The career of Donald Davidson was dogged by the feeling, amounting almost to resentment, that he had started life with meagre advantage and never quite made up the difference. Ransom had drawn upon the largesse of the Rhodes trustees, Wade had been pampered by his uncle's fortune, Lytle had a rich family past, Tate and Warren had been prodigies. For Davidson, there had been a slow and laborious grind in small Tennessee towns, where he had taught in schools to pay for his education. At an age when Tate was a figure in New York, Davidson had not finished his first degree. Where Ransom was urbane, Wade witty, Warren fecund, and Tate brashly assured, Davidson seemed to find his way to the lecture room of intellectual opinion always a little too late and with his audience a few hours dispersed. Although at the heart of Agrarian counsels, he was never quite one with them. Speaking now to the survivors of the group, one finds them loud in his praises. He was, they will say, the finest of men, the gentlest, the kindest. But praise is preface to doubts about his poetry and deprecations of his politics. Even Davidson's biographers are half-apologetic: they pass over his opinions with neutral vagueness and stake his claim upon his prose style, the last resort of the embarrassed critic.¹

Twenty-four years old before he received his B.A. from Vanderbilt University, life for Davidson was further complicated by his being drafted for the First World War and involvement in action on the western front. In 1941, on the eve of a fresh war, he recalled: "I was in the last war, over two years of it, in France and all that; and then the post-war which was even worse—and from which I've never really recovered, because I had to start under a handicap and never have 'caught up.'" For he came back to Vanderbilt in 1919 for a teaching position and was turned sadly away. He beat a retreat to the less formidable Kentucky Wesleyan College, equipped with a new wife, a new daughter, an indistinct promise from Edwin Mims that he would be summoned back, and a most melancholy disposition.²

Wartime experience seems to have given him no taste for either travel or Europe. Waiting in France for demobilization, he delivered severe judgment on the factious Europeans who had dragged him across the Atlantic and were deliberating at Versailles: "I believe that the Allied diplomats are using the same old methods that they clung to before the war, that, in fact, partly brought on the war in all probability, while in opposition to this is the American, idealistic, but thoroughly commonsense diplomacy of Wilson. It is my guess that it has been the European statesmen who have caused the delay. Europe is a hundred years behind
the United States, I would say." There is little evidence that he ever
deflected the drift of that opinion. While his friends went off regularly to
England, France, and Italy, Davidson did not bother to return until
three years before his death in 1968. Even then the trip was not his own
idea.3

In 1943, Davidson was asked if, granted the prerogative, he would
have allowed Joyce's *Ulysses* to be published. He returned an emphatic
“NO,” and added, apropos an indelicate passage in a Warren poem—“piss
in his pants” was the offending passage—“All of you boys have been
corrupted by Europe.” An old student was to remember Davidson's
expression of pain and disgust, when asked for a Rhodes scholarship
testimonial, and the exclamation, “Oxford—why in the world do you
want to go to Oxford.” In the years before the outbreak of the Second
World War, Davidson was a supporter of America First. In 1937, he
resisted an editorial effort by Warren and Brooks to amend his anti-
Europeanism. “I insist,” he told them, “on the uniqueness of the Ameri-
can establishment and on its separateness from Europe.”4

This suspicion of a decadent Old World put him at odds with both
Ransom and Tate, though in sympathy with Frank Owsley. When Tate
was preaching the new gospel of Eliot, Davidson stayed unconvinced. In
his insecurity, he sometimes put it down to his own dullness. He told
Tate in 1922 that “for reasons of ignorance I find myself floundering
about and not quite understanding either your poems or Eliot's . . . . I
am such a poor philosopher and psychologist.” Nonetheless he would
chaff Eliot's Anglicized hauteur, in a review of *For Lancelot Andrewes*.
Eliot, he alleged, “is not writing for us hungry sheep, swollen with the
wind of temporal doctrines, but for posterity. With troubled heart, one
surmises that Mr. Eliot would regard the possibility of writing on Sinclair
Lewis with exactly the same revulsion that he would contemplate a visit
to his mother country.” Crucially, Davidson cared little for the emphasis
of Tate and Ransom upon religion. When Tate, in Paris, began to think
well of Roman Catholicism, Davidson observed: “I, too, am attracted
somewhat toward Catholicism, as toward High Church Episcopalianism.
But I like better to be tied up with no church at all. I find myself more
repelled than attracted by all clergymen and priests. If it were not for
them, possibly I could become something-or-other in a religious way. As
matters stand, I seem to be bothered less by religious matters than by
anything else. Maybe I'm just an animal after all.”5

As a Fugitive poet, Davidson adopted a markedly less modern tone
than either Tate or Ransom. His verses were lusher, more Romantic,
looking backwards towards a fading bardic tradition rather than inward
to a faltering capacity for religious or philosophic coherence. Himself
an accomplished guitarist and singer, Davidson was wont to insist that
poetry, like folk song, should be available to the common man and convey the traditions of a people. In this, he was at one with the Howard Odum who was gathering up the white and black songs of the South. As Davidson put it in a later poem, "Happy the land where men hold dear/ Myth that is truest memory/Prophecy that is poetry." And he was to stay closest, in instinct, to the "people." When Ransom was roused by the Dayton trial, Davidson too looked again at his Southernism; but the difference in tone is instructive. Ransom was annoyed to see a worthy, albeit untutored, position under fire and went like a lawyer to defend the fundamentalist case in language that the court of intellectual opinion might understand. Davidson, more simply, felt close to the men of the Tennessee hills. For him, it was not a position under attack, it was almost himself.

One says "almost," because the Davidson of the mid-1920s had not begun the alienation from the intellectual community that was to embitter his later years. He had achieved some distinction in his poetry. Restored to Vanderbilt, he seemed set for orderly academic promotion. From 1924, he was to run a book review page for the Nashville Tennessean. And part of his first impulse in writing about the South was, ironically, of the New South. His middle name was Grady, in honor of the editor of the Atlanta Constitution. Later, when he knew what that implied, he dropped its usage. But, in his youth, he knew little about the New South. The political education of his boyhood had been Confederate. He had been regaled by his grandparents with tales of the war, and by his father with reminiscences of seeing Andrew Johnson speak and the Klan ride. For hours he had sat outside the country store in Mulberry, Tennessee, and talked to the war veterans. At school, his friends used futilely to hunt their building for the blood stain which was said to mark the spot of General Van Dorn’s death.

