The Consequences of Ideas: A (Prospective) Life of Richard Weaver
Jay Langdale

The "legitimate function of modern biography," the twentieth-century libertarian Albert J. Nock notes, is "to help the historian." This, he observes, is at odds with the general impression that "it begins with [one man's] birth, ends with his death, and includes every single detail of historical significance."[1] The southern conservative Richard Malcolm Weaver (1917-1963), who was Nock's intellectual contemporary, remains someone whose life story stands to aid the historian of modern American intellectual history and, especially, the historian of modern American conservatism. Weaver's life story is predominately the tale of a native North Carolinian who, depending on one's perspective, either converted or segued from Marxism to southern traditionalist conservatism. On the significance of the latter persuasion, Eugene Genovese, who knew a thing or two about such a transition, described southern conservatism as nothing less than "America's most impressive native-born critique of our national development, of liberalism, and of the more disquieting features of the modern world."[2] As Genovese notes, a deep-seated anti-modernism lay at the center of this critique and Weaver, who memorably tells of his 1938 conversion in his essay "Up From Liberalism," was something of the Apostle Paul of southern traditionalism.[3] In short, Weaver remains the most important intellectual descendant of the Nashville Agrarians and,

[1] Nock, "The Purpose of Biography" in The State of the Union: Essays in Social Criticism (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 5.

[2] Genovese, The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1-2.

[3] On this see Miichael Kreyling, The Invention of Southern Literature (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 24. George Nash notes that traditionalists were united in a sense that there was "an intellectual error" at the root of modernity . See Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), 48.

until his untimely death in 1963, was the most significant native southern contributor to the development of post-World War II American conservative thought. Indeed, Weaver's span as a southern traditionalist conservative roughly originated at what George Nash designates as the beginning of the "Conservative Intellectual Movement in America" in 1945 and it ends with his death in 1963 at a time when, Nash presciently observes, American conservatism was beset by "some real intellectual problems."[4] In terms of Nock's commentary, Weaver's biography stands to, among other things, illuminate the intricacies of modern American intellectual history and, especially, the limitations and possibilities of traditionalist conservatism in American history at a time when, a half-century after Weaver's death at the age of 53, it is arguably less beleaguered than it is neglected.[5]

My recently published book *Superfluous Southerners: Cultural Conservatism and the South, 1920-1990* uses the history of the Nashville Agrarians and their descendants, including Richard Weaver, to examine the boundaries of traditionalist conservatism in modern America. The book's conclusion, which relies heavily upon Weaver's intellectual odyssey, affords something of a preface to this project and is appended to this paper. The passage attempts to center Weaver's life and unanticipated death within the scheme of the late twentieth-century demise of southern distinctiveness and to consider what might have been Weaver's response both to Allen Tate's abiding insistence that poetry could redeem the modern world and Mel Bradford's failure to attain the chairmanship of the National

[4] Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945 (Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1998), xvi.

[5]On the nature of traditionalist conservatism, see Nash, The Conservative Intellectual Movement in American Since 1945, 30-50 and 50-73. Also see, Mark C. Henrie, "Understanding Traditionalist Conservatism," in Peter Berkowitz, ed. Varieties of Conservatism in America (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2004), >http://www.fundacionburke.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/01/henrie.pdf <

Endowment for the Humanities. Considered together, their respective dilemmas illustrate the degree to which the would-be modern/post-modern man of letters faced the challenge of balancing the realms of art and politics in a drastically ideological age.

These circumstances were also a preoccupation of Weaver and Nock's intellectual contemporary Richard Hofstadter who, out of both similar cultural concerns and an interest in critical biography, sought, in his 1948 work *The American Political Tradition*, to use biographical vignettes of notable American political figures to deflate what he described as a prevailing "literature of hero worship and national self-congratulation."[6] In the book's introduction, the liberal icon, in a passage which could easily be mistaken as part of a retrospective on the limits of the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, notes that:

> almost the entire span of American history under the present Constitution has coincided with the rise and spread of modern industrial capitalism. In material power and productivity the United States has been a flourishing success. Societies that are in a such good working order have a kind of mute organic consistency. They do not foster ideas that are hostile to their fundamental working arrangements."[7]

Of even greater interest, Hofstadter's opening three vignettes are devoted to southerners Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and John C. Calhoun. In particular, his novel and begrudgingly appreciative account of Calhoun and of the Carolinian's conversion to sectionalism from nationalism is arguably of greatest aid to the American intellectual historian. It also furnishes a means to comparably address Weaver's significance to the historian of modern American conservatism.

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[6] Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (New York: Vintage, 1973), xl.

