

Andrew Lytle at *The Sewanee Review*

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Abstract

Andrew Nelson Lytle, one of the twentieth century's more accomplished (though overlooked) men of letters, served many years as the editor of the nation's foremost and oldest continuously published literary magazine, *The Sewanee Review*. In his two terms as editor, Lytle played an extremely influential role in the magazine's history. During his first tenure he helped save the magazine from scholarly and financial abandonment at a time when other literary quarterlies across the nation were failing under the budget cuts of World War Two. During his second term, Lytle used *The Sewanee Review* as a vehicle for some of his best creative writing students, Flannery O'Connor, Leroy Leatherman and James Dickey. Lytle's accomplishments have now passed on, unnoticed by most but for a few small literary circles. Fortunately, his time at the SR did not go undocumented. The Sewanee Archives at the University of the South and the Andrew Nelson Lytle Papers at the Jean and Alexander Heard Library at Vanderbilt house hundreds of still **unpublished correspondence** between Lytle and his friends and students. A careful investigation and analysis of these documents reveal a deeper understanding of Lytle's personal relationships with several of the twentieth century's most notable writers and his editorial techniques and standards in his time at the SR. Without his tremendous contribution the magazine might not have reached its current prestige. Lytle's contribution to the magazine deserves an appropriate level of recognition.

Keywords: Andrew Lytle, *Sewanee Review*, Unpublished Correspondence

1. Body of paper

Atop the Cumberland Plateau at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, lies 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 art, literature, 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, serving since 1973. Andrew Nelson Lytle, one of the South's more distinguished (and unnoticed) men of letters, edited the *Sewanee Review* twice in his career, once in 1942 to 1944 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 and presented 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 Agrarian movement, an assortment of influential professors and new writers collaborating under the banner of southern idealism. Lytle's interests remained primarily southern after graduating, 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 they 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.

In early 1942, Alexander Guerry, the vice-chancellor at the University of the South hired Lytle to teach history. 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. Lytle and Tate would eventually combine forces to lead the magazine to new successes both ideologically and financially.

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” into a leading national literary review (Young and Sarcone 186). As early as 1936 Allen Tate, a fellow Agrarian, had formed his own opinions about the management of literary quarterlies and a program for their continued success. Tate outlines his argument in “The Function of the Critical Quarterly.” As Tate summarizes it, the “ideal task of the critical quarterly is not the give the public what it wants, or what it thinks it wants, but what—through the medium of its most intelligent members—it ought to have” (72).

Tate was also keenly aware of the opportunity Guerry held if he were willing to act. Guerry was also in need of a new editor at the *SR* after the psychological collapse of W.S. Knickerbocker. Guerry was simply unable to raise the money necessary to pay contributors as Tate stipulated in his aforementioned article. Tate refused Guerry’s offer. With his options running low, Lytle, under heavy pressure from Guerry, reluctantly agreed to fill the role of managing editor in addition to teaching history. As Core explains, Lytle was only managing editor because it was the custom at the time for the head of the English Department to also edit the magazine. Thus, while Tudor S. Long held the title of acting editor, Lytle actually fulfilled the role completely, beginning with the fall 1942 issue (Core, Editorial History 5). Meanwhile, Allen Tate was living only a few miles away from Lytle’s office working on a novel. Because of their proximity and personal relationship,” Tate decided, with Lytle’s concurrence, that the best thing he could do for himself and for the community of letters was to become an unusually active advisory editor” (Core, Remaking, 73).

Despite these lingering issues, the shift in quality between Knickerbocker’s last issue and those published by Lytle and Tate is tremendous. As Core notes, the first issue still contains traces of Knickerbocker’s presence in articles from his backlog, including one piece by Mrs. Knickerbocker. However, the pair chose to use as their leading article a piece on Shakespeare, which probably would have placed further back into the magazine. As Core explains, in the winter 1943 issue Lytle’s most significant change in the *SR*’s contents was revealed—fiction (Editorial History 7).