Indeed, the New South had meant little to him until he went to university and had to read Edwin Mims's textbook, Southern Prose and Poetry, which was generously sprinkled with industrialist perorations. And Davidson was never to be free entirely of the influence of Edwin Mims. On Mims, his department chairman and an autocrat, rested Davidson's hopes of the academic security he desperately wanted and needed. As a teacher, Mims had given Davidson his first critique of the South's place in the modern world. When Tate poured scorn on Mims's The Advancing South, Davidson came to the defense: "I agree that Mims on all aesthetic matters is not the man for you or me. But, as I see it, his book and his industrious dissemination of ideas (which in a direct form wouldn't get far) make the South a little more habitable. What looks very bad ('vulgar' you say) in New York, looks perhaps 'vulgar' in a sense, but also hopeful, down here."
When one turns to his first sustained commentary on the cultural politics of the South in 1928, one finds a mixed bag of emerging agrarianism and fading New South liberalism. The coming Davidson was foreshadowed in an emphasis upon the vitality of the frontier tradition in the South, the call for noninterference in Southern affairs, the defense of provincialism as “a refuge against the cruel conformity ordered by our always accelerating, standardizing civilization,” the horror of the ugly artifacts of industry. But one also finds sentiments almost straight from The Advancing South. There was a defense of the recent progressive administration of the Tennessee governor Austin Peay, and a keenness to explain that the Dayton trial and fundamentalism would not retard the “progress” of the South. Educational growth was held to be encouraging, for universities were “nuclei from which ideas work outward, impregnating the commonwealth of social thought.” In teachers like Ransom, Mims, and Paul Green, the universities were offering “resident spiritual forces that outweigh all the statistics of literacy and illiteracy.” At the center of Mims’s 1926 analysis had been the development of a more self-critical Southern public opinion, and Davidson stressed that point. Most astonishingly, he even smiled upon the Southern business community. While he regretted their loss of contact with the nineteenth-century paternalistic tradition, he saw them as the key to the situation. Without it, Southern thought might be stifled.¹⁰

Davidson’s role as a book page editor was important in this sympathy for the New South in its “educational” phase. Unlike his elitist friends, he bore a direct responsibility for addressing a substantial chunk of the Southern public. Welcoming the task of popularization, he wanted to ease the masses into rediscovering themselves and to help them sort out the wheat from the chaff of modern literature. “It may be true,” he wrote in 1928, “as some of our critics have said, that the Southern audience has long been provincial in a bad sense, and needs to be scolded and admonished out of its obstinate wicked habits. But I cannot altogether agree, for the greater need seems to be that the South should explore its own mind and rediscover itself.” Thus Davidson had put himself in the Mims-like role of a cultural missionary. But in 1928, he was far from clear about the nature of his mission.¹¹

The task of Southern “rediscovery” was as much a personal quest as a public intention. In 1926, he had begun to speculate that perhaps the South offered prospects for the writer. Indeed, he had started his minor epic, The Tall Men. But until then, he had not much read Southern literature. Over the next several years he looked at the likes of William Wirt, William Byrd of Westover, Thomas Jefferson, and John Pendleton Kennedy. Davidson wanted to “define, as significantly as possible for the present and with all the critical soundness I can muster, the Southern Tradition as it has manifested itself in literature.” But it is striking how tentative the
venture seemed to him in the years before *I'll Take My Stand*. In 1926, he wondered if his feeling that the South offered a mode for the writer wasn’t a delusion. In 1927, reading Southern literature, he was wary: “I have not yet gone far enough to say what I may be able to do or whether indeed the undertaking will prove ultimately worth while.”

“The undertaking” was a projected history of Southern literature. In the wake of the interest stirred by *The Advancing South*, Oxford University Press had asked Ransom to write such a book. Absorbed in philosophy, he declined. Thereupon they turned to Davidson. As a book page editor, Davidson had been facing the steady succession of new Southern literature—Cabell, Glasgow, Heyward, Stribling—and the fresh wave of historical writing on the region from Phillips, Beard, Claude Bowers. For perhaps the only period in his life, he was strictly *au courant*. By dint of his reading in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Southern literature, he was ready by the summer of 1929 to produce a significant book. In that year, there were available only the scattered evaluations of New South critics and a few superficial surveys. It was an opportunity, and one he failed to grasp, despite a long summer of trying to turn out the book at Yaddo, the writers’ colony. Ransom told Tate: “He’s been steadily losing his power of productivity. Last summer, at some sacrifice, he went away to Yaddo to write a book: but after a month the book hadn’t come, not begun to come. That impaired his morale, I think; it was a tragic experience.” Davidson was very depressed about his life. He felt crowded out by the inexorable pressures of teaching, editing, and trying to write poetry and criticism. This mood was the background to his involvement in the 1930 symposium. But for several years, he was to strike a bad patch. The time between *The Tall Men* in 1927 and the summer of 1932 was remarkably barren. It was the good fortune of Tate and Ransom to hit the stride of their commitment to the South around the moment of *I'll Take My Stand*. In 1930, Davidson was confused in his thinking. It was his tragedy that, when he did find his own voice, the debate and his friends had moved on.

In fact, his 1930 essay in the symposium and a piece on “Southern literature” for *Culture in the South* (published in 1934, but written in 1930) can be taken as the shadow of the book that never was. In “A Mirror for Artists,” Davidson discoursed for twenty-four pages on the invalidity of an industrial theory of the arts, on the mutilating futility of industry trying to play the Maecenas. Only then did he come to the South. The essay did represent a repudiation of Mims and the New South, but it was not yet the mature Davidson. For it was heavy with borrowings from Ransom and Tate that were internally inconsistent with his own line of thought. For instance, he took Tate’s idea of a dissociation between the artist and society, Ransom’s emphasis on the futility of a humanist education in a technical world and the ex-Rhodes scholar’s view of the Old South as
a European civilization. These perspectives joined oddly with Davidson's lack of patience with artistic elitism and distrust of democracy. "Art in its great periods," he wrote, "has rarely been purely aristocratic. It has generally been also 'popular' art in a good sense and has been widely diffused." When he turned to the South, he pointed to folk crafts as its chief glory, "ballads, country songs and dances, in hymns and spirituals, in folk tales, in the folk crafts of weaving, quilting, furniture-making." And he was reluctant to identify the South with a conservative squirearchy. In the Old South, as he saw it, there had been "a fair balance between aristocratic and democratic elements. Plantation affected frontier; frontier affected plantation." Moreover, Davidson was very careful to separate the suspicious congruence in the growth of democracy and industrialism. "Democracy did not disturb society unduly," he said. "It was a slow growth, it had some continuity with the past, and in an agrarian country like pre-Civil War America it permitted and favored a balanced life."

Nonetheless, and in distinction from his later views, Davidson was still reluctant to put too much weight upon the South as a concrete entity. He was scathing towards the "specious theory" that an independent country should produce an independent art, the thinking that had produced the silly demand for a great American novel. "For many reasons the Southern tradition deserves rehabilitation," he suggested, "but not among them is the reason that it would thus enable Southern artists to be strictly Southern artists." What did seem clear to him was that it was artistic folly to write across the grain of one's social background. This had weakened much New South literature: Glasgow, Stribling, and the rest had tried to become surrogate Northerners, because the Southern tradition had become inaccessible.14

For all this, the reader of "A Mirror for Artists" and "The Trend of Literature: A Partisan View" was left with a muddy impression of just what Davidson thought the South to be. He had vacillated uncomfortably between the South as a "nation within a nation," the universality of art and the provincialism of literary sources, the Southern-cum-European equation of Ransom and his own isolationism. In truth, he could not have it all ways. He could not be John Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson all at the same time. It was to be several years before he had the courage to be himself.

That he was released from their influence to find his own way, later embodied in The Attack Upon Leviathan, was due to a certain deterioration in his relations with Tate and Ransom. The two had become irritated with Davidson's reluctance to commit himself to "practical" agrarianism, his dallying failure to secure a contract for I'll Take My Stand in 1930, his refusal to act over the Harlan strike or the idea of asking the Guggenheim Foundation to fund an agrarian newspaper. Ransom commiserated with
Tate from England: “I’m afraid Don’s going to get, not less, but more incapable of action. His trouble is pretty deep. He can’t be jollied out of his melancholy, and as for intimidation, Don is like a large Tennessee knob of limestone.”

