The Lasting South?
A Reconsideration After Fifty Years

Mark G. Malvasi

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the 1950s seem to many Americans a decade of affluence, security, optimism, and contentment set apart from the uncertain and discordant years that preceded and followed them, an interlude when life was simpler, easier, and happier. The fifties endure in popular memory and national mythology as a refuge from the hardships of the Great Depression and the Second World War as well as from the fiasco of Vietnam, the shame of Watergate, and the social revolutions of the 1960s and the 1970s. Confident of the innate superiority and inevitable triumph of their way of life, Americans during the Eisenhower Era could justly think of themselves as the masters of fate. History, it seemed, was on their side. The essays collected in The Lasting South offer an alternate vision.

At least since the emergence of the Tertiium Quids during Thomas Jefferson’s second administration, southern conservatives have expounded the most trenchant native critique of American politics, society, and culture. Writing 150 years after the Quids, the fourteen contributors to The Lasting South did their utmost to sustain that tradition of dissent. At the same time, they, like their forebears, reaffirmed the cherished principles and values that they believed modern Americans had discarded or betrayed. Their main emphasis, of course, was to clarify and preserve the identity of the South, a difficult undertaking at a time when growing numbers of Americans condemned the South as a bastion of racism and segregation and when some, such as the newspaper editor Harry Ashmore of Little Rock, Arkansas, pronounced An Epitaph for Dixie. In that book, published, like The Lasting South, in 1957, Ashmore disparaged as maudlin, pernicious, and antiquated a southern ethic that failed to meet the requirements of life in the twentieth century, whatever those may have been. But it was expressly the crisis of the modern world that the authors of The Lasting South wished to address in promulgating a defense of their homeland.

Modernity, wrote Louis D. Rubin Jr., was “the most deadly enemy” of the South. Among the ominous modern developments was the advent of an enervating conformity, for which “the persistent individuality of the South” furnished the one sure antidote (ix). In an egalitarian democracy such as the United States, Rubin and his colleagues noted, the attraction of conformity had become

Mark G. Malvasi is Professor of History at Randolph-Macon College. He is the author of The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson and, most recently, he first novel, Merigan.
nearly universal, both as a practical expedient and as a moral imperative. Conformity was not only necessary, it was also right. Success and even survival in modern America, Rubin argued, depended on the urge to conform and on the "unparalleled ability to adapt...to current opportunities and needs," liberated from "the restraining and hampering weight of custom" (3).

Tension between conformity and individualism was an important element in the political, social, and cultural history of the 1950s. Anticipating Rubin's conclusion, William H. Whyte Jr. declared in *The Organization Man*, a classic study of suburban middle-class attitudes, values, mores, and habits, that "adaptation has become more than a necessity; in a life in which everything changes, it has become almost a constant." (2)

In *The Lonely Crowd*, sociologists David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney explored the nature of the "other-directed" personality, which sought approval, identity, and meaning through constant adjustment to the demands, outlook, and inclinations of the group. The "other-directed person" aimed to correspond "not so much in the external details" of life, such as "clothes, curtains, [and] bank credit...as in the quality of his inner experience." (3) Although Vance Packard, author *The Status Seekers* (1959), assumed that many Americans detested "the growing conformity and sterility of their life," he also wondered "how to achieve a creative life in these conforming times." (4)

Under circumstances in which everyone tried to be like everyone else, in which the need to belong had superseded the quest for originality and independence, Southerners argued that fashion had replaced manners, morals, and customs as the guide to conduct, giving rise to an inarticulate, disaffected, and helpless class of "rootless urbanites" (40). No people, asserted Clifford Dowdey, "has ever been so lonely and none have sought so desperately to find identity in crowds" (32).