Tate strongly supported the addition of fiction. As he suggests in his essay, “good creative work is a criticism of the second rate; and the critical department ought to be run for the protection of that which in itself is the end of criticism” (Tate 64). The first story published, “The Enchanted Bull,” was written by Leroy Leatherman, a relative unknown then and now. Establishing a pattern that he would follow throughout his editorships, Lytle developed a strong and lasting professional relationship with Leatherman. The beginnings of their friendship appear to be most firmly grounded in Leatherman’s submission to the magazine. A series of letters between the two can be found in the Lytle Papers at Vanderbilt’s Andrew Nelson Lytle Collection in the Jean and Alexander Heard Library. The first of these from June 1943 from Leatherman to Lytle begins simply “Dear Sir,” and concludes by saying “Thank you for the kind words,” presumably early praise of Leatherman’s story on Lytle’s part (LP 6/15/1943). Leatherman himself remembered in another letter that “once you wrote me that *tone* was at the basis of my style; you didn’t know whether that was good or bad but I ought to be aware of it” (LP 5/12/1957). Paralleling one another in their writing, Lytle and Leatherman’s relationship grew and continued well beyond their early correspondence on Leatherman’s stories. Their relationship is also indicative of Lytle’s style as an editor, as he would continue to forge new literary relationships throughout his career.

Lytle’s accomplishment becomes even more remarkable when considering his strongest interest was always in his own writing. He was never fully committed to editing a magazine, particularly for eight issues over two years when he had expected to edit none. To Lytle’s relief, on October 13, 1943, the Regents of the university unanimously agreed to invite Allen Tate once again to edit the magazine (Janssens 279). This time Tate accepted the offer. He only held the editorship for only eight issues, but in his brief tenure he more than tripled the circulation of the *SR* and further cemented its critical program with a consistent core of critics. As Core argues, the *SR* would have neither survived nor been worth remembering without the substantial contributions from Tate and Lytle. He notes that “Lytle and Tate had not only saved the *Sewanee Review* but completely remade it....the new *Sewanee Review* became an incomparably greater force in the world at large and in the Republic of Letters by at once making and interpreting literary history” (Editorial History 9-10).

From 1946, when Tate resigned, to 1961 the editorship changed hands only once, from John Palmer to Monroe Spears. Palmer might well have held the position longer had he not been recalled to service by the U.S. Navy. Spears took over most effectively, assuring readers as Palmer had, that he would continue to maintain the high standards created by Tate in his few years.

In the late 1940's Lytle took up a position teaching creative writing with Paul Engle at the Iowa Writers' Workshop enterprise. Perhaps more than any of Lytle's former vocations, teaching fiction writing may have been his most successful, and it was certainly his most rewarding. Throughout Lytle's career, he held a tendency to serve as a mentor with fellow writers (as many members of the Agrarian circle did). During his time at Iowa, Lytle became acquainted with another young writer in one of his classes with whom he would develop and maintain a relationship throughout her life. Lytle explains his first impression of her work in *Southerners and Europeans*:

Years ago at Iowa City in a rather informal class meeting I read aloud a story by one of the students. I was told later that it was understood that I would know how to pronounce in good country idiom the word *chitling*, which appeared in the story. At once it was obvious that the author of the story was herself not only southern but exceptionally gifted. The idiom for her characters rang with all the truth of the real thing, but the real thing heightened. It resembled in tone and choice of words all the country speech I had ever heard, but I couldn't quite place it. And then I realized that she had done what any first-rate artist always does—she had made something more essential than life but resembling it. . . .

This, of course, was Flannery O' Connor (Literary Portraits 187).

While Lytle began to oversee O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, in 1948, his attention to O'Connor's work in its most formative stages not only aided her writing but also helped her to find a publisher. While her first published story, "The Geranium" appeared in a small magazine, *Accent*, her second, "The Train," found its way into the *SR*, then edited by Palmer.

O'Connor's introduction to Lytle and the *SR* also implied her introduction to Lytle's literary circle. With other Agrarians behind the helms of the major literary quarterlies, such as John Crowe Ransom at *The Kenyon Review*, Lytle had provided an outlet for O'Connor's tremendous talent. As Charlotte Beck explains in *The Fugitive Legacy: A Critical History*, "It would be difficult to exaggerate Lytle's role in O'Connor's literary career. Had she not become his protégé before sending her fiction to Ransom, she might have been another writer whose stories Ransom did not 'like quite enough' . . . [c]ognizant of her debt to these editors, O'Connor continued to send them her best efforts" (Beck 238). Four out of nine stories from her first collection, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, appeared in either the *Kenyon* or *SR*. Her strongest contributions to the magazine, however, would appear under Lytle's second editorship.