[7] Ibid, xxxviii

In Hofstadter's account, Calhoun's life was marked by the statesman's evolving reaction to the modern world which Calhoun described in 1837, as perpetually "rushing to some new and untried condition."[8] The anti-modern Calhoun, Hofstadter concludes, was "a minority spokesman in a democracy, a particularist in an age of nationalism, a slaveholder in an age of advancing liberties, and an agrarian in a furiously capitalistic country."[9] While this assessment of Calhoun is largely unobjectionable, Hofstadter's notion that Calhoun was a sort of reverse "Marx of the master class" remains among the most novel insights promulgated in *The American Political Tradition*. "Before Karl Marx published *The Communist Manifesto*, Calhoun," Hofstadter argues, "laid down an analysis of American politics and the sectional struggle which foreshadowed some of the seminal ideas of Marx's system." Hofstadter pronounced Calhoun "a brilliant if narrow dialectician" and "the last American statesman to do any primary political thinking." In a passage which exemplifies Nock's commentary on worthwhile biography, Hofstadter notes that Calhoun, in short, "placed the central ideas of "scientific socialism in an inverted framework of moral values and produced an arresting defense of reaction, a sort of intellectual Black Mass."[10]

Much as Calhoun was increasingly "hostile to the fundamental working arrangements" of American politics, Richard Weaver, it might be said, was progressively "hostile to the fundamental working arrangements" of twentieth-century American culture. Similar to the manner in which Calhoun evolved into something of a reverse Marx, Weaver, via his transition from socialist to southern traditionalist conservative, can be viewed as a

[8] Ibid, 104

[9] Ibid, 116

[10] Ibid, 87.

sort of a reverse Grasmsci of southern traditionalist conservatism. In *The Prison Notebooks*, the Italian Marxist elaborated a theory of intellectuals which focused upon the historical struggle between classes of intellectuals as a catalyst for the larger Marxian contest between social classes. Concisely stated, Gramsci juxtaposed "traditional intellectuals" who viewed themselves as humanistic disinterested seekers of truth against "organic intellectuals" who actively sought to promote the interests of a particular class. From this distinction, Gramsci noted, "there flow a whole series of problems and possibilities for historical research."[11] While Gramsci obviously viewed these possibilities as pertaining exclusively to furthering the abolition of traditional intellectuals and the cultivation of organic intellectuals, it is plausible to, in a fashion analogous to that which led Hofstadter to view Calhoun as a reverse "Marx of the master class," view Richard Weaver as a "reverse Gramsci" of traditionalist conservative intellectuals.

Weaver's significance, in this regard, is observable in both his life and work. As noted in the excerpt from *Superfluous Southerners*, his circuitous path to traditionalist conservatism consistently informed his writings extending from *The Southern Tradition at Bay* to *Ideas Have Consequences* and beyond. While he was an intellectual heir of Agrarianism, he was, by his own admission, an "Agrarian in exile" who sought to "bring together traditional ideals and modern potencies."[12] While his exile was literal in that he spent his entire career at the University of Chicago, there was also a figurative exile in that Weaver, in contrast to his fellow Agrarians, notably did not write poetry or fiction, but

[11] Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prisons Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 15, 10.

[12] See Weaver, "Agrarianism in Exile" in The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1987), 30.

principally published cultural criticism in the areas of southern culture, traditionalist conservatism, and rhetoric. He is, in view of his life's work, arguably best described as a "southern traditionalist rhetorician." By all accounts, this made Weaver a singular force in post-World War II conservative thought and his singularity is validated by those who have studied him from a variety of perspectives. There are those, for instance, who are attracted to Weaver the "southern conservative" and who know next to nothing about Weaver "the rhetorician." Conversely, there are those who admire Weaver "the rhetorician" who could care less about his philosophical traditionalism. Furthermore, there are those with conservative leanings who appreciate Weaver's traditionalism and his involvement in the post-war conservative intellectual movement, but who have little interest in or regard for his southern identity. Weaver's diverse subjects, Ted J. Smith observes, "have tended to attract separate audiences, each only dimly aware of the existence of the others and the larger body of his work."[13] In other words, Weaver was never exclusively any one these things and there is little evidence that he felt the need to privilege one over the others. Perhaps, this explains why he opted to refer to himself not as a man of letters or an intellectual, but eventually as a "doctor of culture."[14]

Cleanth Brooks remembered Weaver as "a quiet and reserved, but basically charming man who thought seriously with great power about some of the basic problems of our

[13] Ted. J. Smith, "Introduction" in In Defense of Tradition: Collected Shorter Writings of RIchard M. Weaver, 1928-1963 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), xviii.

