight  
Blacks out the scudding clouds and the churning storm-wrack,  
And the secretary with half-naked breasts  
Extends the telephone on a crimson claw  
And murmurs Washington is calling!

Washington did not call Donald Davidson, who was a guardian of the permanent things, which perish on the pavements of the Long Street. The Scylla of “Old Sailor’s Choice” is the enormous welfare state, which devours the spirit.

**Poetic Works of Politics.** We return to Davidson’s prose. Politics, I never tire of repeating, is the art of the possible — and the preoccupation of the quarter-educated. That is, politics ranks low in order of precedence of the works of the mind, if one refers simply to defecated political theory and practice, cut off from revelation and right reason and imagination. But Professor Davidson never divorced politics from religion or imaginative literature or tradition. He knew that the greatest works of politics are poetic. In his later collection of essays entitled *Still Rebels, Still Yankees* (1957), he writes about the dissociation of the poet from society, now

...painfully apparent as society has accepted the dominance of science and consequently has become indisposed to accept poetry as truth....  
In this phase of operations the poet may well become an outright traditionalist in religion, politics, and economics. He examines the defects of modern civilization. He develops a sense of catastrophe. With an insight far more accurate than the forecasts of professional social philosophers, he begins to plot the lines of stress and strain along which disaster will erupt. He predicts the ruin of modern secularized society and makes offers of salvation. These are unheard of or unheeded. Then upon the deaf ears and faceless bodies of modern society he invokes the poet’s curse.

Eliot’s poetic curse was that famous fatal dismissal, “This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper.” Davidson, fiercely though he reproached a sensate age, was not quite ready to pronounce a curse upon his time. Tradition still might reassert its old power. Take this passage from his essay “Futurism and Archaism in Toynbee and Hardy” contained in *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*:

‘You cannot turn the clock back!’ is the commonest taunt of our day. It always emerges as the clinching argument that any modernist offers any traditionalist when the question is: ‘What shall we do now?’ But it

is not really an argument. It is a taunt intended to discredit the traditionalist by stigmatizing him a traitor to an idea of progress that is assumed as utterly valid and generally accepted. The aim is, furthermore, to poison the traditionalist's own mind and disturb his self-confidence by the insinuation that he is a laggard in the world's great procession. His faith in an established good is made to seem nostalgic devotion to a mere phantom of the buried past. His opposition to the new — no matter how ill-advised, inartistic, destructive, or immoral that new may be — is defined as a quixotic defiance of the Inevitable. To use a term invented by Arnold J. Toynbee, he is an Archaist. By definition, he is therefore doomed.

To abide by Tradition is not to fall into Archaism, Davidson told the rising generation. As for turning back the clock — why, as Davidson puts it, “Neither can you turn the clock forward, for Time is beyond human control.” When a Futurist uses this clock metaphor, we perceive an unconscious revelation of his weakness. He wishes to imply that his design, and his only, is perfectly in step with some scientific master cloak of cause and effect that determines the progress of human events. This implication has no basis in reality, since the Futurist actually means to break off all connection with the historical process of cause and effect and to substitute for it an imagined, ideal process of quasi-scientific future development which is nothing more than a sociological version of Darwinism.

**Gifted and Versatile.** Such was the conservative mind of Donald Davidson. If I have made him seem somewhat abstract — why, that has been my blunder. He was remarkably versatile: a collector of folk ballads, a gifted lecturer, a writer of librettos, an historian, even from time to time active in the troubled politics of Tennessee. He was all too well aware of the huge blunders in public policy during the 20th century. If one turns to the second volume of his history of the Tennessee River, one finds three chapters accurately exposing the failures of that enormous undertaking, so ardently commended by the liberal press and most Tennessee politicians — yet so founded upon economic and social fallacies.

In person, Davidson was a lean and austere gentleman who smiled rarely; his conversation, nevertheless, was lively, and he was a kindly host. He had been a courageous soldier. To the end he lived with dignity, lamenting the destruction of dignity within universities. Once I walked with him on the campus at Vanderbilt; he told me of how most of the trees there had been felled not long before to make space for more automobiles. This was bad enough; but to make his indignation perfect, grim rows of parking meters had been installed. A militant survivor from what he called “the old regime,” Davidson spoke contemptuously of his university's administrators. Students venerated him. He wrote to me on August 31, 1954: “Living in Nashville and teaching at Vanderbilt University is very hard on a Southern Agrarian, I can assure you. It is, in fact, nothing but warfare, and we can't survive very long without some place to lick our wounds for a while.” (He wrote this from Ripton, Vermont, where the Davidsons spent their summers at the Breadloaf School.)

