As I Have Said Before

The Fugitives Poets in 1956: Allen Tate, left, Merrill Moore, Robert Penn Warren, standing, John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson.

by Samuel Hux (January 2022)

I quoted this poem several years ago here in *New English Review.*

Randall, My Son

Randall, my son, before you came just now
I saw the lean vine fingering at the latch,
And through the rain I heard the poplar bough
Thresh at the blinds it never used to touch,
And I was old and troubled overmuch,
And called in the deep night, but there was none
To comfort me or answer, Randall, my son.

But mount the stair and lay you down till morn.
The bed is made—the lamp is burning low.
Within the changeless room where you were born
I wait the changing day when you must go.

I am unreconciled to what I know,
And I am old with questions never done
That will not let me slumber, Randall, my son.

Randall, my son, I cannot hear the cries
That lure beyond familiar fields, or see
The glitter of the world that draws your eyes.
Cold is the mistress that beckons you from me.
I wish her sleek hunting might never come to be—
For in our woods where deer and fox still run
An old horn blows at daybreak, Randall, my son.

And tell me then, will you some day bequeath
To your own son not born or yet begotten,
The lustre of a sword that sticks in sheath,
A house that crumbles and a fence that's rotten?
Take, what I leave, your own land unforgotten;
Hear, what I hear, in a far chase new begun
An old horn's husky music, Randall, my son.

The poem was written at least 60-odd years ago, probably more, by Donald Davidson. I've read it a couple of dozen times, possibly more, and it moves me profoundly every time. Its form is breathtakingly beautiful, four seven-line stanzas, essentially iambic pentameter with an occasional spondaic foot and well-placed trochaics (as in "Randall"), each stanza graced with an ABABBCC rhyme scheme with the first C lines all rhyming with "son." Davidson was a craftsman who did not care to make his poetry sound gutsy and demotic like common speech; he does not slavishly complement the reader by implying that he or she too is a poet deep down. As beautiful as the form itself is the sentiment, a sense of the domestically inevitable touched with the innocently tragic. Sounds autobiographical, but isn't: Davidson had no son. Randall's literary relative is the protagonist of the old Border Ballad "Lord Randall," but his father is no relation to Lord Randall's mother. The father is as conservative as Davidson

himself. He has spent his life creating a traditional small world to pass on to his son, but he suspects and fears that a world of temptations out there will draw, is drawing, his heir away.

"Randall, My Son" is a small delicate masterpiece. But few will read it. Because only a few will own Davidson's *Poems, 1922-1961* published by University of Minnesota Press in 1966. They will not find it in an anthology unless an old and outdated one. No student in an English course will find it assigned, not given the disposition of English departments today. For Donald Davidson, 1893-1968, as excellent a poet and man of letters as he was, committed what is now the unforgiveable sin: *he was a segregationist*. (Apparently T.S. Eliot's "polite" Anti-Semitism and Ezra Pound's fascistic variety of the disease are not so problematic.)

A longtime Professor of English at Vanderbilt, he was a "Fugitive" poet along with John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Merrill Moore. . . and a principal author of the Southern Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand.* But unlike the others above he never moved away and never modified his "Stand." Ransom and Tate died the Burkean conservatives they always were, Warren moved leftward to respectable liberalism, and Moore kept to the practices of psychoanalyst and sonneteer. Moore eventually fell out of fame (unjustly I think) but any broad anthology of American poetry that does not include the other three is a literary disgrace. But Davidson? Well, that's a disgrace too. Would any respectable musicologist writing the history of music or editing selections fail to mention or accord notice to Richard Wagner? We know the answer to that.

Davidson was not simply a segregationist, as most of the Southern population was in his day; segregation was a part of his "Stand"—he was a prominent member of the Tennessee alliance with the White Citizen's Councils. And while he often complimented Blacks—or "the Negro" as he and practically

all Whites called them—for their own traditions, he could call them "amiable children of cannibals." But how many of his "censors" have knowledge of his rhetoric? How many have read *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*?—which in spite of the provocative title is not a neo-Confederate tract, but an argument for regionalist integrity. What his censors know is simply that *he was a committed segregationist who made no bones about it.*

Censors? I mean the editors of literary anthologies and the English Department professoriate from which they derive. I do not mean, for instance, the Black intellectuals and casuals applauding the "de-sculpturalization" of Robert E. Lee. Find any such who knows of Davidson's sins and I will eat his hat or her bonnet.