It is worth mentioning that Leatherman was also keenly aware of O'Connor's ability and Lytle's influence on her career. In another letter to Lytle, Leatherman expressed frustration over O'Connor's recent critical reception: "There is so much *besides* Catholicism in her work . . . [people] ought to read her" (LP 5/12/1957). It must be difficult to recall, and for members of the current generation even more difficult to imagine a time when Flannery O'Connor's work was not widely appreciated outside of certain literary circles such as Lytle's. In another letter Leatherman muses that "hers is a wise, wicked and gleaning eye looking straight out of a real humanity and that accounts, or goes toward . . . the balance . . . I hope you'll continue to exert pressure toward the comedy in her; who else quite does it?" (LP 4/11/1957). It is impossible to know whether or not Leatherman's words inspired Lytle to do so, but Leatherman's request stands as further testament to Lytle's ability as a mentor to O'Connor and by extension over Leatherman.

After O'Connor graduated from the Iowa, having accepted an invitation to the then fledgling artists' colony Yaddo, Lytle accepted another creative writing position in 1948, this time at the University of Florida, which he held until 1961. It was through his position as advisory editor to the *SR* under Spears, however, that Lytle became acquainted with yet another of his young charges, James Dickey. Dickey had early connections to the *SR*, which was the first major magazine to publish his poetry in 1947. Like so many others, Dickey quickly became another one of Lytle's vested interests, despite being focused on poetry, not fiction. The two began a correspondence shortly after Dickey had been awarded the *SR* fellowship and Lytle's influence immediately affected Dickey's life and literary career. Gordon Van Ness makes considerable noise over their relationship in *The One Voice of James Dickey*. Van Ness notes that Lytle served as Dickey's first extended correspondent who could offer strong direction of Dickey's literary voice and mind. "Moreover," Van Ness explains, "Lytle's erudition and literary reputation provided his protégé with what he had previously lacked—validation of his own self-worth" (138).

After their first meeting Lytle wrote convincingly to Dickey's father in an attempt to justify Dickey's literary ambitions: "He's going to make literary history, if he has luck" (Van Ness 139). Lytle's inclinations were proven correct within a decade, when Dickey won the National Book Award for his collection *Buckdancer's Choice* in 1965. Dickey's admiration for Lytle transcended a traditional friendship; Dickey may have viewed Lytle as something of a father figure or role model. Writing unabashedly to Lytle, Dickey stated that "the fact that we were once together for a few hours would suffice itself to justify my life, but for the fact that I may do something to bear out the trust and confidence you have in me" (Van Ness 217). Lytle was eventually able to win Dickey a post on the creative-writing faculty at Florida. He did not hold the professorship more that year, however, disgracefully leaving the college mired in scandal and disgrace after reading and coarsely explicating (supposedly) one of his more obscene poems, "The Father's Body," in a public reading. Dickey took a leave of absence from academia afterwards to work in advertising. Despite his imprudence, which was by no means limited to this single episode, his relationship with Lytle endured for the time being--and he was called upon when Lytle returned to the editorship of the *SR*.

At one point a relationship existed between Dickey and O'Connor, though it was likely minor in a broader significance. In a letter, reprinted in *Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being*, to Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor noted that "Last Sunday I was visited by a poet named James Dickey who is an admirer of Robert" (272). In a letter to Fitzgerald eleven years later Dickey recalls "talking to Flannery O'Connor about you" (Van Ness 453). In another letter to John Hawkes, O'Connor remarks that "I have a friend, James Dickey, a poet. . . . He described a passage in one of your [Hawkes's] books. . . in admiration" (Fitzgerald 292). While Dickey and O'Connor appear to be more directly connected through Fitzgerald and Hawkes, both of these men were mutual correspondents of Lytle's as well and all of these individuals would be published by Lytle in the *SR*. Lytle remains a common thread, linking his new students and old friends.