[14] Weaver, Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 7. Visions, Weaver's last book, was posthumously published in 1964.

society."[15] As Brooks suggests, there was an inner logic to Weaver's seemingly diverse areas of inquiry and Weaver frequently, within single works, adeptly combined observations on southern history, conservative thought and rhetoric. Brooks' pithy reflection also indirectly affirms that Weaver, unlike the other Agrarians, was not a poet or novelist. Michael Kreyling, in *The Invention of Southern Literature*, compellingly argues that Weaver's disinterest in writing poetry or fiction rendered him intellectually "unencumbered" in a manner which proved elusive to Ransom, Davidson and Tate. [16] The logic behind and conditions of this circumstance are key to understanding both Weaver and the place of traditionalist conservatism in modern American thought. On one hand, this disposition likely made him more bellicose than his Agrarian forebears. On the other hand, it is rather plain to see how writing poetry internally constrained the passions of Ransom and, to a lesser degree, Tate. Along the same lines, Davidson, who as he aged wrote less and less verse, proved comparably less able to constrain his political passions and, as part of this, zealously recruited Weaver and, later, Mel Bradford to join his crusades.[17]

Of course, this raises the question as to whether Weaver chose his interests in southern culture, traditionalist conservatism and rhetoric or whether they somehow choose him. What is certain, Ted Smith notes, is that he became increasingly adept, between his conversion to Agrarianism in 1938 and his death in 1963, at seamlessly integrating all three.

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[15] Cleanth Brooks to George Nash, 23 January 1971, Box 86, Folder 1774, Cleanth Brooks Paper, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[16] Michael Kreyling, The Invention of Southern Literature (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 22.

[17] Donald Davidson to Melvin Bradford, 6 February 1966, Box 2, Folder 64, Donald Davidson Papers, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University. Davidson's influence on Weaver and Bradford is dealt with extensively in Chapter 6 of Superfluous Southerners titled "Southern Conservatism and its Discontents: Mel Bradford and the Modern American Right."

On this, it is useful to more closely consider the origins and content of the aforementioned essay "Agrarianism in Exile" which was published in 1950 at roughly the midpoint between these two events.

In a letter to Davidson during the spring of 1949, Weaver confessed to having been "wrestling with [the essay] for several months" and asked for Davidson's "candid opinion" on its treatment of what he described as the "delicate" subject of the "present residence of so many Southern Agrarians north of the Ohio River." Weaver confessed that his own:

> knowledge of the subject is limited. I did not arrive in Nashville until 1933 and I left in 1936; several things that I talk about in the article I learned through reading and report and hence I am not sure of their reliability. And since I value the extreme good opinion of the men here discussed, I do not want to run the risk of saying anything untrue or prejudicial. It has seemed to me though that the subject needs discussing, and that an adequate discussion might be helpful to the causes we are interested in…I would greatly appreciate your opinion [out of concern] that this would burn my bridge to the South.[18]

Eventually published in the fall of 1950 in the *Sewanee Review*, "Agrarianism in Exile" begins, rather expectedly, as an apologia for Agrarianism. Weaver lauded his forebears' "untraditional defense of their tradition" and their tendency to unite "traditional ideals and modern potencies."[19] For roughly the essay's first half, Weaver engages in a New Critical style defense of poetry. Among other things, he notes that:

> It tells us a great deal about a man to know that he chooses as his form of expression the poetic medium. It tells us, I think, something about his system of ontology. The composition of poetry is evidence that for him values have a reality, and that he is capable of emotion upon the subject of value…The

[18] Richard Weaver to Donald Davidson, 8 March 1949, Box 12, Folder 24, Donald Davidson Papers, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University

[19] Weaver, "Agrarianism in Exile" in Curtis, ed. Southern Essays of Richard Weaver (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1987), 30.

> practice of poetry amounts in effect to a confession of faith in immanent reality, which is the gravest of all commitments.[20]

In view of the fact that Weaver wrote neither poetry nor, for that matter, much that could be described as literary criticism, the first half of the essay seems oddly out of character. However, around the midpoint, Weaver's tone shifts as he arrives at the point which he, perhaps, rightly feared might appear treasonable. "We are," Weaver intoned, "dealing now with the Agrarian exile." He then, as a doctor of culture, proceeded to trace its figurative origins:

> For as soon as the agrarian anywhere adds, or allows to be added the *ism*, he is preparing his way for his own exile. We are simply dealing with different planes of human consciousness. Every *ism* is an intellectual manufacture; it has, in all sobriety, little relation to the people who till the soil for a living. These do not understand the language of such abstraction. The Agrarian intellectualized himself enough to make the case for agrarian living. In doing so, he was ceasing to be native. He had not many people at home to talk to. His philosophical doctrines were as far above the average farmer as the empyrean; and though he could argue, he could hardly talk with the New South men of factories and counting houses, for this was the opposition.[21]

Subsequently, Weaver set forth the rationale for recasting what had been a sectional struggle against industrialization as a universal, dialectical one "against anti-humanist forces." Understanding the battle as "world wide", would, Weaver intoned, permit traditional humanists to apprehend that:

> what has been represented as the flight of the Agrarians may appear on closer examination to be a strategic withdrawal to positions where the contest can be better carried on. Up to now the South has not shown much real capacity to fight modernism. A large part of it is eager to succumb; the part which would resist makes the over-formalized response and so hastens its own downfall. There are few effective allies here. And since the ideological character of the

[20] Ibid, 32-33.