Tate’s return to live in Tennessee cooled the warm relations that had flourished in their Fugitive days and been sustained in the remoteness of correspondence. Davidson came to be suspected of too rigidly provincial leanings. In early 1932, the editor of the *Hound and Horn* suggested that Davidson might be commissioned to write a piece on sectionalism. Tate responded coolly: “Alas, my editorial connection with you will force me to betray our secrets! Don, I should say, is the least clear-headed person in Tennessee. . . . He would not do you a good article on Sectionalism in general, but he would surely write a paper in which the philosophy of Southern sectionalism received a stirring defense. Of all our people, Don is the great Literalist in doctrine, and probably our finest character, but sheer, realistic intelligence—no.”

Intellectual differences were strengthened by social habits. Davidson was something of a Puritan, who frowned at the bootleg whiskey that often turned Agrarian gatherings a shade noisy. Friends were seldom invited to his home, partly because his Ohio-born wife felt little sympathy for them. Many years later, a student remembered an evening at the Davidson residence, when the after-dinner entertainment consisted of listening to Wagner with scores set solemnly before the guests. In 1936, Tate explained the social gulf between them like this: “What I have felt at times is this: some mild resentment for your withdrawing from us, for your difficulty of access, for your refusal to take any part in the simple social pleasures that not only give us relaxation from the difficulties of a special kind of life, but actually strengthen the more serious ties that hold us together. . . . you have put such a dense barrier between your friends and your private life that we cannot penetrate it. . . . I cite all this to explain my own behavior in the last few years—behavior that can best be described as motivated by a feeling that it is futile to seek you out and to attempt to continue our social life with you.” Harriet Owsley could not recall ever going to the Davidsons for dinner. And, when Andrew Lytle returned from California in the late 1930s with a new bride, he was surprised to be invited over by Davidson and scandalized when the latter remarked: “I’ve got Coca-Cola. But if you want beer, I’ll have to get it.” Lytle was appalled at the insensitive suggestion. “Beer,” he later recalled, “I never drink beer. I drink whiskey!”

The emotional separation between Davidson and some of his friends, a separation to which Wade formed an important exception, had a striking simultaneity with his shift towards a more literal sectionalism. It would be idle to speculate on which came first, for they fed each other. Tate and Ransom, when their involvement with agrarianism drove them away from Southernism, saw an opposite tendency in Davidson. In particular, they
saw a polemical intention in some of his poetry. Davidson, following his own honest intellectual logic, saw their increasing remoteness. This fed his melancholy and solitary temperament, and drove him further into dependence upon the emotional group loyalty of Southernism. It was a gradual and uneven process. Arguments over the title of *I’ll Take My Stand*, the Guggenheim application, and the Harlan strike coincided with Davidson’s failure to write his history of Southern literature, the collapse of his book page in late 1930, and the death of his father. In between were the episodes where the group was driven together by common enterprise: the planning of the 1930 symposium and, later, the launching of the *American Review*. At these moments, Davidson could be found in optimistic mood. In March 1931, he could surmise that the Agrarians “feel pretty strongly that the current of the times is in our favor.” In March 1933, he enthused about the new magazine: “I am terrifically optimistic about the prospects, where I was gloomy a week ago. My head already boils with ideas.”

During and after 1935, several incidents seemed to confirm his growing isolation within the group: a row over the tenth anniversary issue of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the planning of *Who Owns America?*, the editorial policy of the new *Southern Review*, and, much later, Ransom’s attitude when editor of the *Kenyon Review*.

When in 1934 the editors of the *Virginia Quarterly Review* decided to have a special anniversary issue of the journal deal with Southern matters, they issued invitations to various Southerners to contribute essays, poems, and short stories. Davidson was pained to discover that, unlike Ransom, Tate, Warren, and Wade, he was not asked to contribute. While in Vermont, James Southall Wilson tactlessly read Davidson excerpts from a letter of Allen Tate, making suggestions of possible contributors but not mentioning Davidson. Though hurt, Davidson kept his silence. Eventually a belated invitation did turn up, and he decided to write an article on the genesis of *I’ll Take My Stand* that might clear away misconceptions about the book’s intentions. Meanwhile, in January 1935, the *Virginia Quarterly Review* carried an essay by H. L. Mencken that took the Agrarians, especially Davidson, soundly and rudely to task. Davidson remonstrated with the editor, Lambert Davis, that a friendly Southern journal had no business publishing the inaccurate fulminations of Mencken. Davis countered with a temperate and apologetic letter, which seemed to satisfy.

Soon after, Davis found to his embarrassment that his anniversary issue threatened to become an Agrarian symposium. The Agrarians had been prompt and efficient in accepting his invitations, while Southerners of other ideological persuasions had been dilatory. Wishing to maintain a balance of opinion, he decided to reject Davidson’s article. At this, Davidson saw the faint shade of a plot to keep him out. Unwisely, he confided his fears to John Gould Fletcher, at a time when the poet was
undergoing one of his periodic bouts of mental instability. At the conference in Baton Rouge in April to launch the *Southern Review*, Fletcher was to be at his most belligerent; on his way home to Little Rock, he was to collapse in Memphis. In such a mood, he had decided to rush to Davidson's defense. The Arkansan hurled insulting scrawls to all the Agrarians who had contributed to the anniversary issue, to demand that they withdraw their articles or else he would "resign" from the group. Astonished at the violence of the outburst, Davidson found himself caught between his friends and Fletcher's ostensible defense. When the dust settled, he found himself a little more isolated.

After *I'll Take My Stand* was published, there had been loose talk of producing a second symposium. In 1932, the idea had gained headway after discussions between Fletcher and Ransom in New Mexico. The business of approaching publishers was delegated to Davidson. Through no particular fault of his own, he was unable to interest anyone in the idea and the project languished. In 1935, Tate and Herbert Agar revived the plan with distinctly nonsectional intentions. Like Frank Owsley, Davidson was on the sidelines. When the idea of an Agrarian-Distributist conference was broached, Davidson suggested a preliminary Agrarian parley. With a quiet despondency, he added to Tate: "But that is just my opinion. I defer on the question of policy and practical steps to you and Agar, who are now clearly the Generals-in-Chief." Later he remarked: "Well, it all sounds mighty exhilarating, after all these years of biting our nails in impotence. I only wish it were possible to hang out a Confederate flag when we meet next week." He well knew that the Stars and Bars was becoming unfashionable.

The *Southern Review* put Davidson a little further out in the cold. Warren was not his closest friend. In 1935, Davidson felt it just to remark that "Warren . . . has not seemed to me to be particularly keen for anything from me." If one one looks at a statement of editorial policy by Warren like this: "The SOUTHERN REVIEW is attempting to provide a kind of focus for literary activity in the South, but holds that its purpose can best be served by maintaining the highest standard possible, rather than by publishing something merely because its author happens to be a Southerner," one finds a sentiment intellectually palatable to Davidson, but emotionally distasteful. In the case of the *Kenyon Review*, Ransom's break with agrarianism and dislike of Davidson's "polemical" poetry was more brutally obvious. Only once did he ask Davidson to do even a review. One finds this in a Ransom letter to Tate in 1939: "Don is a real problem to me. I haven't been able yet to write about his book of selected poems, and I simply couldn't touch them in a published review; nor do I dare send them out to any good reviewer. Don just stopped growing before the rest of us did.