Lytle's time at Florida also proved to be one the most fruitful periods of his literary career. With the publication of his last novel, *The Velvet Horn*, in 1957, Lytle made his greatest contribution to the art of fiction. Lytle spent nearly eight years writing, relying heavily on Tate throughout the process for editorial advice and guidance. Lytle had published a section from the story, "What Quarter of the Night," later to be called "The Water Witch," in the *SR* in 1956. The book was also a National Book Award finalist and dedicated to John Crowe Ransom. In an effort to explain the story, which is a complex tale revolving around themes on the loss of innocence and the quest for spiritual wholeness, Lytle published "The Working Novelist and the Myth-Making Process" in the magazine *Daedalus* in 1959. Lytle's friends and students were impressed with his achievement. Flannery O'Connor remarked to John Hawkes, who would eventually publish an article on O'Connor for Lytle, that "I read *The Velvet Horn* and I was entirely taken with it" (Fitzgerald 350). With another correspondent a few weeks later she states that "[Hawkes] is very much taken with *The Velvet Horn*. With Andrew I have the sense always of a very brilliant artificiality, but *The Velvet Horn* was very readable for me. I usually can't read a book that long" (Fitzgerald 357). Leatherman also held Lytle's novel in the highest regard. After reading *The Velvet Horn*, Leatherman wrote to Lytle with urgency: "I really need to converse with you about all these points. About innocence, Paradise and the division of being" (Lytle Papers 5/12/1957), three of the main issues in Lytle's novel. Later in the same letter Leatherman criticizes Faulkner's new novel *The Town*, saying that "it is less and less poetry, farther and farther from *The Velvet Horn*." Despite the novel's critical success, it has been suggested that the complexity of the novel, both in style and content, typically precludes a universal public appeal or understanding. As with Leatherman's comparison of Lytle's prose to poetry, O'Connor noted in her letter to Hawkes, "I didn't follow all the intricacies of the symbolism but it had its effect without working it all out" (Fitzgerald 350-1). To recognize that even an accomplished artist like O'Connor, who used allegory throughout her fiction, was incapable of fully unraveling Lytle's symbolism is to explain the intricacy of his craft. While O'Connor was able still able to derive its symbolic meaning, the same might not be said for the casual reader, which no doubt hindered the commercial success of the novel.

In 1961 Lytle was invited to resume work at the *SR*, this time as editor in name and fact, replacing Spears. As Core reaffirms (Editorial History 17), fiction was Lytle's primary concern, as it had always been, and during his editorship he would publish an average of ten stories per year—Spears, by most immediate contrast, went through one year publishing only one story in its four issues. Despite this prejudice, Lytle did make equally serious efforts to publish verse and criticism of high quality. In the mid-1960's Lytle wrote an informal guide to editing at the *SR*, possibly fearing his own failing health, entitled "Some of the Steps Necessary in Publishing a Quarterly Literary Magazine." While much of the memo is focused on pure logistical problems—i.e. what to do with the hundreds of books sent by publishers to be reviewed, how best to copyedit the final proof of an issue, how to advertise effectively—Lytle clearly establishes his plan for an appropriate distribution of material. "1. Fiction—10-12 stories per year. 2. Essays— 10-12 per year, up to 14 some times. 3. Verse—the work of 25-30 poets" (Lytle, Steps 1). Lytle followed these guidelines, mostly, throughout his time at the *SR*.

While Lytle's first issue may have been backlogged with pieces selected by Spears, Lytle's issues from 1962 clearly illustrate his dedication to and dependence upon his former students. The summer issue also saw Lytle's first real editorial effort toward a cohesive issue come to fruition, led by O'Connor's novella "The Lame Shall Enter First," two critical pieces on O'Connor's work from Robert Fitzgerald and John Hawkes, and poetry and reviews from Dickey. Lytle's relationship with O'Connor is further revealed by their existing correspondence about the story. Lytle proposed the idea of an issue devoted to O'Connor that would feature her contribution and critical analysis of her fiction. Lytle pushed her, as in this letter: "After all, the *Sewanee Review* is the place for this to happen" (SA 9/2/1961). Lytle's determination to construct issues of this scope indicates his commitment to building upon the established critical program at the *SR*. O'Connor had already published three stories for the *SR* over the past ten years, and thus she herself was part of the established trend.

In 1963 Lytle solicited another story from O'Connor, telling her that her contribution would be essential: "I think it's important to get together, once a year, the best fiction I can. Too often magazines such as ours have turned it over to the poets" (SA 11/8/1963). Lytle's request further cements his clear preference for fiction throughout his editorial tenure. O'Connor did not disappoint him: "I have a story I'll send you. . . . I think it's a right good story" (SA 12/12/1963). The story, which would be published in the spring 1964 issue, turned out to be "Revelation," which Core dubbed not only the best of O'Connor's work but the finest work of fiction ever published in the *SR*. A great loss to Lytle and the literary community, O'Connor passed away before the story was published. Even her unfortunate death could not keep her name from continuing to appear the pages of the *SR*, however, with Lytle publishing six essays on her achievement during the next five years. As Core estimates, "With Flannery O'Connor—her fiction and the criticism of it—Lytle performed best as editor" (Editorial History18).