[21] Ibid, 40-41

> Civil War, which was perceived by only a handful of its contemporaries, has now been brought to general view, one no longer has to take past as a sectionalist. The sections fade out, and one looks for comrades wherever there are men of good will and understanding. [22]

Though Weaver sustains this argument for several paragraphs, his attempt to unite the world's traditional intellectuals inevitably runs back into the needful role of poetry as sustainer of the particular. Weaver, in conclusion, directly confronts the dilemma of how to universally replicate the manner in which the Agrarians understood "through their reverence for the office of poet, that man requires some conception of the absolute to maintain his humanity."[23]

In concise terms, Weaver, in "Agrarianism in Exile" attempts to discern, not merely how to sustain the principles of Agrarianism in the relative absence of the "southern way of life," but, ultimately, how the traditionalist can sustain the defense of poetry in the absence of poetry. Weaver, in a certain sense, resets the clock to Tate's traditionalist dictum, from his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, that a viable tradition must be "automatically operative before it can be called a tradition."[24] However, to an even firmer degree than Tate, Weaver, as I argue in the conclusion to *Superfluous Southerners*, came to view this, from his "missionary outpost in darkest Chicago," as an essentially theological errand. From this station, Weaver, much like Hofstader's Calhoun, emerged as "a minority spokesman in a liberal country" who "produced an arresting defense of reaction." Proceeding from this, Weaver's

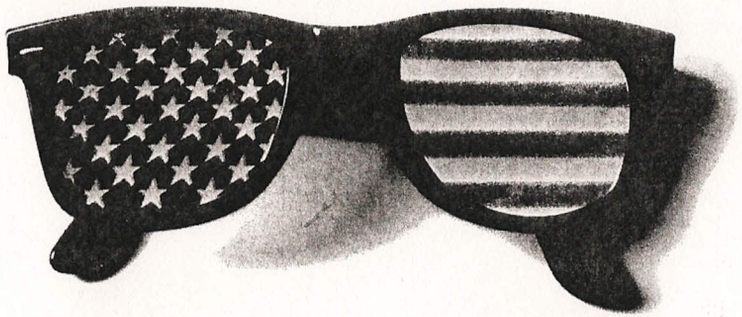
[22] Ibid, 44-45.

[23] Ibid, 48

[24] Allen Tate, "Remarks on the Southern Religion" in Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930),162.

biography stands to help the historian better understand both the nature of the post-World War II conservative intellectual movement and of the fashion whereby traditionalist conservatives operated in perpetual scorn of the notion that American society is "adverse to fostering ideas that are hostile to their fundamental working arrangements."

Superfluous Southerners



Cultural Conservatism and the South

1920–1990

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Conclusion

The Southern Man of Letters in the Postmodern World

"The man of letters," the nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire declared, is first and foremost the "world's enemy." Of course, the immediate question, in view of the story of the Agrarians and their intellectual descendants, remains to what degree this adversarial disposition remains relevant within the confines of a perpetually globalizing postmodern world? Though a unique product of the then-present age, the man of letters, Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1841, was a "heroic" figure who, in his capacity to reassert that "the spiritual always determines the material," was uniquely suited to challenge the modern ascendancy of science and democracy. Consequently, the man of letters, Carlyle declared, "must be regarded as our most important modern person" and as a surrogate for "Prophets" and "Priests."[1] Carlyle's invocation was, by all accounts, a tall order for the man of letters in the mid-nineteenth century, but represented an even greater undertaking for anyone who aspired to the role in the ever more secularized and democratized twentieth century. For this reason, the increasingly burdensome task of the man of letters, Lewis Simpson rightfully maintained, is best observed in the American context and is, furthermore, most palpable in the American South where a premodern slave society, vanquished by the modern forces of science and democracy during the middle of the nineteenth century, rejoined the world during the early twentieth century with a burst of cultural creativity known as the Southern Literary Renaissance. "With the war of 1914–1918," Allen Tate illustriously declared, "the South [had] re-entered the world—but gave a backwards glance as it stepped over the border" and, as it did so, its men of letters furnished a "literature conscious of the past in the present."[2] Of course, in light of the late twentieth-century saga of Mel Bradford, one is left

to consider to what extent and ultimate effect did the Agrarians and their culturally conservative intellectual descendants fulfill the mandate of the man of letters in the modern world.

While undoubtedly inspired, at least in part, by Carlyle, Tate's realm of pure literary possibility was, at least circuitously, also informed by Karl Marx's dictum that "all that is solid melts into air." Indeed, along these very same lines, Donald Davidson cautioned Tate, in 1927, that his friend's poetry and criticism were "so astringent" that it "bites and dissolves what it touches."[3] To a firmer degree than his fellow Fugitive-Agrarian, Davidson sensed that, to an overwhelming extent, the climate of modernity favored gnostic pragmatic designs for recreating the world anew over conservative attempts to imagine a dissolving past. Culturally speaking, modernity abetted a prevailing condition whereby want and dread of pure possibility were, in many respects, instantaneously interchangeable. During the late nineteenth century, northern intellectuals, historian Jackson Lears notes, were, as a consequence of their confrontation with modernity, left with "no place of grace."[4] Prominent among them was, of course, Henry Adams, who was consigned to label himself a Conservative Christian Anarchist and who, unable to reconcile the Virgin and dynamo, memorably referred to himself in the third person in *The Education*. However defeatist, Adams's encounter with the acids of modernity nonetheless furnished a framework for the conservative anti-modernism of, among others, the New Humanists and the Nashville Agrarians during the twentieth century. The difficulty, with which Adams and Tate wrestled, was the often interchangeable sense of dread and pure possibility which animated the modern man of letters' journey amongst the realms of literature, politics and religion.