The vulgar rule of the masses, "the greying standardization of...so-called democracy," "the psychotic compulsion to sameness," the "vast, grey anonymity," as Dowdey put it, "was historically abhorrent to the Southerner," who instead embraced an aristocratic spirit that revered character, liberty, and honor. In an age of conformity, however, "any divergence is regarded as a cancer in the body politic" (40, 41, 44, 34). The modern individual, if such a term still applied, had thus become captive to prevailing opinion. The continual need to accommodate to, and acquiesce in, the will of the group, the urgent longing to appear normal and to fit in, had engendered in Americans a permanent immaturity that arrested the evolution of a genuine consciousness of self. Men remained perpetual adolescents, whose duty it was to do as they were told. Many Americans, so the writers of *The Lasting South* feared, were prepared to surrender their freedom in exchange for assurances of prosperity, well-being, and happiness. They wanted only to be cared for. This false, timid, and irresponsible choice had bred a tyranny far more subtle and comprehensive than that of the authoritarian regimes, which the modern democratic order was meant to replace. It was, after all, the Southerners reasoned, psychologically easier to resist a despotism intent to manipulate, persecute, and oppress than it was to resist a despotism, like that of the welfare state, imposed in the name of compassion, humanity, and benevolence.

The enduring problem, these southern thinkers discerned, was to restrain power without at the same time destroying freedom. By the 1950s, suggested Richard Weaver in "The South and the American Union," Americans had lost their distrust of power. Captivated by the uninterrupted success, the incomparable prosperity, and the extraordinary good fortune they had en-
joyed, most Americans, Weaver charged, placed their faith in limitless progress, assuming that their country was impervious to the misfortunes that had befallen other men. Embracing the legend of “American exceptionalism,” they resolved that the United States is somehow exempt from the past and present fate, as well as from many of the necessities, of other nations. Ours is a special creation, endowed with special immunities. As a kind of millennial [sic] state, it is not subject to the trials and divisions that have come upon others through time and history. History, it is commonly felt, consists of unpleasant things that happen to other people, and America bade good bye to the sorrows along with the vices of the Old World (46).

A Christian pessimism fused with the experience of defeat had, by contrast, instilled in most Southerners the melancholy wisdom that only the recognition of tragedy can bring. They knew that there was no avoiding the exigencies and vicissitudes of the human condition.

Proceeding from this fundamentally conservative view of mankind, Weaver insisted that modern Americans were deceiving themselves about human nature and human prospects, denying the essential tragedy of life for which reason had no answer. Their fallacy originated in the Enlightenment conception of the American as a new man who defied the limits of tradition and faith, nature and history. America had become an idea to be shaped and reshaped according to the mind and will. The effort to recover the original innocence of man, which seemed possible in an America isolated from the wages of sin and the ravages of time, negated the venerable belief in human evil, impotence, and tragedy. The redemption from history and the regeneration of humanity became the very ethos of America to which all Americans were obliged to give unconditional assent. Together these convictions took on the force of revealed truth. As a consequence, Weaver alleged, the dominant impetus of American thought had become utopian. In America, the idea of utopia, which for Thomas More was an unattainable “no place,” became confused with a community immanent in history, a prophetic intuition of the future to which Americans alone belonged as no other people ever has or can. The land of opportunity and possibility, Weaver confirmed, was always in the making, with Americans forever departing one paradise to enter another that was new and improved.

Weaver contrasted this “Faustian” impulse “to make things over in its own image” with the “Classical ideal of fixity and stability” that distinguished the South. “Faustian man,” he wrote, was “a restless striver, a yearner after the infinite, a hater of stasis [sic], a man who is unhappy unless he feels that he is making the world over” (51). During the twentieth century, the old lie that human beings could become as the gods and create a heaven on earth had grown in extent and peril, not only because modern men had at their disposal more powerful tools and more destructive weapons than had their predecessors, but also because modern men were less capable of prudence, judgment, and self-restraint. Assured that progress was inevitable, modern men, perhaps none more so than Americans, were impatient with obstacles of any sort. They exhibited what Weaver called “the spoiled-child psychology,” the conviction that there was nothing they could not know, nothing they could not do, nothing they could not have, and that they may obtain their heart’s desire through complaints, insolence, and threats. “The spoiled child,” Weaver elaborated, “has not been made to see the relationship between effort and reward. He wants things, but he regards payment as an imposition or as an expression of malice by those who withhold it. His solution […] is to abuse those who do not gratify him.”