**Neglected Agrarians.** Vanderbilt's administration disparaged the Agrarians and, in effect, would not accept Davidson's or Allen Tate's papers as gifts. For that matter, the literate South generally neglected those Agrarians, the most illustrious of southern sons, in their own time. Only when New York paid attention to Tate, Warren, Ransom, Lytle, and others did the South prick up its ears. As that 17th-century “Person of No Quality” put it,

Seven cities now contend for Homer dead,  
Through which the living Homer begged his bread.

I fear I have given you, ladies and gentlemen, only a fragmentary summary of Donald Davidson's social thought. But now I pass to some remarks on the Southern Agrarians generally — one of them, Mr. Andrew Lytle, will spend some days at a seminar in my house, next month, so the breed is still quick — and to the pressing question of what to do about Leviathan.



Nearly sixty years ago, when I was a fourth-grader in the very northern town of Plymouth, Michigan, twelve southerners published a book entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. That slim volume, a heartfelt defense of the permanent things in the South's culture, has been discussed ever since; a literature of assent or of disapproval has developed about it. Young men and women who come to study with me in my northern fastness discover this literature — even without my having commented on any of it — and read the books, night upon night, even to the witching hour of three.

Christian humanism, stern criticism of the industrial mass society, detestation of communism and other forms of collectivism, attachment to the ways of the Old South, in valor and in manners — these were the principles joining the twelve Southern Agrarians who took their stand in Dixieland in 1930. Their twelve essays were approved by T.S. Eliot and some other reflective people at the time the book was published; yet for the most part the Agrarians met with hostility and ridicule. Today their book sometimes meets with understanding, for we are farther down the track to Avernus.

**Reminder and Challenge.** As Louis Rubin says of the Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand* "is the rebuke to materialism, a corrective to the worship of Progress, and a reaffirmation of man's aesthetic and spiritual needs. And because the South has come so late into the industrial world, it appeals to the hungry memory within the Southerner's mind of the tranquil and leisurely Southern life that existed before the machines and superhighways came. As such the book constitutes both a reminder and a challenge. What are you losing that you once possessed? Are you sure that you want to discard it entirely?"

Despite the considerable attention paid nationally to these Agrarian writers, it was not easy for them to find publishers; or, if their writings should be published, to keep them in print. Yet they persisted; and in the long run their high talents as men of letters gave them for some years, about the period of my college days, ascendancy over the realm of letters, even in Manhattan — a mild domination that endured until recent years, when it was overthrown by the squalid oligarchs of the *New York Review of Books*. (Even here the South has made a successful counterattack, most conspicuously in the homage paid to Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy.) As a group, the Agrarians illustrated well the remark made by Lionel Trilling in 1950 that the 20th century writers possessing imagination were not liberals — distinctly not.

**Demolished and Uglified.** The Twelve Southerners, Donald Davidson among them, knew that the South would change. As Stark Young put it in his essay "Not in Memoriam, But in Defense," which concluded their book "That a change is now in course all over the South is plain; and it is as plain that the South changing must be the South still, remembering that for no thing can there be any completeness that is outside its own nature, and no thing for which there is any advance save in its own kind. If this were not so, all nature by now would have dissolved in chaos and folly, nothing in it...."

Yet the South's pace of change has been more rapid, these six decades past, and more overwhelming, than even the gloomiest of the Twelve Southerners expected. Old Nashville,

the domicile of the Fugitives and the Agrarians, has been thoroughly demolished and uglified, Strickland's capitol on its hill besieged by the haughty office towers of state and federal bureaucracies and of teachers' unions. Much else, in Nashville and nearly all the South, has gone by the board — among those losses, the disappearance of Southern architectural styles.

Along with the dwindling of a distinctive Dixie has come relative economic prosperity. It is factory-town prosperity. The rural pattern of existence, which the Agrarians praised, still endures here and there south of Mason's and Dixon's Line, but it has been brutally buffeted during the past sixty years.

Of the Twelve Southerners, two — Andrew Lytle and Robert Penn Warren — still are here in the land of the living. Modernity has been doing its worst to wipe out Southerners of their sort, in part by sweeping away — in the South and elsewhere — the sort of schooling that men like Davidson and Lytle and Warren profited by. And the welfare state has striven to efface, as impoverished and culturally deprived, the old rural pattern of the South — or, for that matter, of Northern rural counties like that I inhabit — which endured little altered until the building of the “good roads.”