Don's case is partly private but partly, I'm afraid, the effect of ideology."
So he came to realize through the 1930s that the most prominent intellectuals among his friends did not respect his work. The lonely feeling of rejection came to haunt and embitter him. In 1936, he felt moved to write that he had “become an outsider, and the state of my feelings is so confused and irritated that I cannot tell to my own satisfaction whether I have just stepped outside or been kicked outside.” In 1937, he came to refer to himself as “a lone guerilla” and “Banquo’s Ghost.”

To this estrangement, John Wade had proved an exception. Davidson and the Georgian had been friendly in 1930, when Wade’s lack of polemical zeal had drawn criticism. Events in 1932 were to intensify this unlikely alliance of the patrician who liked irony to do service for commitment and the earnest English professor, who cast himself in the role of a prophet without honor. Davidson had lived for many years in Wesley Hall, a rambling dormitory on the Vanderbilt campus. In the spring of 1932, it burned to the ground. Neither Davidson nor his family were injured, but the blaze carried off most of their possessions. Books, correspondence, a First World War diary, back numbers of the *Fugitive* were consumed. Added to other setbacks, the incident badly jolted Davidson and, to recover his poise, he asked for and received a year’s leave of absence. Generously, Wade offered to let Davidson stay in a cottage on his Marshallville estate. Thus, after a summer in Vermont, the Davidsons went as “refugees” to middle Georgia.

The Marshallville year marked a turning point, at which Davidson began to climb out his slough of noncreativity. His time was free of book pages and teaching, he received a commission to write a major article on sectionalism for the *Hound and Horn*, the *American Review* was founded, his first look at life in Vermont had offered fresh perspectives. Even more important, the area around Marshallville was a revelation to him. Davidson’s South had been the semifrontier regions of middle Tennessee. The plantation culture of Macon County surprised and pleased him with its reminiscence of the Old South. The grace of the Wade household, presided over by the forceful Ida, impressed him. “Marshallville is a grand place to rusticate,” he told Lytle. “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.”

Marshallville gave one precious commodity to a man deep in self-doubt—respect. It must have contrasted agreeably with the tangled intellectual relationships of Nashville. The “villagers” did not look upon him as a man who had failed to write his magnum opus, or a poet tinged fatally with “ideology.” They saw only a courteous young professor, friend to the
local squire, who joined in their community activities without condescension. He went along to their Sacred Harp meetings and lent his pleasant tenor voice. He gave a paper to the local discussion group and was applauded for putting the village radical in his place. On Confederate Memorial Day, he attended services at the local graveyard. Not a man to stand at the gate and ponder the dissociation of the modern sensibility, he sang their Civil War songs and listened, with growing emotion, to the roll of the honored dead. At the end, as the guest of the village, he was introduced to the gathering and read them his poem on "The Army of the Tennessee."

All this helped to restore his confidence, both in himself and in the integrity of the ordinary Southerner. So he wrote of his new experiences in Georgia and Vermont, and started to refine his attitude towards the New South heritage. While his friends had so often found themselves held by the agrarian side of the Southern/agrarian equation, Davidson grew more fascinated by the Southern aspect. It seemed time to undertake a serious analysis of the place of sectionalism in American life. For he had read Parrington and knew that the redefinition of literature to include "political literature" had put new responsibilities upon the critic. He had pondered Beard's writings in 1930, with some distaste. In early 1933, after he had begun the new venture, he became aware of Turner's *The Significance of Sections in American History*. Exuberantly, he had written to Tate: "Have you seen... Turner's posthumous book... I have not yet seen a copy, but the reviews indicate that it sustains powerfully all my major contentions as to the nature and importance of sectionalism... our ideas rest on a foundation which not even the most 'advanced' historians can lightly reject... I feel somewhat exultant that I had, without prompting, worked out something of what Turner concluded."

From late 1933 to 1937, he composed and assembled the essays that form *The Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States*. It was published in 1938 by the University of North Carolina Press to a resounding silence. Not to Davidson's surprise, it sold very badly. Overshadowed by the simultaneous publication of Jonathan Daniels's cheerful and journalistic *A Southerner Discovers the South*, Davidson reflected with characteristic gloom and defiance: "I am not, however, bothered so much on my own personal account, having long been used to rough and casual treatment and having ceased, long before this, to expect very much of the world." This neglect has not been remedied since then. And yet, it was one of the most impressive analyses of sectionalism and the South to be offered in the 1930s, a decade peculiarly concerned with that problem. Indeed, with the exception of Odum's work, it was the only sustained examination of the problem, which proved both its strength and its weakness.
Davidson finished *The Attack on Leviathan* at a time when the reputation of sectional analysis was deceptively high. In Parrington, Turner, Odum, wherever he turned, Davidson seemed to find authoritative voices to tell him that sectionalism was "an effective reality, amounting almost to a commonplace, to be accepted and dealt with entirely aside from its status as a political and social problem." As a literary critic and poet, he well knew that he was in the midst of a "Southern Renaissance." Aware that he was an amateur in fields that mattered deeply for his analysis, it was a comfort to Davidson to be reassured.

Although he had seen that he disagreed with Odum over the weight to be attached to the words, "sectionalism" and "regionalism," when the latter had approached him during his fracas with Benjamin Kendrick, they had parted friends. Davidson had refused Odum's absolute distinction, but understood his motives: "The terms *section* and *sectionalism* seem to him too schismatic and contentious for complete acceptance. The scientist wants a scientific term. . . . The words *region* and *regionalism* suit his purpose better." As Davidson saw it: "I can't conceive of our country as offering a fixed hierarchy of values: 1. Something called a nation, of which you must think first; 2. Something called a region, of which you are privileged to think, if you are careful to give it second place. . . . I should say, rather that regionalism or sectionalism thinks of the nation in its proper place and of the region or section in its place, without elevating one above the other. I have no abstract devotion to some entity called the nation, but I am loyal to a loose historic entity called the United States, whose government, with some important exceptions, has acted as arbiter between sections." Nonetheless, with every statistic that Odum piled up about the "Southern Regions," Davidson felt secure that sectionalism was solid enough to put analytical weight upon. "Sociology," he observed in *The Attack on Leviathan*, "is indeed in many ways the friend of differentiation, and it has been led by its allies, the geographers, the demographers, and the anthropologists, to make new and broad extensions of its studies of the varying cultures existing within the general pattern of American life."

So the early pages of the book were spent in drawing up his, occasionally unwilling, allies. Turner and Beard were arbitrated, to the disparagement of the latter. Like Turner and Owsley, Davidson saw American history as the ebb and flow of sectional imperialism. Although Davidson owed much to the Beardian concept of the Civil War as a "Second American Revolution," he could not accept Beard's view of sectionalism as a transient phenomenon that would pass with the nationalizing force of industrialization. To Davidson, Turner represented the Jeffersonian democratic tradition, "which takes into consideration old and well established American preferences, emanating both from inheritance and environment," while Beard betrayed a "late-European, anti-traditional view of all society": Turner
was the historian of continuity, Beard the prophet of discontinuity.\textsuperscript{36} Then, to Turner, Davidson added the authority of an Odum, purged of the "regional" interpretation. Shrewdly, Davidson struck at the two fundamental weaknesses of the Chapel Hill position: the improbability of social decisions being made by social scientists and the incongruity of manifestly local spokesmen attempting to "defuse" regional passions. As Davidson envisaged it, Chapel Hill was caught in a vicious circle. To move and act upon the region, it was necessary to arouse its communal feelings. But sectional emotions, once summoned from the vasty deep, were hard to control. "Can the social science regionalists achieve a unified effort without unleashing the sectional antagonisms that they disclaim?" he asked. And, reading these pages, one's mind goes forward to an old Howard Odum, hurriedly convening his friends to consider the 1954 Brown decision, and seeing his delicate straddling of the race question placed under intolerable strain.\textsuperscript{37}