To reverse these distort-
tions, Weaver commended the Southern world view, which extolled moderation and forbearance, acknowledging the limits of human power and the tragedy that ensued when they are breached.

Traditional Southerners may have preferred the inherited pattern of imperfection, but the disposition of modern Americans was that of “an army on the march,” preparing to attack, subdue, and vanquish in the name of progress and improvement (54). Defiantly unprogressive, the South was the exception. Southerners long assailed a doctrine of progress that sacrificed the charms of humane living to the rigors of efficient operation, knowing too well that attempts to harness nature had often degenerated into attempts to conquer nature. Throughout all facets of Southern life, natural constraints prevailed, impeding the most unruly and explosive aspects of the human personality. Hunters and fishermen, for example, never presumed to kill or catch more game than they and their families could eat. Any excess was wasted. It was incumbent upon all to conserve the environment for their good and for the use of future generations, not least because God had ordained men to be the stewards of His creation. The rural southerners who dwelled in harmony with the rhythms of the natural world were thus “zealous conservationists” who in time aspired “to repeal the law of progress” (114–15). When vanity replaced survival, lamented Robert D. Jacobs, the civilized men who set out “to feed their egos, not their stomachs” lost their piety. Armed with more precise, sophisticated, and monstrous weapons, they began to kill for “sport,” that is, for pleasure, and “the strings of fish, the kills of game, became larger to attest to the prowess of the hunter[...)]” (115, 113). The transfer of the forests, hills, rivers, and lakes to industrialists, lumber and mining companies, and real estate moguls logically followed. The desecration of the earth had begun with the pollution of the mind.

Despite the historic wastefulness of plantation agriculture, the conservation of nature has long been vital to the Southern conservative tradition. In the 1930s, the Agrarians condemned the brazen irreverence toward, and consequent defiance of, nature. By the 1950s, Southern conservative thinkers had come to appreciate, perhaps earlier than any other group of Americans, that human beings could not exploit nature with impunity. To do so was to endanger life itself. They anticipated what has since become self-evident: that the scientific and technological rearrangement of nature has drawn the world closer to death. Questioning the cult of progress, Southerners worried that, in subjugating nature, science and technology in the twentieth century had also effaced humanity. Eliminating human purposes from life, science and technology had moved closer to becoming the principal instruments of man’s annihilation.

The Southern respect for nature, like the Southern mistrust of progress, arose from the religious premise that creation was ultimately intractable and unfathomable and that, in any event, men could not place it fully under their dominion. Having acquired what James McBride Dabbs called a “sense of dependency”—a “sense of submission to the unpredictable”—Southerners contradicted the reassuring modern assumption that “nothing bad can happen” (79, 80, 120). They knew from hard experience that the worst could and frequently did happen, and that men could do little either to anticipate it or to prepare for it. Southerners appreciated their own disabilities and imperfections. Nevertheless, objected Walter Sullivan, “under pressure from advertising agencies and automobile salesmen, from stock brokers with optimistic analyses and charts and clergymen with a new and more progressive eschatology, we are seduced by the philoso-
tery that the future holds nothing for us to fear, that whatever can happen is bound to happen for the good” (120). Not all problems, though, had solutions. Among those that did, the solutions commonly occasioned new and unforeseen difficulties. Most problems, in essence, were never solved as much as, in one way or another, they simply ceased to matter.

That revelation came as no very great epiphany to most Southerners whose faith did not reside in the hope of earthly success or, as Sullivan expressed it, in “the...promise of a perfect tomorrow...of perpetual happiness and tranquility” (123-24,125). Even the rare victory did not alter the treacherous and sorrowful facts of life. Understanding that the kingdom was not of this world, Southern conservatives remained unpopular with their fellow countrymen, for they evinced the conviction that eternal truths endured and merited the respect of a people who were historically impatient, dissatisfied, restive, and truculent, convinced, as James J. Kilpatrick wrote, “that the grass must be greener somewhere else” (189).