In this regard, it is useful to revisit Tate's 1954 confession to Andrew Lytle that the Agrarians, in their failure to understand the theological implications of their errand, had mistakenly "made the South, and especially the Old South an object of idolatry."[5] In hindsight, Tate's remarkable admission, which extended to the claim that it was nonetheless "better to be an idolater than worship nothing," was the culmination of a quarter century of inward disquietude regarding the compatibility of Agrarianism, the realm of letters, and religious faith.[6] At the same time, Tate, despite his dismissal of Agrarianism as idolatrous and his mid-century conversion to Catholicism, remained troubled by the perennial irreconcilability of his literary and religious selves. In fact, less than two years before confessing Agrarianism's shortcomings to Lytle, Tate, in an equally confessional essay titled "The Man of Letters in the Modern World," wrote revealingly about what he called the man of letters' burden of "special awareness," which he described as equal parts "Gnostic awareness" and "Augustinian humility." "There would be no hell for modern man," Tate surmised, "if our men

of letters were not calling attention to it."[7] Though this may have been entirely true, Tate's logic affirmed, but more importantly, considerably deepened, if not darkened, the role of the man of letters as formerly defined by Carlyle.

With no safe harbor, both modern man and the modern man of letters, in Tate's estimation, were destined for the self-same purgatory which existed at the conjunction of the struggle between their gnostic and Augustinian temperaments. Rather than confess that he had, in much the same manner that he had once worshipped the false idol of Agrarianism, wrongly venerated literature, Tate, in the essay's conclusion, affirmed that it remained "the duty of the man of letters to supervise the culture of language to which the rest of the culture is subordinate and to warn us when our language is ceasing to forward the ends proper to man."[8] Tate, in other words, recast the problem as a "linguistic" one rather than a "historical" one or, more significantly, not as the irretrievably "theological" dilemma he privately described to Lytle. In short, Tate, despite his Catholic conversion, retained much more than a semblance of the modernist faith that poetry might, as yet, offer the absolutes of religion.

Though Tate's privileged view of poetry, from a theological perspective, might be said to border on the heretical, it was, more significantly, a tendency which was intrinsically limited within in a nation founded amidst the Enlightenment inspired ascent of science and democracy. In 1833, Alexis de Tocqueville, addressing this circumstance, notably cautioned that democracy's impulse towards science, progress and perfectibility "shuts the past against the poet" and, thereby, diminishes poetry.[9] Indeed, democracy's capacity to, in a certain sense, de-idealize poetry was not only corrosive of poetry, but, as the twentieth-century pragmatist Richard Rorty subsequently proudly affirmed, was, at its core, destructive of "monotheistic religion" itself. This diminished poetry was, Rorty further observed, ideally suited to a "secular version of polytheism" that would eventually permit Western man to "turn away not only from priests but from anyone who purports to tell you how things *really* are."[10] Anyone, in this sense, certainly included the poet whose verse, Tate devoutly maintained in 1950, was a principal source of the "knowledge of evil in man."[11] Thus, the presumptive end of democratic society was not only the oft acknowledged displacement of religion and of priests, but also the diminishment of poetry and the abolition of the man of letters who had, of course, ironically been formerly esteemed by Carlyle as a potential surrogate for prophets and priests.

Despite his conversion to Catholicism, Tate remained a modernist—albeit a reluctant one—until his death in 1979, just one year before Mel Bradford's failed nomination to become head of the NEH. Taken together, Tate's devotion to the poetic realm and Bradford's attraction to the political were both evidentiary of the diminution of the southern man of letters in post-World War II America. At the same time, Tate's and Bradford's respective dilemmas

furnish a means to, in conclusion, consider the manner in which Richard Weaver, prior to his death in 1963, and, thereafter, Walker Percy, until his own death in 1990, sought to restore the integrity of language through appeals to the religious rather than the poetic or the political imagination. Weaver and Percy shared a number of remarkable coincidences. Both men were born during the second decade of the twentieth century; both lost fathers at an early age; both had life altering episodes during their late twenties which deepened their traditionalist conservative leanings; and both men became, as a consequence of these episodes, intensely preoccupied with the problem of language in the modern world.