From sociology and history, Davidson turned to the arts. He traced the "cosmopolitan" phase of American literature from 1912 and the establishment of \textit{Poetry} in Chicago, to the "regional" literature of the 1930s. This seemed a movement from a "European" phase, "an adventure paralleling... the adventure in internationalism represented by American participation in the World War and in European post-war economics" to a rediscovery of indigenous American materials. But he was careful to grant a place for both European and regional influences in the interplay that produced a worthwhile American literature. In this, he was repeating all of the strictures of a Tate and Warren against a too self-conscious regionalism. Nonetheless, his version of recent literary history paralleled his vision of political and economic sectionalism to a degree that would have discomfited his friends. The ebbing and flowing of literary preeminence—Boston at the time of Emerson, Chicago in 1912, New York in the 1920s, the South in the 1930s—matched his Turnerian idea of sectional imperialism.\textsuperscript{38}

Running through Davidson's analysis was a distinctly Romantic thread, the idea of \textit{genius loci}. As he wrote of American literature, "the indigenous materials will derive some of their shape and force from the \textit{genius loci}—the region itself—and thus become a foreign influence pervading other regions, and giving as well as receiving... The regions will develop their arts as they develop their people and ways of life." This made \textit{The Attack on Leviathan} a historicist book, a part of the great if problematical tradition that started indistinctly with Giambattista Vico in Naples, flowered more coherently with Herder in Germany, and found expression in the analytical achievements of German historical writing in the nineteenth century, the tradition that held that men were necessarily gathered into and understood through organic groups, which leave evidence of themselves through the human institutions of language, customs, religion, legends, myths, moral
and legal systems, literature, and the arts.39

But Davidson wished to arrogate historicism to individual American regions, not to the United States as a nation. His book was about American, not merely Southern, regionalism. As such, it was incumbent upon him to define how people and social life varied from region to region. Thus, in four chapters, he sketched his impression of regional “types” in the South, New England, New York, the Southwest and Old Northwest, and the Great Plains. It had been suggested by an editor that completeness required a chapter on the Far West, but Davidson eventually demurred because his personal experience did not extend so far. Although he was modern enough to be diffident about it, the crucial sentence ran like this: “Although I do not hold very devotedly to the economic determinism of modern historians, it was a temptation to say that the people were a great deal like the land.”40

Vermont was taken as a metaphor for New England: here one found frugal Calvinists taught prudence by the severity of winter and the brevity of summer. John Wade’s middle Georgia was seen as the South, lazy, gracious, flattered by a lush but intimidating environment that proffered rich crops, rattlesnakes, and the mixed benefits of the Negro race, “a cheerful grinning barnacle tucked away in all the tender spots of Southern life, not to be removed without pain, not to be cherished without tragedy.” As for New York, its great port had made it the entrepreneur of European ideas and the eclectic sponge of émigré Americans from the hinterland. The Middle West was portrayed as a New England extended over vast but manageable prairies, easy of access, “where ‘planning’ rather than ruggedly individualistic growth fitted the topographical situation.” The Old Southwest of Tennessee and Kentucky had a separate logic: “The genius of this land was in its great irregularity and variety, which both invited and repelled in its changing profile of mountain, plateau, hill, valley, plain and swamp. It more or less enforced self-sufficiency and isolation upon settlers and settlements that were secluded by the very contours of the land.” As for the Great Plains, Davidson deferred in his characterization to the contemporary work of Walter Prescott Webb.41

In these crude blocks of analysis, Davidson did his best to weave a subtle portrait of the interaction between environment, historical factors like immigration, slavery, and the presence of Indians. But his brush strokes were too clumsy and willing, his units of analysis too large while being based on too small a range of experience. The farm of Homer Noble in Middlebury, Vermont, and the plantation of John Wade in Marshallville were not synonyms for New England and the South. It is doubtful that they even worked as metaphors. In this, Davidson had all the difficulties of Howard Odum in American Regionalism, with the advantages that the needs of social planning did not wreak havoc with regional groupings and Davidson could write well. Nonetheless, for all their vulnerability to
intellectual atomism, these chapters offered a valuable insight into the conventional wisdom of American regionalism. Davidson may not have been right enough to satisfy the relativistic patchwork of the historical sociologists, but he faithfully mirrored what many Americans thought was right. As such, he was documenting a significant chunk of American psychological reality and, with imprecision, fragments of an American social reality always crucially out of focus. Thus, when dealing directly with social psychology, as in a chapter on “American Heroes,” a study in the localized perception of hero worship, he was at his most convincing.42

Davidson was conscious of mounting an attack on the notion of an American national literature. He had, in effect, to put Madame de Stael to work for the South, not for the whole country. He was convinced that the pursuit of a distinctive “American” genre had been based upon a mistaken analogy with Europe. Thus he tried to trace the development of the concept of nationality from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, when literature came to be defined as “the expression, attained by slow accretion and ingrained habit, of a character that might be described as national.” As Davidson saw it, each traditional European national literature had required certain conditions: “one language, one race, a definite cultural homogeneity—or at least no heterogeneity fixed by inner geographic conditions; a definite intellectual leadership associated with the centralizing presence of a capital like Paris or London; and besides, a long period of growth under aristocratic and learned guidance, and a second period, no less important from the modern standpoint, of critical and retrospective exploration of the cultural tradition.” As Davidson had spent much time explaining, the United States had only one of these conditions, language. Thus there was no American national literature, but only the accumulation of regional literatures. To Davidson, this offered an exhilarating prospect, because American writing could be constantly cross-fertilized by local influences: “No other great literature has ever enjoyed the prospect open to us, of an almost indefinite enrichment from provincial sources that are not, in the usual sense of the word, provincial at all, for our provinces are more like nations than provinces.”43

It was as quasi nations that Davidson moved to arrogate to the regions some of the prerogatives of nationality. Unsurprisingly, he echoed the call of Owsley for regional governments. And, by reprinting an address to the college section of the National Council of Teachers of English, he called for the regionalization of educational institutions and textbooks. Concerned that students were obliged to read books that reflected, not their own regional perspectives, but those of the publishing center of New York, he insisted a “good regional theory of education would call for our institutions to exercise a dual function”: to inculcate the universal body of knowledge, and to preserve the texture of the students’ regional background. Textbooks
should thus fall into two categories: the “national,” which should pay just and equal attention to the diverse regions, and the “regional,” which should be produced by and for a particular locality. In this way, Davidson hoped to mitigate the cultural implications of sectional imperialism at the grass roots and thereby stabilize regional mores.44

The bulk of The Attack on Leviathan was a general analysis of American regionalism. Davidson was keen to insist that he was not merely riding a Southern hobby horse. And his comments to an editor twenty years later on the publication of Still Rebels, Still Yankees can serve as a pertinent commentary to the earlier book: “The general theme that binds the essays... is the conflict between tradition and anti-tradition that characterizes modern society, with tradition viewed as the living continuum that makes society and civilization possible and anti-tradition as the disintegrative principle that destroys society and civilization in the name of science and progress... The South, which has suffered most in its devoted defense of tradition, naturally offers me examples for consideration; but this is not a book about the South as such.”45 Nonetheless, four essays were grouped under the heading “Southern Essays,” and it was proper, given his general regional theory, that as a Southerner he should have attempted to define his own relationship to the Southern tradition.