But it is a legitimate question how a man as intelligent as Davidson was (Read him! His prose is criminally brilliant, by which I mean smarter than the law should allow) could remain a committed segregationist. I know I could not have. Which last sentence is an introduction to a necessary memoir-digression to establish my "credentials" so to speak. As I've said before in other essays. . .

Although my earliest friend when I was three or four on my grandparents' farm was a Negro (as he was then) kid slightly my elder, whom I admired and adored, I grew up in a totally segregated North Carolina town where I had no social intercourse with Blacks and, as a matter of fact, thought not very much about them. They lived and schooled over there, "we" over here. I neither supported segregation nor decried it. It simply was a fact of life, the same way the Tar River which cut the town in half was a fact of nature. Only when I became a teenage soldier boy did I rub shoulders with Blacks. As I have narrated before, when basic training was over, I and two mates with brief furloughs set off for our home town and county: I, a farmer in his 20s, and a Black my age whom I had never known before the army. Somewhere late at night in South

Carolina we pulled into a truck stop to get coffee and burgers, walked into the diner and sat down at the counter. Now I quote from an earlier essay:

The counter-man leaned over toward me—I was closest to him—and said, "What the hell you boys want? "What do you mean?" I answered, "We want coffee and something to eat." "Boy, I can tell by the way you talk you aint no Yankee. You ought to know better than this." "What do you mean?" I repeated. "Boy, you can't be that stupid. You know goddamned well we don't serve niggers here!" Oh my god! Good lord! This was no time or place for bravery, no place to make a "statement." Indeed, we were not trying to make a statement. We quietly got up and walked to the car as quickly as possible, and drove away. We did not speak. . . because we did not know what to say. I remember nothing else about that journey.

Three Southerners of two races who had lived in a segregated society all our civilian lives. Yet after roughly four and a half months of integrated living we walked into a Carolina diner together as if it were normal behavior. There's a lot to be said about this, and I've said it before; but here I will cut to my conclusion. I have been told all my life that the racial attitudes that amount to racism and result in the institution of segregation are so deeply embedded they cannot be controlled, can only after lifetimes of time be modified to some livable level of social peace. My experience, which I offer this story as an example of, tells me the common knowledge is a lie. The attitudes and assumptions of a lifetime—or three lifetimes—could be forgotten after roughly 135 days, because rather than being so deeply buried in the psyche they were instead "bedded" so close beneath the surface as to make burial a joke. Meta-conclusion: racism is not an uncontrollable or at best barely-controllable psychological fact of human nature! It is a sociological disposition or habit which fades away. . . or is retained by

a conscious mental act: that is, *it is a choice!* Seen this way, it is all the more deplorable.

Why Davidson made the choice—that Penn Warren for instance did not—I cannot know. . . but can think about, as I shortly will. I do not judge Davidson's choice *forgivable*, which has to mean I find it *unforgivable,* but I do find it—*now*, not *back then*—what shall I call it (?), ignorable. . . yes, *ignorable*! I am not going to keep ancient tabs on every man or woman like some demi-god of wrath. I have enough wrath to go about present tense. Donald Davidson, like most of the Agrarians, was a traditionalist conservative if there ever was one: he despised the laissez-faire capitalism that putative conservatives adore, and despised the liberalism that wished to shape America into a unified whole. Let each region have its own traditional character, as the South did, as New England did. In the title essay of *Still Rebels, Still Yankees* (first published in 1938 before the book was published in 1957) Davidson treated a semi-fictionalized Vermont Yankee and a Georgia Rebel with equal respect. (In fact Davidson loved Vermont, teaching every summer at Middlebury College's Bread Loaf Conference; he even bought a summer home there.) Neither Yankee nor Rebel is polemically hectored about reforms, no suggestion—quite the opposite—that they should learn the standards of thought and behavior of the sophisticated mass metropolitan areas. Vermont should remain itself and Georgia itself. One might suspect (I do) that Davidson goes to such lengths praising the Vermont Yankee as a tactic in defense of the Georgia Rebel, as if to say "I don't object to Vermont's character; don't you object to Georgia's." For of course an integral part of the South's character was segregation, which Davidson barely mentions. It's not a morally satisfying argument, but it *is* a consistent one.