Tide what may betide, the Southern Agrarians will loom large in histories of American thought and letters. With liberalism in America now nearly mindless, some of the rising generation in this land are finding in Donald Davidson's prose and verse, and in the writings of other Agrarians, an understanding of personal and social order far removed from desiccated liberal attitudes.



Six decades after Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, Lyle Lanier, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Frank Owsley, John Gould Fletcher, H.C. Nixon, Robert Penn Warren, John Donald Wade, Henry Blue Kline, and Stark Young took up arms against Leviathan, how goes the fight?

Like the Celts of the Twilight, it seems, the Agrarians have gone forth often to battle, but never to victory. America's farmers now total perhaps 5 percent of the national population. The South has been subjugated a second time by the federal government, and endures a second political Reconstruction — although this time the southern economy is far from ruined. Centralization of power in Washington was carried much farther by Lyndon Johnson than ever it had been by Franklin Roosevelt; states still nominally sovereign are reduced to a condition little better than that of provinces. The nationwide television broadcasters are rapidly effacing any remnants of regional cultures. The public educational establishment exhorts its teachers and its charges to sing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” rather than “Dixie.” In many other ways, Leviathan looms far vaster than the monster was in 1930.

**Swallowed by Leviathan.** And yet the predictions of the Twelve Southerners like those of Cassandra, are being fulfilled. Our great cities, a hundred Long Streets, are nearly ruined, ravaged by crime, their population corrupted or endangered by deadly narcotics, all community destroyed. Our boasted affluence is given the lie by the swift and sinister growth of a genuine proletariat, voracious and unruly, subsisting at public expense. Our layers of governmental bureaucracy are increasingly inefficient and vexatious. Our legislatures, national and state, seem willing to yield to every demand of a pressure group, regardless of the true public interest. Our judges, or many of them, have turned demagogues. Our air is polluted badly, our countryside uglified, public taste corrupted. Our children are brought

up indulgently on images of terrible violence and gross sexuality. Schooling at every level is reduced to child care, adolescent sitting, and collegiate mating: humane letters and history are contemned. While we talk windily still of free enterprise, the industrial and commercial conglomerates move toward oligopoly on a tremendous scale. Religious belief and observance have been first reduced to the ethos of sociability, and then to ignorant discourses on revolution. Leviathan, the monstrous society, has swallowed his myriads. What hope for the person and the republic?

Certain sanguine neoconservatives inform us that America in this year of our Lord 1989 is virtually an earthly paradise of democratic capitalism. This sensate, materialistic, bored, trivial, and often perverse culture of ours today, the summit of human striving? What an absurd contention! But then, most neoconservatives are liberals thinly veiled. Leviathan does not need to pursue such people: they swim eagerly into his maw. The patronage empire of the great "charitable" foundations, by the way, is yet another manifestation of Leviathan.

**Salute to the Southerners.** So I do commend to you, ladies and gentlemen, the genuine conservatism of the Twelve Southerners. It is not the only mode of conservative thought, but it is an important mode. The authors of *I'll Take My Stand* did not propound a rigorous ideology or display a model of Utopia: their principal purpose it was to open our eyes to the illusions of Modernism. The Southern Agrarians proclaimed when I was a child that the southern culture is worth defending; that society is something more than the gross national product; that the country lane is healthier than the Long Street; that more wisdom lies in Tradition than in Scientism; that Leviathan is a devourer, not a savior. Your servant, a northerner of northerners, salutes those Twelve Southerners, some quick, some dead. Study what they have written, and you will discover that they are no mere Archaists.

"Worn out with abstraction and novelty, plagued with divided counsels, 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." So Donald Davidson writes in his chapter "The Diversity of America." He continues, "Such moderns prefer to grasp the particular. They want something to engage both their reason and their love. They distrust the advice of John Dewey to 'use the foresight of the future to refine and expand present activities.' The future is not yet; it is unknowable, intangible. But the past was, the present is; of that much they can be sure. So they attach themselves — or re-attach themselves — to a home-section, one of the sections, great or small, defined in the long conquest of our continental area. They seek spiritual and cultural autonomy....They are learning how to meet the subtlest and most dangerous foe of humanity — the tyranny that wears the mask of humanitarianism and benevolence. They are attacking Leviathan."

Amen to that, Donald Davidson, my old friend, now passed into eternity. Ladies and gentlemen, go forth and do likewise: strike a blow against Leviathan, the monster of the mass-age.

