

The Last Fortress

J. M. L A L L E Y

The Southern Tradition at Bay, by Richard Weaver; edited by George Core and M. E. Bradford; foreword by Donald Davidson. *New Rochelle, N. Y.*: Arlington House, 1968. 422 pp. \$7.00

RICHARD WEAVER, who until his untimely death in 1963 was an associate editor of *Modern Age*, began this book in an effort to discover why it was that the American South was for so long able to resist the process of spiritual disintegration that has been evident in all the rest of Western society. The posthumous discovery and publication of the work gives it an even greater interest than it would have had at the time it was completed more than a quarter century ago; for what was then evident to the thoughtful has now become apparent to all. It was Weaver's conclusion, after this exhaustive study of the Southern mind and

ethos as revealed in its literature, that the South "is in the curious position of having been right without recognizing the grounds of its rightness." Others who have sought to demonstrate the rightness of the "lost cause" have done so either by constitutional arguments or on the basis of a political philosophy; but the unrecognized grounds to which Richard Weaver referred were the persistence of a religious attitude in an age of materialism and infidelity and devotion to an agrarian ideal in an age of industrialism, technological innovation, and urbanization. The very "backwardness" and provincialism for which the South had been scorned had been its chief defenses against the drift toward anarchy and revolution.

It has been said rather sneeringly of some contemporary conservatives that they were dragged unwillingly into the twentieth century; it might be said even more ap-

appropriately that the psychological history of the South in the generation between 1830 and 1860 was a retreat from the nineteenth to the seventeenth century. The generation that fought the War of Independence had adopted many of the ideas of the Enlightenment as well as the name and doctrines of the Whig revolutionaries of 1689; Patrick Henry had even invoked the ghost of the arch-Roundhead Cromwell against George III. Deism and freethinking seem to have been fashionable attitudes; but in the course of a few decades all that had changed. The aristocratic Southerners saw themselves as the spiritual if not lineal descendants of those gay and stout-hearted gentlemen who fought in the lost cause of Charles I. They also saw themselves as heirs to the chivalric tradition.

Like some other European institutions chivalry came over a seedling, but having struck root in the American soil, achieved a lush growth, though modified, sometimes grotesquely, by the rudeness of the American environment. . . . Of the characteristic ideas of chivalry, none came to a more exaggerated flowering in the South than that of personal honor. . . . As soon as the gentleman caste had established itself on property ownership and slave labor, this concept was invoked to set it apart from the commonality. The gentleman was surrounded with prerogatives. He could not be injured with impunity; his motives could not be impugned; and above all, his word could not be questioned. A highly touchy sense of personal pride was built on these premises, and its vindication often called for the duel. . . .

In some instances, particularly in the farther South, this touchiness about personal honor seems to have engendered an attitude of arrogant irascibility but it could also be reflected in candor and courtesy. W. E. Channing contrasted the generous confidence of the Virginians with the selfish prudence of his New England compatriots. The chivalric and aristocratic structure of the antebellum society derived, of course,

from the nature of the Southern economy. The much debated question of how many or how few of the Southern aristocrats were of noble lineage is, Weaver insisted, largely irrelevant, since the class-structure was not imported from England but was created here.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century the populace was effectively divided into a lower class of slaves and tenants, a middle class of yeomen, or small independent farmers, and an upper class of planters. The aristocracy of the Old South was small in number and it was found in restricted areas, but such is the nature of aristocracy that if it is genuine—and that means if it earns and receives respect—its relative number is of little importance. It will set the tone of society and those who aspire to rise in the world will seek to identify themselves with it.

As a political reality the aristocratic order—feudal in the sense that it contained the principles of “subordination without envy and superiority without fear”—was, of course, overthrown by the Civil War, but the aristocratic ideal was never dislodged from the Southern tradition, a fact, to which postbellum literature bears abundant testimony. But the chivalric heritage was a disadvantage, so Richard Weaver thought, in one important respect: its neglect of the life of the mind. This too is characteristic of all aristocratic societies.

The notion of following letters as a profession was quite as foreign to the Southern gentleman as it was to the English nobleman, and his position was, if anything, less favorable for it. His career was that of a man of the world; his education was devised to meet its demands, and if he developed some special skill at authorship, that was a matter for congratulation, but seldom was there a suggestion that he capitalize it by making it his means of support or his claim to recognition by society.

This is to say there was little or no place

in the antebellum society for the professional writer, or man of letters, as distinguished from the amateur or dilettante. The solitary exception that comes to mind is Edgar Allan Poe whose life was mostly one of poverty and misery and whose genius was first clearly recognized by the French. "The career of a gentleman is being a gentleman," an end in itself which does not depend on the possession of any particular skills or powers. The proper concerns of a gentleman, apart from the management of his estate, are arms, law, and public affairs. Thus the Old South, rich enough in political philosophers and publicists—Jefferson, Madison, Taylor, Calhoun, Fitzhugh—was singularly lacking in either imaginative writers or systematic thinkers.

The South spoke well on a certain level, but it did not make the indispensable conquest of the imagination. From the Bible and Aristotle it might have produced its *Summa Theologica*, but none measured up to the task, and there is no evidence that the performance would have been rewarded. It needed a Burke or a Hegel; it produced lawyers and journalists. . . . The average Southerner, pushed beyond the rather naïve assumptions with which he sanctions his world, becomes helpless and explodes in anger.

Neither the postbellum South nor the New South, certainly, has been lacking in imaginative writers, as this survey shows, but the need of a metaphysical rather than legalistic or sentimental vindication of Southern history has not been filled. Still, as Weaver was obliged to admit, metaphysics are not congenial to the Southern mind, which in its attitude toward the universe is pious rather than speculative. Southern religion has been characterized by an uncritical faith and the experience of conversion. It accepts nature for what it is and both the mysteries and tragedies of life as part of the providential design. It is the flight from nature and the impatience with mystery and the quest of this-worldly paradise, Weaver believed, that has led the modern world to its great cultural crisis. We are beginning to discover, he wrote,

that scientific advance and a flourishing technology are destructive of refinement and individuality and even of tradition by breaking down the possibility of communication between one generation and the next. What follows is not necessarily progress but may well be a retrogression to savagery. Had he lived but a few years longer he would have seen in the incendiary *émeutes* and campus insurrections only further evidence of that

"spoiled child" psychology which appears in all urban populations. This malady, described by Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses*, afflicts any people who have lived so long in an artificial environment that they have lost sense of the difficulty of things. Like the children of rich parents they have been pampered by the labor and self-denial of those who went before: they begin to think that luxuries, though unearned, are rightfully theirs. They fret when their wishes are not gratified; they look for scapegoats. . . .

and, as we know, find them readily in such conjurations as "the white power structure," "the Establishment," and "the military-industrial complex." By contrast "the backwoods Southern farmer does not feel as sorry for himself as the better heeled, better padded, and more expensively tutored Northern city cousin." Living nearer to nature and accepting it along with the persistence of tragedy, the farmer had acquired the first element of spirituality and provided "a first lesson for the poor bewildered modern who, amid the wreckage of systems, confesses an inability to understand the world."

But that was written twenty-five or more years ago. Now the South too is becoming industrialized and urbanized. The farmer perhaps has exchanged the austerities and autonomy of his backwoods for the comforts and securities of a unionized wage earner. And his children, exposed through the television and other mass media to the desires and discontents of the mass culture, may like the rest of us have acquired its neuroses.