One theme was binding and familiar, the attack upon the New South. This led to curious alliances. In trying to rewrite the postbellum history of the South, Davidson had joined, not only Wade, but a younger historian, C. Vann Woodward. To Woodward was to fall the primary responsibility for supplanting the versions of Virginius Dabney and Edwin Mims. In odd ways, the analysis of Woodward and Davidson ran similar courses, channels dictated by the needs of demolishing a common enemy. Their ideological standpoints were very different, in that Woodward was deeply interested in the utility of class analyses. On this, he and Davidson were to dispute publicly in 1939. But both had a deep commitment to the inherent rationality of the Southern people, especially its agrarian tradition. In Woodward’s case, the faith had taken a Populist turn. And Davidson reported to Tate that Woodward, in a letter to Davidson, had been anxious “to be put down in the right category, insists he is not a Marxian, wants us to think of him as an agrarian sympathizer.” Indeed, there is virtue in regarding Woodward’s later achievement as a historian, with its distinctive blend of the Southern conservative’s feeling for the tragic aspects of the Southern past and the liberal’s passion for social advance, as a synthesis of strands lying around separately in the debates of the 1930s.46

Davidson himself had not completely shed his ambivalence about liberalism. When he had sent a copy of an article on “The Dilemma of the Southern Liberals” to Edwin Mims in 1934, he had ended his letter: “May I then subscribe myself, a liberal of some sort, I know not what.”47 He
was willing to grant that liberalism had delivered on some of its promises, with better roads, schools, libraries, and hospitals. But he was writing in the full knowledge of the Depression and with increasing, though confused, unease about the New Deal. In this mood, he pointed to the failure of even the semblance of New South prosperity and the real challenge posed to the laissez-faire assumptions of nineteenth-century liberalism. The liberals, Davidson wrote, "will have to be a little more specific in their descriptions of the civilization which, they have long claimed, is so much nobler and more beneficent than the kind of civilization the South has traditionally preferred." With the 1930s in mind, he was more severe towards younger liberals than the generation of Walter Hines Page. As he wrote to Mims, the likes of Virginius Dabney and Gerald Johnson "have had an opportunity that Page did not have for making a fresh estimate of the social and political history of the South. They have shown themselves singularly unmalleable, almost incapable of receiving new points of view."

What interested Davidson was an intensified search for a usable Southern past among the liberals. He singled out Dabney's *Liberalism in the South* as the most ambitious effort to "equip modern liberalism with precedents and sanctions." He noted their attempt to claim Jefferson as the apostle of educational reform, egalitarian democracy, and the separation of church and state. For Davidson, the intervening fact of industrialism was more than enough to cut off modern liberals from the philosopher of Monticello. Instead, he gave them a separate genealogy: "It can hardly be said that the Southern liberals have any ancestors in the South. Their intellectual pedigree, so far as it is American, must be traced out on the Northern side of the Potomac. They will discover their family portraits among the New England humanitarians."

Against this, Davidson defined the essential Southern tradition as Jeffersonian and agrarian. Under the exigencies of the slavery controversy, Jeffersonian egalitarianism had been trimmed by Calhoun. The Civil War had been a struggle between two liberalism, in which the romantic nationalist vision of the North had triumphed over the more traditional and realistic South. The abolition of slavery, he thought, had left a mess that Southerners combined to clear up during Reconstruction. Beginning well as exponents of honest and frugal government, the Bourbon regimes seemed to Davidson to have degenerated into cliques, drifting from agrarian support to industrial interests. For this, they paid with the Populist revolt. Davidson granted the valid agrarianism of the Populists, but he was at pains to deny their Jeffersonianism. Their program seemed too mixed, with the call for government ownership of railroads, free silver, the graduated income tax, the eight-hour day, the popular election of senators, the initiative, and the referendum.

As Davidson sketched the scenario, the agrarian revolt dispossessed
the Bourbons of the trappings of power but not the reality. They ruled agrarian legislatures by swapping economic concessions for humanitarian improvements: "Where their private interests were involved, they have ruled; where they were indifferent, they have let their bought legislatures flounder." Innocently, the New South liberal like Walter Hines Page provided a screen for this. In a surprisingly sympathetic portrait, Davidson dwelled upon Page's role in the counsels of Southern liberalism. He firmly identified the North Carolinian with the tradition of nineteenth-century liberalism, "which praised Arnold's 'sweetness and light' without much understanding, and looked to science and culture as the deliverers of mankind, perfectly certain that industrial prosperity would be the foundation of a great, a strenuous democratic civilization." But Davidson charged Page with a cavalier naivety about Southern traditions. It seemed to him foolhardy to think, as Page did, that the three "ghosts" of Southern life—the Confederacy, Negro subjection, and religious orthodoxy—could be dismissed by a mere educational system and a few good roads.

Against the ready arguments of a Page, the inarticulate culture of the conservative South had floundered. As Davidson saw it, "Offstage the liberals and the chambers of commerce shook hands over the prostrate body of the Old South; and out in front the political Punch and Judy show went on to the old tune of 'Let the people rule.'" This state of affairs had continued until the Depression had forced retrenchments, especially in the pride of the humanitarian New South, its educational system. Thus the 1930s, by placing the old alliances under intolerable strains, had presented the liberals with their dilemma. Squeezed between recalcitrant rural legislatures and the New Deal, they had to choose. If they should decide for the New Deal, "they must favor a Federal Union more gigantically centralized than ever and more forbidding in its attitude toward private initiative... a dispensation that will enforce tenets of a decidedly socialistic cast: science to the limit, antagonism to all but the most diluted forms of religion, and equality for the Negro." In doing this, the liberals would cut themselves off from the mass of the Southern people. For the three ghosts were still too powerful to be flouted, especially by a liberalism shorn of its alliance with the chambers of commerce. In an uncomfortable prophecy of the "massive resistance" movement of the 1950s, Davidson added that the Southern people would need little encouragement to turn those ghosts into "the hard actualities of a period of violence."

One feeble ray of hope seemed apparent to Davidson. The simultaneous facts of a growing tide of Northern criticism of the South during the 1920s, a vociferous indigenous Southern industrialism, and the extension of government power had had an unexpected consequence: the revival of sectional consciousness. In this debate about the South, he saw a hope of establishing and applying coherent principles of action; and these principles
had to be Jeffersonian, the tradition embodied by Jefferson himself and modified by John Taylor. On this, Davidson was unsure. At times, he retained the residual feeling that Southerners had just enough of the old ways in them to decide their own fate. At other moments, he cheerlessly faced the prospect, already conceded by John Wade, of the South "becoming the most inert and passive section of the United States, or else falling into blind and violent divisions whose pent-up force 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."

Even in his special role as a poet, he felt that industrialism would erode the Southern literary tradition. Admitting that the literary heritage of the South was not rich, he took some solace in such value as Parrington had uncovered. Like Ransom, he felt that too much of the South's creative effort had been channelled into "the eighteenth century arts of dress, conversation, manners...of architecture, handicraft, oratory, anecdote." If left undisturbed, the South would develop an effective artistic tradition. Being disturbed, the results were ambivalent. On the one hand, progressive centers of education like Chapel Hill had joined in the call for regional literary spokesmen. On the other, such calls, rooted in industrial modernity, placed the Southern artist at odds with himself, and the larger conflict of agrarian and industrial in American society would be etched in the writer's self-consciousness. As a poet, this was intimately pertinent to Davidson. He felt only the forlorn hope that poetry was now so unnoticed and unpromoted an art form that it might, through indifference, escape such pressures.