Davidson's title poem in *The Tall Men* is practically talismanic. The Tall Men are those who came over the

mountains to Tennessee, “Who talked with their rifles” and tamed the land. One thinks naturally of Daniel Boone and others, Davidson was proud of his ancestors—and why shouldn’t he have been? Even though they made “Bullets for words that said ‘Give way, Red Man. / You have lived long enough.’” Or instead of “even though” maybe “because they did.” Davidson was not writing for English professor types with Anglo-Saxon names publicly critical of their predecessors for taking the land from the Indians but privately glad they did. Davidson’s public position makes clear that he was a White Supremacist, but, unless a narrative poem in praise of one’s predecessors is racist (an impressively stupid assumption), Davidson’s *oeuvre* is not White Supremacist poetry. . . not any more than Wagner’s compositions are Anti-Semitic music. There’s no comparison with the way Pound’s Anti-Semitism invades his *Cantos.* Am I going to refuse to listen to Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* because of his noxious opinions? I’m going to *ignore* those opinions, just as my Jewish spouse will set them aside without forgiving them. And in similar fashion and spirit I am going to ignore Davidson’s defense of the segregation that is now irrelevant and return to his greatest poem, “Lee in the Mountains.”

Which poem I mention for tactical reasons. It is a blank verse dramatic monologue or soliloquy of Robert E. Lee, no longer Confederate General but President of Washington College, renamed of course *Washington and Lee* after his death. Lee corrects the students who call him “General.” He’s only an old man in a dark suit. You sense that he’s walking as he thinks about his disgraced father “Light Horse Harry,” about his soldiers whom he mourns, about the war of course, about his own semi-disgrace with the loss of his citizenship. What he does not think about is any justification for his career. Nowhere in the poem is there the slightest hint of any spoken or implicit Confederate propagandizing. This is a portrait in reflection of a mortally injured man trusting in a just God and the hope of

heaven.

There really should be a *statue* of Lee in the Mountains!

A minor but loaded digression: Before I retired from college teaching it was my announced policy that students who wandered out of the classroom before an intermission (widespread habit nowadays) did so at their peril, and I actively imperiled those who so sinned against the life of the mind. In the week or two devoted to *Oedipus the King* in a Great Books course I would show an excellent brief film. During the scene in which Oedipus is slowly and dramatically-excruciatingly discovering his identity, a student exits the classroom at that very moment. I am enraged but also shocked the student is a pretty young girl instead of a male thug. I am seeking here now an idea of a hopelessly insensitive shmuck irrespective of race and gender. (Notice my spelling of *sh*muck—not to be confused with German *der Sch*muck, *the "jewelry."* I'm not writing about jewels.)

How much sensitivity does it require to know that Robert E. Lee was a tragic figure? A soldier whose creative intelligence and bravery was proven in the Mexican War; an excellent man, in the estimation of Abe Lincoln, who desired him to be chief of Union forces before Lee chose to go with his beloved Virginia; who for respectable reasons of loyalty to region made the wrong choice with respect to nation. Does anyone seriously think that was an easy choice to make? Is it not clear that such a judgement was a tortuous one? Anyone who does not see that must have a superficial mind. As Hegel put it in his reflections on tragedy, the tragic hero is trapped not between good and evil but between two recognizable goods in conflict. The shmuck will tell me the choice was not between two goods, but between freedom and slavery. A simple view and simple minded.

When Lee chose Virginia he was not thinking "I'll go with slavery." He was thinking of that river, that hill, this

house, my kin and beloved, deceased and alive, the years that have made me, countless precious memories, the experiences that identify me as *Virginian. . . Virginia* one of *these* united states (plural) older and more intimate than *The* United States (singular). Just as when Lincoln responded to secession he was not thinking "I must end slavery." He was thinking of the preservation of the Union at whatever cost was necessary. These are the facts, whether one thinks them simple or complex.

The liberal who looks like me (German and Scots-Irish) will dismiss the previous couple of paragraphs. Thinking (so to speak) a-historically, he or she will insist that people back then (who looked like me) must really have thought quite naturally and obviously, just as he or she conceives alternatives now, in defense of or protest against *slavery* pure and simple, no matter what other *secondary* issues were involved. Hence Lincoln and Lee made choices straight off to abolish and to preserve slavery. Might I share my judgment about such manner of thinking? It betrays a truly amazing degree of *self-absorption. . .* that's what.