During the 1950s, American conservatism was in retreat. In 1955, two years before the appearance of The Lasting South and at a time when few Americans were willing to designate themselves as “conservative,” Louis Hartz announced in The Liberal Tradition in America that liberalism was the only American political tradition, or at least the only political tradition of consequence. According to the optimistic fantasy that Hartz and other liberals celebrated, society was perfectible, original sin nonexistent, and men, through their own agency, capable of transforming the world. How odd, deviant, and frightful must have seemed those conservative Southerners who refused to abandon their belief in the depravity of man, the efficacy of grace, the divinity of Christ, and the reality of the Last Judgment.6

Notwithstanding the religious orientation of Southern conservative thought, the writers of The Lasting South did not forsake their secular commitments. In the political realm, they assailed a nationalism that demanded the consolidation of authority at the expense of individual freedoms, traditional rights, and local prerogatives. “The Confederacy was formed, and fought for its life,” admitted Clifford Dowdey, “in order to avoid becoming Americanized,” and the modern southerner, “like his Confederate ancestors...is most happy where least American” (44-45). Was it intellectually treasonous of Southerners to doubt the rectitude and virtue of the American way of life, especially during the 1950s when the United States stood as a fortress against communism? Was not America the most radiant beacon to shine forth in all the long, dark, painful history of the world? Southern conservatives did not think so. Even as they resisted communism and the degradation of humanity that it augured, Southern conservatives rebuked the American will to power that projected the image of millennial perfection onto the United States. History, they agreed, had compromised, if not wholly discredited, the transcendent meaning and the moral authority of America. The American was not the embodiment of innocence any more than America was the City of God.

It was in this historical and moral context that Southern conservatives in the 1950s interpreted the national quarrel over race relations. To be rudely candid, there was no defense for the segregation of black people in the South. Separate was indubitably not equal. All arguments to the contrary were false, ignoble, and unbeciting of the finest traditions of Southern tolerance and generosity. Yet, conservative opinion about race relations was far from unanimous. Some, such as Walter Sullivan, presumed that, for good or ill, Southern society would integrate
in time. Others went further. Ellington White equated the persecution of blacks with whites’ concern to safeguard their own prestige, security, and rights, an anxious and faint-hearted bourgeois morality foreign to, and unworthy of, the aristocratic spirit of the South. James McBridge Dabbs variously described segregation as a “principle of disassociation,” a “source...of spiritual disvalue,” and a “way of non-life” (77-78). Louis D. Rubin Jr. conceded the maltreatment blacks had suffered, and understood that their foremost grievance lay not in the denial of equal access and opportunity but rather, and more profoundly, in “the insult to their pride.” The source of blacks’ frustration, anger, and distress, Rubin continued, lay in “the hundred little things, mass humiliations, that are intended primarily to remind ‘Them’ that they are Inferior. It is the knowledge that in the eyes of the white man who governs their region, even the best and finest that their race produces is in essential things equated with the meanest and most wretched” (11). Francis Butler Simkins, on the contrary, professed that “faith in the Biblical heritage is a factor second only to White Supremacy as a means of conserving the ways of the South,” while James Kilpatrick wrote that “an overwhelming majority of the people in the South believe in the prudence and wisdom of essential race segregation within the Southern States” (84, 202). However regrettable these observations, Simkins and Kilpatrick spoke the truth.

Although differing about race relations, Southerners concurred that arrogance and rancor had prompted Northerners to disdain constitutional restraints and to effect integration by judicial fiat. Under the pretext of eliminating inequality and thereby rectifying injustice, the national government had extended the scope of its power, and by this revolutionary edict had reduced state governments to impotence. Henceforth, advised Southern conservatives, the sovereign in Washington, D.C., would oblige all to endorse abstract and remote national standards at the expense of local custom and regional diversity. As a result, government would no longer rest on the consent of the governed, and authority would no longer be subject to lawful controls. Americans, Kilpatrick resolved, had unwittingly exchanged “government by the people for government by judicial oligarchy,” a transaction that rendered all citizens mere vassals in service to the omnipotent state (198).