This was the broad outline of *The Attack on Leviathan*, a systematic attempt to annex the social, cultural, and political life of the United States to regionalism. Forty years later, it reads less convincingly than it did, written in a crescendo of interest in sectionalism. The atomism of social psychology has dismembered Davidson's bedrock sense of regional types. Howard Odum, who seemed so massively the wave of the future in "Southern sociology," has long since lost his preeminence. Davidson's pioneer but impressionistic sketches of postbellum Southern history would be regarded as inadequate, though suggestive, by historians. Turner's sectional hypothesis has never been accorded the importance of his frontier thesis, and the latter has been savaged. To Davidson, it represented the measured judgment of the greatest of American historians; to a Richard Hofstadter, it was the undeveloped rumination of a man looking "backward to the post-Darwinian nineteenth century frame of mind...locked into the grand spatial metaphor that had dominated the first phase of his work."

Regionalism in the arts has weakened perceptibly since the 1930s. Writing at a very special moment in the history of American sectional consciousness, Davidson assumed that he was living in and describing the regional norms
of American society. In fact, *The Attack on Leviathan* was the last flowering of the sectional intellectual tradition. In it, one can trace its virtues and its final bankruptcy.

One manner of approach to Davidson's writing must be weighed. As in much debate about Southern ideology, Davidson has been often dismissed, not for the logical validity of what he said, but for what he was. A conservative and racist, an opponent of conventional American liberalism and a philosopher of sectionalism, he was everything that most American historians have not been. He was painfully aware of this. As he wrote in *The Attack on Leviathan*, the "Southerner is always pleading a sectional case before a court that insists upon ruling sectional issues irrelevant."

The Whiggery of conventional American historiography has never served well those who have resisted progress, and Davidson has been a victim of this. Whatever the philosophical objections to this Whiggery, and they are considerable, one practical difficulty is apparent: it incapacitates the historian from dealing sympathetically with a very great deal of the Southern tradition. For seen from within the Southern tradition, *The Attack on 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.

Nonetheless, problems remain. Davidson had come to the issue of regionalism through the filter of literature, and his units of social analysis bore the mark of this passage. "New York" stood as his metaphor for modernist change in the United States, not because it was the head office of much of American corporate industry, but because it contained the publishing houses, at whose products he had groaned in the 1920s. His "spatial metaphor" of regionalism did not allow him to cope with the dispersal of manufacturing outside the Northeast, any more than it allowed him to digest the presence of most Americans in urban areas. As significant as his inability to deal with Detroit, was his failure to assimilate Washington, D.C. Although the federal government made fleeting appearances as the manifestation of Leviathan, it was jammed awkwardly into the mêlée of sections and too readily viewed as the toy of a particular section. Both these faults stemmed from a single root: Davidson was not the historian of the American polity so much as the registrar of opinion about it. And it is as a record of subjectivity in American experience that his book is most valuable. Thus he gave great space to literary, sociological, and historical critiques. Like many a New South intellectual, he was prone to exaggerate grossly the importance of his own breed.
The difficulty with the book was precisely its coherence. Davidson had gathered together, with literal efficiency, the assumptions that had lain scattered through the rhetoric of politicians, the analyses of historians, sociologists, and critics. He raised to explicitness the validity of looking at American life through regional eyes. And he took the only tack those half-buried assumptions had given him: he regarded the region as a kind of nation, regionalism as a kind of nationalism. If one looks at Turner on sections, one finds this: “The significance of the section in American history is that it is the faint image of a European nation... Our politics and our society have been shaped by sectional complexity and interplay not unlike what goes on between European nations.” The later work of Wilbur Cash has this: “The peculiar history of the South has so greatly modified it from the general American norm that, when viewed as a whole, it decisively justifies the notion that the country is—not quite a nation within a nation, but the next thing to it.” Equally, John Ransom and Allen Tate deployed the South in a series of equations between national cultures, American and European. Although many had added to the phrase, “nation,” hedging phrases to indicate that the South was “not quite, but almost,” the qualification had and has made little functional difference to the manner of writing about the South. The assumption of distinctiveness has led to an analytical tradition indistinguishable from the formats of European and American nationalist writing. Davidson’s problem was not that his perspective was different, but that he took it so ruthlessly to heart. Here was the quasi-nationalist interpretation of the South, extended to the other regions and exhaustively exploited.

A crucial aspect of the modern theory of nationalism has been its moral dimension. As David Potter has put it: “Where a body of people contests the exercise of authority by another body over it... , the crucial question is fundamentally whether the two are parts of a single community, or, more specifically, a single nation, in which case the exercise is valid; or whether they belong to separate communities, or nations, in which case it is not valid. In such a case, the determination of nationalism ceases to be a merely descriptive matter; it becomes an evaluative matter, for the attribution of nationality sanctions the acts of the group claiming autonomous powers.” It is clear that this moral autonomy was the central claim, and difficulty, of The Attack on Leviathan. Within Davidson’s regional definition of America was a regionalization of social morality. It seemed proper to exclude criticism on the grounds that it emanated from outside the region. And this, it must be said, was not an idea confined to Davidson. It marked Southern liberals as well, and was an important consequence of the translation of historicism to the South.

The assumption of the prerogatives of nationality for an area that was
not a nation put a dynamic into Davidson's arguments, just as it had into
the less sweeping case of Howard Odum. Nations require institutions of
exclusivity to enforce their norms. Half-aware of this need, Davidson was
forced into demands for these institutions; hence his endorsement of
regional governments, regional education and textbooks, tariffs between
the regions, regional self-sufficiency, and the cultivation of regional cultural
traditions. Nothing, in fact, betrayed the inaccuracy of his regional diagnosis
of American society more than this impulse to give institutional reality to
the sections.\(^{40}\)

This same desire to give coherence to a South not notably coherent,
made it necessary for him to readjust the Southern past to conservative,
agrarian ends. Jefferson had to be poached back from the liberal, and the
liberals themselves read out of the Southern tradition. For to grant industrial
liberalism as an indigenous tradition would be to jeopardize the survival of
an agrarian South, even with the erection of an institutional cordon
sanitaire. The spirit of place could not tolerate too much diversity.

Obviously, Davidson's sense of the rigidity of sections was not unrelated
to his Southern origins. Like Odum, he was led by the richness of the
Southern sense of identity, a richness stronger in the South than anywhere
else, to extend his case to the rest of the United States. But, as his attitude
to Europe showed, the desire to be both Southern and American was
deeply important to him. This influenced one important element in the
analysis of Southern regionalism, the problem of race. Clearly racial
hegemony was a crucial element in Southern identity, and it formed an
element in Davidson's perspective. But it was not—and this contradicts
received opinion about both Davidson and most Southern intellectuals—the
element. Davidson's root explanation for regional differentiation was en-
vironmental. As such, he could not use Ulrich Phillips's argument. To have
done so would have left him unable to extend the regional case to non-
Southern areas. Without that extension, neither he, Owsley, nor Odum
would have been able to spread the weight of resistance to the industrialist
Northeast and able to hold on to their Americanism.