Born in 1910, Richard Weaver, as was noted in an earlier chapter, travelled a circuitous route to a conservative disposition. Despite having once deemed *I'll Take My Stand* an "ineffectual rally against the onward sweep of industrialism," Weaver, several years after completing a Master's degree in English at Vanderbilt under John Crowe Ransom, underwent what he notably described as a "religious conversion" from socialism to the "Church of Agrarianism."[12] Resolved, as he later wrote, to "start" his education over at the "age of thirty," Weaver enrolled in the doctoral program in English at Louisiana State University where, in 1943, he completed a dissertation that was posthumously published in 1968 as *The Southern Tradition at Bay*.[13] In it, Weaver traced the origins of "modern frustration" to mankind's impulse to "strip aside all concealing veils and see what is behind them." Far from liberating, this action, Weaver insisted, resulted only in the tragic awareness that "the reality had existed somehow in the willed belief, or the myth." Relating this circumstance to the history of his native region, Weaver, sounding like a thirteenth contributor to *I'll Take My Stand*, maintained that, upon the Confederacy's defeat by modernity's onward sweep, the "last barrier to the secular spirit of science, materialism, and democracy was vanquished."[14] However, in contrast to the prescriptive tendency of the Agrarians, Weaver readily conceded that he was "unwilling to say that [the South] offers a foundation" or, for that matter, "even an example." Rather, Weaver merely noted that it remained the duty of "poets," "artists," "intellectuals," and what he termed other "workers of the timeless" to counter the modern climate of spiritual disintegration by furnishing mankind with a "world view completely different from that which he has constructed out of his random knowledge of science."[15]

Though his anti-modernism made him sound like a latter day Agrarian, Weaver's reluctance to insist that the South had any prescriptive quality whatsoever ultimately made him a more post-Agrarian figure. In his 1948 work, *Ideas Have Consequences*, Weaver, at the urging of his editor William Terry Couch and with some guidance from Cleanth Brooks, applied the conclusions of his dissertation to an even broader critique of the modern world. Whereas *I'll Take*

My Stand cast industrialism as the enemy of civilization, Weaver—perhaps taking a cue from the New Humanists' derision of Bacon and Rousseau—cast the considerably more ancient nominalism of William of Occam as the proximate cause of modern depravity. The remainder of *Ideas Have Consequences* was devoted both to clarifying the "consequences" of this intellectual convulsion, and to prescribing a remedy.[16] Of these, Weaver wrote more rigorously about the former, but more urgently regarding the latter. "The only redemption" from the modern world, Weaver insisted, "lies in restraint imposed by idea, but our ideas, if they are not to worsen the confusion, must be harmonized by some vision." In this, he concluded, "our task is much like finding the relationship between faith and reason for an age that does not know the meaning of faith."[17] Throughout *Ideas Have Consequences*, Weaver made it clear that the abuse of language was the proximate cause of this modern dilemma. "The word is almost in limbo," he lamented, "where the positivists have wished to consign it" and, since, he maintained, "all metaphysical community depends on the ability of men to understand one another," the "rehabilitation of the word" and the restoration of "power and stability to language" were of paramount concern.[18] In the conclusion to a chapter notably titled "The Power of the Word," Weaver called for a "fresh appreciation of language" and for a renewed "respect for words as things" which, he insisted, could only be rendered through a "practical application of the law that in the beginning was the word."[19]

This was essentially the same diagnosis rendered around the exact same time by Tate in "The Man of Letters in the Modern World." Weaver's remedy, like Tate's, called for a renewal of language, but, through its appeals to "faith" and scripture, did so with recourse to the religious rather than the literary imagination. During the late forties, Weaver, in an essay for the journal *Poetry*, wrote, in agreement with Tocqueville, that modern poetry suffered from an "impoverishment of imagery" and that this circumstance was the best evidence that, he wrote, "something serious has happened to our belief in the accessibility of truth."[20] Of course, Weaver, as someone whose mentors John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks were among the leading proponents of the New Literary Criticism, had to tread guardedly when making such pronouncements. Weaver did so in a 1963 essay, "Language is Sermonic," which lamented the decline of the academic subject of rhetoric. In recent decades, the "teacher of literature," Weaver noted, had, at the expense of rhetoric, been placed, along with his "critical doctrines," at the "height of eminence." Weaver, however, promptly maintained that this circumstance only partially explained the "relegation of rhetoric" and cited the rise of science and, in particular, the belief that "nothing was beyond the scope of its method" as most responsible for the demise of rhetoric as an academic discipline. Weaver, setting out to rehabilitate the subject, insisted that "rhetoric has a relationship to the world" which forces the

rhetorician to "keep his eye upon reality as well upon the character and situation of his audience." "Language," Weaver continued, is, thus, not only predicative, but more importantly "sermonic." As a consequence, "we are," Weaver concluded, "all of us preachers in our private or public capacities."[21]

Weaver's religious prescription was, by all accounts, both a different calling than that of the man of letters as formerly esteemed by Tate as well as a notable departure from the New Criticism's insistence upon literature's insularity from the political. In contrast to the New Critical approach to teaching literature, instruction in "rhetoric," Weaver maintained, "must be viewed formally as operating at that point were literature and politics meet, or where literature and political urgencies can be brought together." By virtue of this orientation, the successful rhetorician, Weaver noted, is not averse to being in "bad grace with both camps" as a "lay preacher" who, on one hand, is too "practical" for the "literary people" and who, on the other, is too "flowery" for the "more practical political people."[22] In other words, rhetoric belonged neither entirely to the realm of literature nor to the domain of the political, but to the religious imagination which both mediated between and was superior to both the exclusively literary and the solely political.