It is hard for me to contain my contempt for this figure. It is mitigated for the moment only when I think instead of the disgusting professors at Washington and Lee who want the name *Lee* removed from an ancient university.

Black intellectuals (with maybe a few exceptions) will dismiss those same paragraphs, for somewhat similar but not *exactly* similar reasons. They are offended by the notion that principals of the Civil War should be understood to have had issues other than slavery on their minds. . . since that's what's on *their* minds, because a Black intellectual, if alive back then, would likely have been a slave, so things naturally get very personal. So his or her position is easier to understand and even sympathize with. Put it another way: his or her self-absorption is more forgivable. But it is

self-absorption nonetheless!

I am perfectly aware that it could be said that I am asking for a hell of a lot when I *apparently* suggest that a Black intellectual should be able to sympathize with a Confederate general; but what's *apparent* here is deceiving. I'm not talking about sympathy at all. I'm thinking about *empathic* capabilities—which requires here another digression, if I am to make myself at all clear.

Personal experience and intellectual interests—not unrelated—have led me to essayistic reflections on *Wehrmacht* veterans of World War II, both a friend of mine much older than I and those I never met. Through a pure act of the imagination I can put myself in the position of my late friend Jaspar, never a Nazi but not brave enough, by his own admission, to risk saying No to induction and consequent service on the Russian front. Not being devoid of imagination, obviously, I can figure out what it must have been like to come of age in a militaristic totalitarian state not comparable to the U.S.A. in which I came of age. It is more of a task, but not impossible, to grasp Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, who unsuccessfully tried to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

Hold on! I can only pretend or hope to imagine having the courage to do something on that order. Pretense to high deeds is easy. But before that day in July 1944 Stauffenberg served the regime bravely in Poland, North Africa, and Russia, losing a hand and an eye in battle. While I find his attempt to kill Hitler glorious but beyond my serious imagining, I find his prior service well within my ability to grasp. A Bavarian Count and professional soldier, a warrior, he did what professionals of arms do while thinking it above politics, and he continued to do it even as his contempt for the *Fuehrer* and the Nazi regime grew. I can imagine that—and I could imagine it even had I not joined the army as a teen, totally unconcerned who the president was or which party held

power. It is only a matter, not of sympathy, but putting oneself in one's mind in the position of someone else. Empathy. And that's what an intellectual of whatever shade (racial or political) should do if one is to make historical judgments—and if one can't, one is an intellectual in claim only and an opinionated partisan in fact.

Why should it be so difficult for a Black critic-in-retrospect of the Confederacy to empathize at all with a Confederate? Why should self-absorption be so utterly compelling? I with no experience of being anything other than a guy who looks German or Scots-Irish am capable of standing in a Black's shoes—although evidently not capable of inhabiting a Black intellectual's mind. Why cannot he stand in a Confederate soldiers boots? To answer 'cause he's black strikes me as a dangerous thing to say. Indeed, it sounds racist to me. Although I'm sure that if I asserted that he has no empathic capacity when racial-ethnic differences are involved at all, I'm the one who would be charged with racism. Well. . . I don't think it's so much a matter of he or she *cannot* empathize but *will not:* that is, a polemical choice. Will not give in an inch; feels so good not to. And since I'm already living dangerously with these speculations I might as well have the guts to risk more danger. . . .

While a Professor of Philosophy I also, on loan, taught the occasional Literature course; especially when the English department was short of someone available to talk about Shakespeare I jumped at the chance. The students, usually two-thirds or more Black, seemed to enjoy my cranky opinions—about Shylock for instance, or especially maybe about Othello, whether Moor or African less important than "Other." I'd like to share some of the students' insights but that would lead us too far astray. Suffice it to say they were totally "into" the subject, whether the subject was racially loaded as in *The Merchant of Venice* or *The Tragedy of Othello* or free of social or political relevance as

in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* I remember one energetic discussion, although I don't recall which play, when a young Black woman, apparently unprovoked by any specific instance, pierced the classroom with the stiletto remark "Shakespeare is a genius," announced in a tone of unlimited joy.

