

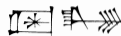
THE
SOUTHERN ESSAYS
OF
Richard M. Weaver



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OF
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EDITED BY GEORGE M. CURTIS, III
AND JAMES J. THOMPSON, JR.



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So face with calm that heritage
And earn contempt before the age.

Allen Tate, "Brief Message" (1932)

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FOREWORD

The fact that it has clung to its belief in the supernatural, that it has never abandoned the idea that man is a special creation, that it persists in seeing life as a drama . . . in which creatures of free will make choices and are saved or damned, and that it has never accepted a simple equalitarianism is very closely related to its present literary renaissance, as well as to its conservation of certain values that have been pretty well leached out of other societies. . . . The South remains, despite some terrible pounding from the outside and a good bit of betrayal within, a stronghold of humanism.

Richard M. Weaver
“The Land and the Literature” (1956)

Richard Weaver’s career embodied the many strong recurring patterns revealed in the publications that record his mature thought from 1943 until his death in 1963, but none is more obvious and significant than his commitment to the American South and its civilization.

The first book that Weaver wrote was the study that would be published many years later as *The Southern Tradition at Bay* (1969); the present collection of his essays, long overdue, purports to be his last book. From the early 1940s until his sudden death, Weaver wrote regularly about Southern manners and mores, rhetoric and history, literature and religion.

Weaver explored what Allen Tate called the lower myth, which is “based upon ascertainable history,” and the higher myth, which depends upon the religious imagination. The lower myth tends toward being literal and factual, the higher toward being symbolic; these views of the South meet, as Weaver has implied, in the idea and practice of chivalry, a secular religion.

Few critics of the South rival Richard Weaver in comprehensiveness of vision and depth of thought, and perhaps only Tate stands as clearly superior to him. The best Southern literary historian today, Lewis P. Simpson, may have been influenced by Weaver; and a similar indebtedness may apply to some of the work published by the best Southern historian of our time, C. Vann Woodward, whose “Irony of Southern History” was anticipated by Weaver in his commentaries on the Civil War.

These acutely written and closely argued pieces slightly overlap, since they were presented not for a book but for disparate occasions and purposes during the course of twenty years. Even so, over the two decades since Weaver’s death, the essays have demonstrated marked originality and continuing vitality. “The Older Religiousness in the South,” “Aspects of the Southern Philosophy,” and “The South and the American Union” are profound and trenchant syntheses. “Agrarianism in Exile” (which is complemented here by “The Southern Phoenix”) may well be the finest essay ever forged about the Vanderbilt group and *I’ll Take My Stand*. “Contemporary Southern Literature,” which belies its bland title, is among the strongest general essays written about the Southern renaissance. And the essay on Randolph and Thoreau shows how good Weaver’s comparative study of the minds of the South and New England would have been, had he lived to complete it.

Most of these pieces have been out of print for many years. To have them together, newly published, is more than a mat-

ter of convenience for readers seriously interested in the South, and the editors have accomplished far more than an act of piety toward the author and his native region: they have given us a singular testament of rare and enduring value.

George Core

George Core, who succeeded Andrew Lytle as editor of *The Sewanee Review* in 1973, is a frequent contributor to the periodical press. He has edited several books about the South, among them (with M. E. Bradford) Richard Weaver's *The Southern Tradition at Bay*.

PREFACE

Richard Weaver's name does not evoke instant recognition in most circles. Ideas, like the width of neckties and the length of hemlines, change with the seasons, and no one wants to be caught wearing yesterday's fashions. Few reputations endure in the realm of ideas. New thinkers constantly elbow their way to the fore, only to find themselves quickly relegated to the backwaters; the proverbial dustbin of history brims with long-forgotten thinkers and their moldering books. From 1948, when he published his first book, until his untimely death fifteen years later, Richard Weaver won substantial acclaim. His name continues to crop up from time to time, and a few devoted readers thumb his writings for their learning, clarity, and sagacity. One suspects, however, that even among conservatives Weaver, his importance acknowledged but his ideas no longer compellingly influential, is more mentioned than read. That is a distressing turn of events, for few American thinkers of the past half-century can match Weaver's keen perception.