Nonetheless, white supremacy was important to Davidson. It was his
tragedy that race gradually came to overwhelm the delicate balance he
achieved in the 1930s. The Attack on Leviathan was written only just in
time. A few years later, he could not, one feels, have kept race as a minor
theme in his analysis. External events were moving to thrust the issue upon
him. The failure of his book, his regrettable knack for saying the right
things at the wrong time to the wrong audience, his deepening alienation
from Tate and Ransom, his melancholy sense of estrangement, all lowered
his capacity to withstand the challenge to his intellectual equilibrium. He
came to need a fresh sense of social involvement to replace the intellectual
comradeship that vexatious literary metaphysics and social inadequacies
had taken away from him. Driven back upon himself and his South, he came to lose the distinction between the two. When the South’s central social institution came under attack, the blow was personal and required a personal response.

At first, the strains were minor. Several of the new sociological studies of Southern race relations came his way during the 1930s for review. In 1936, it was Arthur Raper’s study of Macon and Greene counties in Georgia, *Preface to Peasantry*. In 1937, it was John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. The predominant tone of Davidson’s comments was mingled anger and puzzlement, for he was genuinely surprised at books that asked him to repudiate the inferiority of the Negro. And he felt secure enough in the solidity of the Southern biracial system to poke fun at Dollard’s Freudian and class analysis. As Davidson saw, Dollard’s “grand assumption is that Southerntown [Dollard’s pseudonym for Indianola, Mississippi] is abnormal and queer—otherwise he would not be investigating it. 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.”

The insistence that class, rather than race, was the fundamental fact in the social relations of Indianola elicited amusement from Davidson. Dollard’s Freudian analysis of sexual relations between the races appalled his Puritanism, as well as his racism: here there was genuine anger. Still, Davidson felt that, on sexual and social equality, he had the whole South behind him. Miscegenation laws, he wrote, “represent the traditional will of white society to preserve its racial integrity. Southern dissent to this view is so slight as to be negligible. Even those Southern Liberals who go so far as to advocate greater economic and political privileges for the Negro do not dare, and probably do not wish, to challenge the biracial sexual code.” Likewise, when he considered Arthur Raper’s claims of racial exploitation in Macon County—the same Macon County that contained Marshallville and benign memories for Davidson—he was adamant on the virtues of segregation. But in 1936 and 1937, it seemed that biracialism, despite scattered troubles like Scottsboro, remained sound.81

By 1945, things had grown palpably insecure. The Second World War had advanced the Negro cause by significant notches. There had been the movement of the March on Washington, and the establishment of the Committee on Fair Employment Practices. The black community itself had begun to stir. In December 1942, the Durham conference had issued its demands for the ballot, civil rights, employment opportunity, and access to public services. More impelling than actual advance was the spiral of rumor about a fresh push for equality and black willingness to fight for democracy on the home front, to which a severely agitated Howard Odum addressed himself in *Race and Rumors of Race* during 1943. Southern
conservatives and liberals alike were forced to appraise where they stood on segregation. To Davidson, it was only the fulfillment of the prophecy of *The Attack on Leviathan* and it required no somersaults to define his position. But this was ceasing to be shadow boxing. A little heavy-handed irony at the expense of Yale sociologists was no longer in order. It was now serious business, deeply serious.62

In the summer of 1945, Davidson published “Preface to Decision” in Allen Tate’s *Sewanee Review*, and presented the segregationist case with brutal frankness. After sketching the development of reform sociology on race relations and discussing volumes like Charles S. Johnson’s *Patterns of Negro Segregation*, and the symposium, *What the Negro Wants*, he pointed to federal legislation as the necessary lever of change. “The ground for decision,” he wrote, “...is clear. Whatever steps are taken to solve the Negro problem will be taken within the context described. It will be considered in terms of welfare as sociology defines welfare and of democracy as democracy is represented by the Wagner Labor Act, the War Labor Board, the FEPC, and the judgements of the New Deal Supreme Court... sooner or later, there will be direct legislative attack upon the segregation practiced in Southern states.” To Davidson, segregation was a necessary device to harmonize relations between two races who were ineradicably opposed and to prevent the social relations that led to “biological mingling.” Admitting its occasional “inconvenience” and violence, he insisted that the regime when unchallenged was “mild...and even indulgent.” And he pointed to discrimination in the North. Most fundamentally, he charged that reform would both lead to violence and it would fail. “What reason,” he asked, “has anybody—and most of all the Negro—to suppose that an unwilling populace will not again contrive means of evading or nullifying laws that cynically ignore the social will of the white majority?”63

He was to prove as good as his word. In 1950, he joined the Tennessee States Rights Committee with the observation, “My criticism of the States Rights activities, particularly in Tennessee, is that they are not vigorous enough, not as hard-hitting, intense, and continuous as the circumstances require.” In 1952, he seemed thoroughly a part of the McCarthyite ethos and was urging Tate to read Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness*. In 1953, he drafted a telegram to President Eisenhower that read: “Respectfully urge that your foreign and domestic program cannot possibly succeed unless as Senator McCarthy urges your administration ceases to follow the Truman-Acheson policies which we voted against when we voted for you in 1952. We strongly urge Sen. McCarthy’s views.” In 1955, he became chairman of the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government, a “massive resistance” organization. In brief, the positions of anti-Marxism, anti-Europeanism, “Southernness,” and white supremacy, which he had
taken up with considerable thought and subtlety in the 1930s, had become iron reflexes by the 1950s. He had long since lost the emotional and intellectual reserves that might have preserved a measure of detachment: ideas had become slogans. The modest and uncertain Davidson of the *Fugitive* had become an old man galvanized by fear into political action.\(^6^4\)

There is scattered evidence that the tangibility of the crisis came as a relief. At last, he could do more than fester in a "constant state of impotent indignation." He seemed to relax. Friends, to their amazement, found him willing to take a glass of whiskey. But the organization failed. Although it had some claim to statewide support, the Tennessee Federation had little grassroots influence. By 1960, even Vanderbilt itself had started a reluctant desegregation. He sent his old Agrarian friends memoranda on the race problem, but the rapport was vanished. Wade was sympathetic but reserved, Tate was now a puzzled liberal, Warren an active proponent of desegregation, contact with Ransom had long ceased, and Owsley was dead.\(^6^5\)

Unwise critics have, too readily, dubbed Donald Davidson a "spokesman" for the South. He himself hated the term. In 1940, he protested to Tate: "You say I conceive myself as the 'spokesman' for a culture & a people! What foolishness!" It is true that his papers contain more letters from ordinary Southerners, echoing his political positions and his instinctive love for the region, than those of any other Agrarian.\(^6^6\) And he was the only one, at the last, to mount the barricades on the side of the majority. But, like any intellectual, he was trapped in a certain isolation and, at best, he moved in sympathy with other Southerners. His idea of the South had been rooted in an uncomplicated perception. He had come to terms with his South by no elaborate route, from no critique of poetry or religion, but simply. The pattern of intellectualism he wove around his patriotism was beyond the reach of the average Southerner, but it remained anchored in a straightforward emotional need. The intellectual who defended the South was not uncommon, but the intellectual who defended it on its own terms was rare. John Gould Fletcher's memory of Davidson can be left as an obituary: "He was more interested in the South on the emotional side than on the intellectual . . . . He was capable of an unstudied frankness in regard to his ideals and beliefs, on many occasions, where Ransom would have employed all his resources of mental reserve; and for just this reason, Davidson was . . . far more discontented and unhappy at bottom than Ransom. He was, indeed, more or less lost amid the confused sophistications of modernity."\(^6^7\)