Like Richard Weaver, Walker Percy, who was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1916, felt the pain of loss at an early age. His father committed suicide when he was thirteen and his mother perished in a car accident less than three years later. Much as Weaver steeled himself against tragedy by embracing socialism, Percy sought refuge in science. After graduating from the University of North Carolina in 1937, he enrolled in the Columbia College of Physicians, but, during his residency, contracted tuberculosis at the age of twenty-six. Though he would later claim that he was "the happiest man ever to contract tuberculosis" because it enabled him "to quit medicine," Percy, was, at the time, thrown into a state of uncertainty not unlike the one Weaver experienced at a similar point in his life. While Weaver got his bearings at Louisiana State University, Percy convalesced at a sanitarium in upstate New York. Whereas Weaver, seeking to recover from socialism, immersed himself in southern history, Percy, seeking to recover from scientism, immersed himself in the existentialist writings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Sören Kierkegaard, and Gabriel Marcel, and, much like Tate, converted to Catholicism.

Remarkably, both Richard Weaver and Walker Percy, despite their disparate choice of remedies, reached similar conclusions regarding the prescriptive capacity of southern history and literature. Not unlike Weaver's reluctance to insist that southern history offered guidance for confronting the modern world, Percy, from a literary perspective, often remarked that he thought himself "starting where Faulkner left off with the Quentin Compson who didn't commit suicide." Indeed, Percy's protagonists, among them Binx Bollling of

The Moviegoer and Will Barrett of *The Last Gentleman*, memorably confront both burdensome pasts and hollow futures. However, unlike Faulkner or, for that matter, the Fugitive Poets who clung to a modernist aesthetic of art for art's sake, Percy, in a 1962 letter to Tate's wife Caroline Gordon, proclaimed that he did not consider himself an artist, but rather a "moralist or a propagandist" who aimed to "tell people what they must do and what they must believe if they want to live."[23] Later in the same letter, Percy rhetorically wondered, "When the holy has disappeared, how in the blazes can a novelist expect to make use of it?" Answering his own question, Percy proposed, much like Flannery O'Connor, that the "craft of the religious novelist nowadays consists mainly in learning how to shout in silence." "That plus," Percy continued, "what Jack Bolling, protagonist of *The Moviegoer*, called learning how to place a good kick in the ass." "As far as I am concerned," Percy continued, "the latter comprises 90% of my vocation and my next novel shall be mainly given to ass-kicking for Jesus' sake."[24]

Though somewhat lighthearted, Percy's declaration was about as distant from the modernist literary aesthetic as one could get. Through his letter to Caroline Gordon, Percy, who greatly admired Kierkegaard's essay, "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle," expresses a desire to, in the spirit of the existentialist philosopher, move beyond the realm of the mere literary artist in order to become an apostle or, at least, perform the function ascribed to the apostle.[25] By virtue of this longing, Percy, Lewis Simpson notes, overturned the modernist "aesthetic of memory" with an "alternative aesthetic of revelation."[26] In numerous regards, Percy's risible take on the novelist's vocation was entirely emblematic of his belief in the superiority of the novel over other literary forms, most notably poetry, as a conduit for the "aesthetic of revelation." On this, Percy once remarked that the novelist's calling was imminently compatible with Christianity since, he noted, "the novel has to do with narration, and narration has to do with a person born in trouble as the sparks fly up." In this respect, Percy insisted, "Christianity and the novel are both predicamental."[27] In light of his religious understanding of the literary vocation, Percy's unequivocal choice of literary form tacitly affirmed Tocqueville's nineteenth-century observations on the limits of poetry in the American context.

Beyond his preference for the novel as literary form, Percy believed, like Weaver, that the alleviation of the modern malaise ultimately rested upon the recovery of the mystery of language. Much as Weaver remains better known as a southern partisan than a partisan of rhetoric, Percy is more recognized as an award winning novelist than as a philosopher of language. Percy, however, in contrast to his blithesome ruminations on the novelist's task, was unapologetically serious when it came to his interest in the nature of language. Writing

to his friend Shelby Foote in 1974, Percy confidently insisted that, if he were remembered in a hundred years, it would be because of his contribution to semiotics and the theory of language.[28] Weaver, whose life was cut prematurely short in 1963 when he was only fifty-three years old, is not known to have made a similar pronouncement, but, if the body of work that he both left behind and partially finished is any indication, he most assuredly shared Percy's sentiment. In fact, the pair shared remarkably similar views on the final significance that language held for the endurance of mankind.