The particulars of Weaver's life reveal nothing especially memorable. Born in 1910 in the western North Carolina town of Weaverville, he spent his adult years in the confines of academia. Having earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Kentucky in 1932, he entered Vanderbilt University and left two years later with an M.A. degree. After a brief stint of teaching, mainly at Texas A & M, he resumed graduate study, this time at Louisiana State University, which

awarded him a doctorate in English in 1943. The University of Chicago then hired him to teach in its undergraduate college; he remained there until his death. In the 1940s his essays began to appear in literary quarterlies, and during his career he published several books, the most important of which were *Ideas Have Consequences* and *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. From his fugitive essays and unpublished manuscripts editors culled material for four more books: *Visions of Order*, *Life Without Prejudice*, *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, and *Language Is Sermonic*.

Weaver arrived at Vanderbilt during the high tide of Agrarianism, the intellectual movement sparked by the publication in 1930 of *I'll Take My Stand*, a volume of twelve essays written mainly by Vanderbilt professors and their former students. This reassertion of Southern tradition against the fragmentation and anomie of urban industrial society captured Weaver's interest, for like many young Southerners in the 1930s, he was exploring the meaning of Southernness. Weaver's two years in Nashville completed his disaffection with the liberalism he had imbibed at the University of Kentucky. Agrarianism provided him with a bedrock upon which to ground his subsequent thinking.

His adoption of the Agrarian creed has misled many interpreters to type him as a mere disciple of his Vanderbilt mentors, but Weaver was more than an epigone: having absorbed the Agrarians' ideas, he reshaped them, impressing upon them his own special mark. Unlike most of the original Agrarians, who were mainly poets, novelists, and literary critics, Weaver combined the sophisticated tools of the historian with the penetrating vision of an astute observer of contemporary culture. His erudition empowered him to trace the roots of the current malaise far back into the Middle Ages; his grounding in rhetoric gave him a keen sensitivity to the current corruption of language, logic, and the arts of persuasion; and his engagement with Agrarian principles, long after many of the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* had de-

bouched in other directions, enabled him to adduce a powerful critique of American culture in the 1950s. In a sense, Richard Weaver carried to completion the task begun by the Agrarians in 1930.

While Weaver's far-ranging mind embraced many subjects and crisscrossed several disciplines, the history of the South remained at the center of his thinking. Although he never wrote a full-scale history of the region, he did examine the period from 1865 to the turn of the century in *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, and in numerous essays he adumbrated his view of the full sweep of the Southern past. Like the Agrarians, he admired the South's preservation of older European modes of thinking and living, a phenomenon he spied in everything from the Southern devotion to chivalry to the "medieval" nature of Southern religion. Ten years before the historian C. Vann Woodward, an opponent of the Nashville school, published his famous essay "The Search for Southern Identity," Weaver spotted the characteristic marks that Woodward would later single out: the poverty, defeat, and tragic sense which the Civil War had saddled upon the region. More than any of the Agrarians, he perceived the overarching significance of "the burden of Southern history" (to borrow the title of one of Woodward's books).

Weaver derived his appreciation of liberty from Southern history as well, for he discovered in his native land the evolution of a "social bond individualism" that he pitted against the "anarchic individualism" that had emanated from the environs of Concord and Walden Pond. He coupled individual liberty with duty and social responsibility to advance a concept of disciplined freedom, a stance he saw epitomized in John Randolph of Roanoke. In the South's historic deference toward the gentleman he seized a means of combating the rise of the mass man that so disquieted the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. His grasp of Southern history enabled him to impose meaning on the unsettling international events of the 1940s and 1950s. In the South's allegiance to a traditional

society he discerned a source of order and freedom to assert against the totalitarianism and nihilism of both fascism and communism.

