Andrew Lytle at *The Sewanee Review*

Atop the Cumberland Plateau at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, is the office of *The Sewanee Review*. Founded in 1892, the *Sewanee Review* (*SR*)has never missed an issue, distinguishing it as the oldest continuously published quarterly review in the United States. For its first half-century, the magazine existed as a general journal of the Humanities, featuring articles on literature, art, politics, and the South. In the early 1940s its focus became purely literary, and the *SR* now regularly publishes superb essays, literary criticism, fiction, poetry and, of course, reviews of current books. This shift in tone was facilitated expressly by the editors of the time. Indeed, a great deal of the magazine’s continued excellence has depended on its editors, without whom the *SR* would not have been able to solicit and select the excellent writers that have graced their pages during these past decades. For the last seventy-six years, the office of the *SR* has housed only five, with the most recent editor, George Core, beginning his run in 1973. Andrew Nelson Lytle, one of the South’s more distinguished (and underappreciated) men of letters, edited the *Sewanee Review* twice in his career, once in 1942 to 44 and then again from 1961 to 1973. During his tenure as editor, Lytle helped to resurrect the magazine from academic stagnation, financial straits and a dwindling readership while presenting some of the twentieth century’s finest critics, writers and poets.

Lytle’s career prior to his position was certainly not what one might expect from an editor. He attended Vanderbilt University in the early 1920’s, making connections with several members of the Agrarian movement, an assortment of influential professors and new writers collaborating under the banner of southern idealism. He left Vanderbilt in 1927 after studying literature and history to attend the Yale School of Drama. Lytle’s interests remained primarily southern, however, and in 1930 he contributed his first major essay, “The Hind Tit,” to the Agrarian symposium *I’ll Take My Stand*, which also included pieces written by Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom—Lytle’s friends and teachers from Vanderbilt. Tate became acquainted with Lytle through Ransom. They first met in New York City, and over time developed a strong, almost kindred relationship, often referring to each other as “brother.” Their relationship is carefully documented in *The Lytle-Tate Letters*, as edited by Thomas Daniel Young, which provides their selected correspondence from the 1920s through the late 1960s. After a short stint on the Broadway circuit, Lytle published his first book, *Bedford Forrest and his Critter Company*, a biography of the Confederate general, in 1931.

Throughout the early thirties, as throughout his career, Lytle maintained a relatively Agrarian outlook. His first published work of fiction, “Old Scratch in the Valley,” which appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* in 1932, is more distinctly a work of Agrarian sentimentalism than it is fiction, as Mark Lucas argues in *The Southern Vision of Andrew Lytle*: “No one would make great claims for the story as art….Point of view is clumsily handled; the content is self-consciously provincial in the manner of local-color writing; and there is an evasion at the climax” (52). Such essays as “The Backwoods Progression” and “The Small Farm Secures the State” follow the direction of Lytle’s earlier Agrarian writing. Lytle certainly recognized the weakness in this kind of writing when applied to literature, since he declared much later in career: “When a novel obviously makes an appeal other than its proper aesthetic one, you may be sure it has been written with the left hand” (Lytle, Forward 194).

The late thirties saw a noticeable shift in Lytle’s writing—his most famous short story, “Jericho, Jericho, Jericho,” was published by *The Southern Review* in 1936. While the piece loosely resembles “Old Scratch in the Valley” in design, it is devoid of any direct political attitude, replaced by a purely literary one. As Lucas notes, “ ‘Jericho, Jericho, Jericho,’ skillfully renders what is merely argued in ‘Old Scratch,” (53). He reasons that “Jericho, Jericho, Jericho” represents Lytle’s transition from southern Agrarianism to southern fiction. Lytle’s first novel, *The Long Night*, was released later that year. While its setting, dialogue and story were distinctly southern in style, Lytle successfully portrayed the South with a sole literary intent. Lytle continued to develop his literary career in the next few years, earning a Guggenheim fellowship in 1940 and publishing his second novel, *At The Moon’s Inn*, in late 1941. In an effort to support his family, including his first daughter, Pamela, Lytle accepted an invitation to teach at the Sewanee Military Academy later that year.

In early 1942, Alexander Guerry, the vice-chancellor at the University of the South (at Sewanee the vice-chancellor holds the authority of chancellor while the titular chancellor is the regional bishop of the Episcopalian Church) hired Lytle to teach history at the University level. In their conversations Guerry complained frequently to Lytle about then editor, W.S. Knickerbocker, hoping the *SR* could become as successful as the other university quarterlies of its day. Before the early 1940’s there would have been neither sense nor purpose in the *SR* assigning itself purely to literature—several quarterlies were already devoted to the subject, including *The Dial*, *Hound & Horn*, *The Symposium*, and, most notably, the *Southern Review*, edited by the Fugitive-Agrarians Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren at LSU from 1935-42. Despite their successes, all of these magazines eventually folded under serious financial strain, and wartime budget cuts. George Core notes that the *Southern Review* was “declared superfluous by the narrow-minded and autocratic general then running Louisiana State University” (Core Editorial History 72) being the last of these quarterlies to shut down in 1942. The implications of the collapse of the *Southern Review* were intimately discussed in correspondence between Lytle and Allen Tate. The pair would soon collaborate to manage the *SR* to unparalleled success at a time when other literary magazines were being discontinued across the nation owing to the financial constraints of the war. Lytle and Tate directed the magazine to new heights both ideologically and financially, and Lytle’s contribution stands as his significant contribution to the longstanding legacy of the *SR*.

With the *Southern Review* out of the picture, Lytle sensed that the time was ripe for Tate to lead the *SR* into a new era, inciting Tate in a letter on January 30, 1942, to “tell him [Guerry] that now is the time for the *Sewanee Review* to take the place of the *Southern Review*, and that you might take the Academy job until Knickerbocker's contract expired, when you would be made editor of that and do more or less what you have been doing at Princeton” (Young and Sarcone 181). Tate’s time a Princeton is notable, since he served as a poet-in-residence and helped found the university’s creative writing program. Lytle knew that Tate possessed both the drive and the ability to transform the *SR* from what Tate would call “a graveyard for second-rate professors” (Young and Sarcone 186) into a leading national literary review.

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