For instance, Weaver, in a 1961 essay titled "Relativism and the Use of Language," observed:

> The difficulty of the whole problem makes us wonder whether some help cannot be found by investigating the ultimate origin of language . . . It is not that things give meanings to words; it is that meanings make things "things" . . . Theories of meaning that include only the symbol and the thing symbolized leave out of account the interpreter. But there can be no such thing as meaning, in the sense of understanding, unless there is a third entity, the human being, who brings the two together in a system of comprehension.[29]

In remarkably similar terms, Percy, in his 1975 book *Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man is, How Queer Language is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*, addressed this dilemma. In the opening pages, Percy wondered:

> What does a man do when he finds himself living after an age has ended and he can no longer understand himself because the theories of man of the former age no longer work and the theories of the new age are not yet known, for not even the name of the new age is known, and so everything is upside down, people feeling bad when they should feel good, good when they should feel bad? . . . Where does one start with a theory of man if the theory of man as an organism in an environment doesn't work and all of the attributes of man which were accepted in the old modern age are now called into question: his soul, mind, freedom, will, Godlikeness? There is only one place to start: the place where man's singularity is there for all to see and cannot be called into question, even in a new age in which everything else is in dispute. That singularity is language.[30]

In the final analysis—Richard Weaver, the rhetorician, and Walker Percy, the novelist—shared not only crucial elements of their life stories, but likewise the conviction that, in late twentieth-century America, due regard for the mystery of language could no longer be maintained by the man of letters' mere appeal to the literary imagination and that, consequently, a revitalization of the religious imagination was essential to resisting ideology's gnostic impulse to

debase the spoken and written word. For this reason, Weaver opted to cast himself as a "doctor of culture" at a "missionary outpost in darkest Chicago," while Percy frequently maintained that he was simply a "wayfarer" in the "pleasant nonplace" of Covington, Louisiana.[31] In their respective postures of self-styled superfluity and their mutual recognition that any potential restoration would be consummated not through literary appeals to a dissolving past or political designs for an evolving future, but rather via a reinvigoration of the traditionalist religious imagination, Richard Weaver and Walker Percy revised and extended the mandate of the man of letters as hero in what was becoming a post-southern America in a postmodern world.

Notes

Introduction

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3. Quoted in George Scialabba, "The Critic as Radical," *American Conservative*, December 2010, 26.

4. The idea of the "superfluous man" figures prominently in nineteenth-century Russian literature and in the writings of the American libertarian Albert J. Nock. See David Patterson *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Albert J. Nock *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943).

5. M.G.J. de Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1793), 46.

6. Matthew Arnold, "Stanzas From The Grand Chartreuse," in *Poems of Matthew Arnold, 1840–1867* (London: Oxford University Press, 1909), 272.

7. Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero As Man of Letters. Johnson, Rousseau, Burns," in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841; reprint, Boston: Ginn and Company, 1901), 5, 177–78. For perspectives on the man of letters as an historical figure, see John Gross, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters: A Study of the Idiosyncratic and the Humane in Modern Literature* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); George Panichas, *The Critic as Conservator: Essays in Literature, Society, and Culture* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

8. See Lewis Simpson, "The Southern Writer and the Great Literary Secession," in *The Man of Letters in New England and the South: Essays on the Literary Vocation in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 232–33.

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10. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harry Reeve (1835; reprint, New York: Appleton, 1899), 4. On Tocqueville and nineteenth-century intellectual culture, see

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45. Christopher Lasch, "The Obsolescence of Left and Right," *New Oxford Review*, April 1989, 6.

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48. Samuel Francis, *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 222–32.

49. C. Vann Woodward, "The Search for Southern Identity," in *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1960), 21.

50. Russell Kirk, "Norms, Conventions, and the South," *Modern Age* 2 (Fall 1958): 345.

Conclusion

1. Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Man of Letters: Johnson, Rousseau, Burns," in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841; reprint, London: J. M. Dent, 1908), 283–84.

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3. Davidson to Tate, 15 February 1927, in *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate*, 186.

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13. Richard Weaver, "Up From Liberalism," *Modern Age* 219 (Winter 1958–59): 24.

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15. Ibid., 391–92.

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17. Ibid., 34.

18. Ibid., 148, 164–65.

19. Ibid., 169.

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24. Ibid., 301.

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26. See Lewis Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 244.

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30. Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is and What One Has To Do With The Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 7.

31. Richard M. Weaver, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 7. "Address of Dr. Richard M. Weaver, Chicago University," in *The Tribe of Jacob: The Descendants of the Reverend Jacob Weaver of Reemes Creek, North Carolina 1786–1868 and Elizabeth Siler Weaver*, ed. Pearl M. Weaver (Asheville, NC: Miller Printing Company, 1962), 113. Walker Percy, "The Holiness of the Ordinary," in *Signposts in A Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1991), 391; and "Why I Live Where I Live," in Ibid., 3.