While Weaver loved the South with a fierce passion, he avoided one of the besetting sins of some of the heirs of the Agrarians: a constricting sectionalism that thrives on the belief that all would have been well south of the Potomac had the Confederacy bested the Union armies. Weaver perceived that the infirmities of modern Western civilization transcended the dichotomy between North and South, for those problems were rooted in a decline of the medieval synthesis, a decline that long predated the collapse of the Confederacy. True, the South had much to teach the rest of America—lessons that the South itself came to learn only in the school of adversity after Appomattox—but the region had been no pristine Eden violated by rapacious Yankees. Weaver's appreciation of the best the North had to offer informs his respect for Abraham Lincoln, whom Weaver placed high in the ranks of American statesmanship. Witness to "the general retreat of humanism before universal materialism and technification," the conserver of Western civilization found himself as isolated in the South as in the North; the struggle to maintain humane values has no geographical boundaries. As Allen Tate wrote in the 1930s, with a similar disregard for geography: "All are born Yankees of the race of men."

Unlike some of his Agrarian mentors, Weaver sought no haven in the bitterness of despair. Although he was not much of a churchgoer, he possessed a deeply religious sensibility that allowed him to face the trials of modernity with equanimity. He was acutely aware of the frailty of humankind and of man's capacity for perverting and twisting the good, but he harbored as well a faith in man's ability to restore lost virtue and to pursue the right. He refused to surrender to the notion that Western civilization was doomed to ineluctable decay and disintegration. In 1952 he wrote: "There have been revolutions in human affairs which appear miraculous in the

light of the conditions which preceded them. Ultimately it is the human psyche which determines the kind of world we live in, and history is marked with radical changes of phase which could undermine even so seemingly impregnable a thing as our modern scientific-technological order." This belief permitted Weaver to be that odd creature in the twentieth century: a resolutely hopeful traditionalist.

It is impossible to say what Richard Weaver's standing would be today had he lived beyond that truncated life of fifty-three years. There were many books he planned to write, many things he wanted to say. But we do not call his life truncated to imply that it was incomplete and unfinished; that would do Weaver a disservice. The body of work he completed speaks for itself, and one feels certain that it will be read and pondered as long as men still care deeply about civility and honor and liberty. Equally important is the personal example he bequeathed to posterity. Richard M. Weaver was a humane, decent man who confronted the modern world with courage and hope. His testimony on the merits of a life well lived remains as persuasive as ever. Those who count themselves his heirs could ask no more.

George M. Curtis, III
James J. Thompson, Jr.

George M. Curtis, III, formerly associated with the Papers of John Marshall and the Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln, is Professor of History at Hanover College, Hanover, Indiana.

James J. Thompson, Jr. is the book review editor of *The New Oxford Review* and the author of three books: *Tried as by Fire: Southern Baptists and the Religious Controversies of the 1920s*, *Christian Classics Revisited*, and *Fleeing the Whore of Babylon: A Modern Conversion Story*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This restoration of Richard M. Weaver's essays is a fitting celebration. Over the years, the editors, one from Weaver's South and the other from his adopted Midwest, have shared a world of historical ideas and values in which Weaver's work has assumed a greater and greater presence. As we collected Weaver's essays, a deep excitement grew as their richness became manifest. To our surprise and delight we discovered as well that the sum was greater than the parts: these essays possess a cohesiveness not often found in such collections.

In addition to Richard M. Weaver, we extend our thanks to John Stoll Sanders for his advice at the early stages of this project, to Richard T. Paustenbaugh for his bibliographic research, and to Polly Weaver Beaton for her generous encouragement.

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O N E

“Work with the Word”:
Southern Literature
and Thought

THE TENNESSEE AGRARIANS

The often quoted saying of President Davis that if the South lost the war, its history would be written by the North, proved partly wrong and partly right. Between 1865 and 1900 the South wrote its history with vigor and in volume, and the literature of Southern apologia published in that period makes a fair-sized library. But there is some room for saying that the writers of these years wrote well rather than wisely, so that Davis's prophecy was in one point borne out. It was not so much history as special pleading which was presented; and while this may have softened, it did not materially change the national verdict.

This statement should of course not be made without due recognition of the genius and energy which were spent in defending the South's cause and in justifying its culture. The literature of the post-bellum era falls into three rather distinct phases: military and political defenses written in the shadow of defeat; romantic re-creations of ante-bellum civilization, chiefly in fiction; and continuations of the political and social argument, with some addition of perspective and objectivity. The first group contains some brilliant effort; and the South should never have been allowed to forget the herculean labors

Shenandoah, Vol. III, No. 2 (Summer 1952), 3-10.