The burden of this oppression would fall as heavily on blacks as on whites, perhaps more so, for, as Kilpatrick and several of the other essayists conjectured, officials of the national government would encourage blacks to see themselves as a custodial people incapable of functioning without remedial assistance. They would not be free men; they would be dependents, slaves in all but name. Aiding blacks was the prime method whereby the national government, already grown “immense,” “unapproachable,” and “monolithic,” had enhanced its domination over the individual lives of the American people (204). The Southern conservative argument had merit and cannot be conveniently dismissed as an expression of racial animosity. As Southerners were quick to point out, the Constitution did not provide for universal equality, but guaranteed only a more limited equality before the law. The exercise of justice in the United States, therefore, did not require the achievement of complete social, political, or economic equality. But when blacks could not obtain equality before the law—when, in fact, the law itself conspired to prevent them from exerting the rights to which they, as citizens, were legally entitled—where were they to turn? The Southern conservative historian George C. Rogers Jr. ascertained the problem. Acknowledging that “we have affirmative ac-
tion because the South was too slow in ending segregation and race discrimination (and the South should be ready to accept these criticisms),” Rogers exposed a crucial weakness in the Southern conservative philosophy. During the 1950s, the decent and responsible conservatives of the South did nothing, or next to nothing, to end white supremacy. What could they have done? They championed the rights of local communities to decide such matters for themselves, and the members of those communities were implacably hostile to altering the racial orthodoxy of their region. This stubborn resistance again transformed the South into a battleground, with Congress, the Supreme Court, and federal troops intervening to pressure entrenched interests to make concessions.

It is among the great misfortunes of American history that the apology for slavery and segregation twice discredited the Southern conservative tradition. “In another fifty years,” predicted Robert Hazel, “there will be no South as we have known it” (179). His prophecy could not have been more accurate. The rising generation of Southerners for the most part knows nothing of leisure, hospitality, piety, good manners, the attachment to family and place, the philosophic habit of mind, the joy of contemplation, or the art of gracious living. Worse still, they are unfamiliar with the ideal of the gentleman, which requires a concern for others before the self and the sacrifice of happiness to duty. That the Southern conservative tradition was self-serving, that it faced the persistent temptation to misunderstand itself and become an ideology, may be taken for granted. Ambiguities and contradictions aside, the Southern conservative tradition, by a heroic act of mind, may yet be summoned against the distortions of modernity, and, in particular, against the alluring gnostic supposition, now so prevalent, that men can alter the nature of existence and transmute the substance of being.

At a time of rising national glory, confidence, and strength, the authors of The Lasting South challenged the American dogma of inexorable progress and unalloyed righteousness. They loathed the impersonal and irresponsible bureaucracies that had come to administer and regulate modern society. They warned of the reaction that an imperious and self-congratulatory foreign policy was sure to inspire among peoples around the world determined “to avoid Americanization” (44). They glimpsed the deterioration of American cities that has since led to urban squalor. They inveighed against a materialism that has produced a staggering consumer debt and has created the aura of impermanence that envelops all the things that credit can buy. They reproved the ardor for promiscuous growth that has despoiled not only the earth but also the mind, body, and spirit. They decried the moral and intellectual superficiality that Americans commonly mistook for innocence. They sought, finally, to break the spell that wealth and power had cast over the United States, reminding their compatriots, North and South, that the nature of man had long rendered barren all hope of establishing a heaven on earth, even in America.


**A Lesson in Hermeneutics**

In Kenya, vervet monkeys take the ground
Until a sentry gives a chattering bark,
Which in the simple vervet lexicon
Means *snake*, and connotes *evil, death and dark*.
Or else the sentry makes a guttural sound
That translates in our own more complex tongue
To *hawk* or *eagle* circling for prey,
And sends the monkeys scampering. Either way,
The monkeys must take action—jump or flee
Across the ground or to a sheltering tree.
Should one, instead, hearing a sentry speak,
Decide to deconstruct the fellow’s meaning
And prove all urgent chattering oblique,
A python’s fang or hawk’s cruel curving beak
Will punctuate the monkey’s idle preening,
Ending his dissertation in mid-squeak.

— Paul Lake