The Black intellectual and white liberal cohorts, habitually pursuing statues and flags (about which later), would not feel comfortable in that classroom, even if only visitors. They are not truly as "intellectual" as my unsophisticated students experiencing the life of the mind. There would be nothing there for the visitors who are turned on only by protest. What my students were feeling would be foreign to them: intellectual joy.

The Self-Absorbed become Shmucks when they are incapable of the least degree of empathy with the tragic protagonist in literature or life. I don't invite either the Blacks or those who look like me to visit Davidson's "Lee in the Mountains," or should they do so to let me know. I have no capacity left to extend sympathy to minds so crippled and incapable of sympathetic or empathetic extension.

But it is one thing not to read a book—by Donald Davidson or anyone else. It is quite another thing—and I have said this before—to tear down a sculpture, a work of visual fine art, so that no one else can see it, those that might see in it what you cannot see in it because you think that what you see is all there is to see. For that is tantamount to burning a book!

I can distinguish between *this* statue and *that.* Why can't the shmuck? Unless its aesthetics are (is?) exquisite such that it gives pleasure, I have no investment of any kind in a statue of Jefferson Davis. A certain kind of distinction that history provides aside, the most distinguished thing about him was his lovely and brilliant wife Varina. I am not offended by the historical distinction because after all there was

indeed a Confederacy, and he was indeed its President, and the destruction of all evidence of those facts is akin to the Stalinist rewriting of history. And the notion that the preservation physically of that evidence is necessarily a celebration and retroactive endorsement of the Confederacy is only a figment of the shmuck's imagination. In any case, I am not willing to go to the barricades in defense of Jeff Davis's sculptural remembrance. He was only a second rate politician. His statue—which I have never seen, by the way—is not a testament to a brave soldier as Lee's is. . . or now *was*.

Nor will I go to the barricades for Nathan Bedford Forrest, although a brave soldier also, whom Shelby Foote, interviewed in Ken Burns' epic of the Civil War, called a military genius. My reason? The memory of his extraordinary bravery in battle is partially erased by his civilian profession, slave-dealer, and his post-war avocation, Ku-Klux-Klan enthusiast. Which does not mean I will help tear it down, for reasons already implicit.

And I might as well say something about the flag issue. The Confederate flag, which I've never owned, I've always thought more beautiful than the "Stars and Stripes"; but who can account for aesthetic taste? The "Stars and Bars" did *become* the banner of the CSA, but its tenure as such was brief. With the war over it *became* almost as many things as there were people with memories and school instructions. For "Neo-Confederates," those people who with the war lost "never gave up," the flag was the symbol of "The Lost Cause"—the cause lost, by the way, was the war itself, a romantic notion, not slavery itself: who the hell do the shmucks think wanted or were foolish enough to think it possible to re-install "the peculiar institution"?

For most Southerners the flag was simply a broad symbol of the South itself, an emblem of regional pride (which Donald Davidson wrote so much about). I just now used the

word *simply*—but that's misleading. The *pride* was in the South's differences: its conflicting natural beauties, from swamps to mountains to seashores and god knows what; its *rural* nature (mythically not compromised by the encroaching urban), which insured—so Jefferson proclaimed—the natural simplicity of its population not compromised by effete urban sophistication; in general "the Southern way of life" even if that meant racial social boundaries; and even the complicated pride in suffering and tragedy, as if to boast with an oddly superior irony, "We are the only Americans ever to have known defeat." "The Irony of Southern History" the great C. Vann Woodward called it.

And for many, maybe most, the flag meant simply—and this time I mean *simply*—our grandpas and grandmas we are enjoined never to forget. And I confess—I who have not resided in the South since I graduated from college—whenever I see the flag the first thing that comes to my mind is my father. . . who never had the Stars and Bars on his windshield, and who never so much as mentioned the Lost Cause as I can remember, and never uttered the word *Yankee,* and who—as I've said before—slapped me out of my chair when at ten I uttered the word *Nigger. . .* who was born on a dirt farm in North Carolina only 33 years after Lee's surrender.

Only for the liberals, Black and White, does the Confederate flag mean slavery.

It may suggest the size of my disgust if I confess an ugly thought that has crossed my mind more than once. Do these right-thinking people, who would and do cleanse the cultural environment of certain statues and banners, enjoy the pleasing sense of power that, famously, Joseph Goebbels felt when he set books afire? I think I have asked a merely rhetorical question.

Table of Contents

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