Leroy Leatherman presented a review in 1964, but it would also be his final contribution to the magazine. A letter from Leatherman lends some explanation to his sudden difficulty in writing: "I wrote the whole first draft of 'The Enchanted Bull' in a single afternoon. Now the words come one at a time, little dribbles of muddy water" (LP 5/12/1957). Lytle would continue to solicit Leatherman as a reviewer, once in 1968 with a mark of miscommunication between the two for several years: "Dear Leroy: Which circle of purgatory are you now inhabiting? . . . If it has postal service please let me know where you are. Would you have any time to do any reviewing for the summer issue?" (SA 10/8/1968). Lytle's commitment to Leatherman reveals a microcosm of Lytle's *modus operandi* at the *SR*—he had first established his relationship with Leatherman nearly three decades earlier and yet still viewed him as a necessary contributor to the magazine. Dickey's last appearance under Lytle came soon after Leatherman's, in 1965, with yet another defense letter for his harsh criticism. Lytle's struggle with cancer in the mid-sixties may have led Dickey to think himself the heir-apparent at the *SR*, writing to his wife, Maxine: "I have a feeling that I will be asked to edit the *Review*, but we can cross that bridge when we come to it" (Van Ness 395). Lytle's recovery and Dickey's renewed success on the national scene with *Buckdancer's Choice* and his immensely popular novel *Deliverance* (1970), of later Hollywood fame, ended such discussions.

Within five years of Lytle's first issue three of his most accomplished contributors and friends had either shifted their interests elsewhere or passed away. Even with their absence Lytle was by no means incapable of producing a magazine, relying upon the countless writers he had known and taught throughout his many years. If anything, Lytle was perhaps too reliant on his small circle of literary acquaintances in the general production of the magazine. Tate himself promoted the concept in his essay, noting that a strong core of regular contributors were vital in the development of a critical program. While the notion is theoretically sound and a necessity in practice, in reflecting on the history of the *SR*, one wonders if Lytle would have been able to succeed at all as an editor without being able to depend on his cultivated group of writers.

Lytle was still capable of finding young new authors and in 1965 published Cormac McCarthy's first short story, "The Dark Waters." While McCarthy never returned to the *SR*, it is still a notable starting point for his literary career and a reminder of Lytle's keen eye for promising talent.

Lytle's last personal contribution to the magazine, "The State of Letters in a Time of Disorder," bears witness to Lytle's own views on the necessity of art and his own hopes for the magazine's contributions when he became editor, stating in his introductory editorial that he would continue "the *Review's* vigilance for language and language's finest expression . . . literature" (SR 1961 V 69). Nearing the end of his tenure, Lytle still rose to the defense of the tenets laid out by Tate in 1936, arguing for the careful consideration of the quarterlies to showcase literature and criticism outside the constraints of mainstream magazines: "A poet of great reputation asked me not long ago if I didn't think literary quarterlies were out of fashion. . . . I told him I didn't think so. . . . the quarterlies' care for language and style and the protection of what is eternal in letters makes them a kind of supreme court of literary judgment" (State of Letters 3-4). Lytle's unwavering commitment to the very idea of the literary quarterly undoubtedly played some part in the magazine's continued success; *The Kenyon Review* had ceased publication only a few years earlier in 1969, a decade after Ransom retired from the post.

Whereas *Kenyon* relied solely on a great editor, the editors of the *SR* have been able to maintain the momentum of their predecessors. In this sense, Lytle may indeed have finished what he started, despite the fact that he had no desire for it in the first place. Had Lytle been truly unwilling to bear the burden of editing his first two volumes in the early 1940's, the *SR* might well have been discontinued and sunk deep into the well of history. Without Lytle's own effort in the task there would have been no magazine for Tate to vivify or for Lytle himself to edit. However coincidentally, Lytle managed to create a position that suited him quite well. While he tested many different fields as a writer throughout his life, working as a historian, essayist, critic, teacher, editor and novelist, he always held a clear sense of his role as an artist and a teacher— perhaps nowhere else was Lytle so capable of demonstrating the breadth of his ability in each of these roles than in his time at the *SR*. His ability to encourage talent in young writers like O'Connor and Dickey compounded by his ability to provide them with an immediate public and critical venue afforded him the opportunity to place the magazine on the forefront of the national literary scene. While his preference toward a tight-knit circle of standard contributors and the inclusion of his own writing certainly led to biases, the standardized quality of the work set a clear bar for which the *SR* could continue to strive. To this day the magazine has yet to miss an issue in its one hundred and sixteen years, the last thirty-five under the unprecedentedly tenured editor George Core since Lytle's retirement in 1973. While Core is due the most recent portion of praise in this regard, a large share of credit must surely rest with Lytle.

2. Abbreviations

SR	<i>Sewanee Review</i>
LP	Lytle Papers
SA	Sewanee Archives

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