CHARLES ROSE

Remembering Andrew Lytle

Andrew Nelson Lytle (December 26, 1902-December 12, 1995) was an American poet, novelist, dramatist, and professor of literature. He was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and early in his life planned to be an actor and playwright. He studied acting at Yale and performed on Broadway when he was in his 20s.

However, Lytle, unlike other Southerners intellectuals who left the South never to return, was brought home by the death of a kinsman, and he remained in the South, except for brief sojourns elsewhere, for the rest of his life.--from Wikipedia

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During my senior year at Vanderbilt University—that was in 1952—I went to see Donald Davidson after taking his creative writing course. Soft spoken in the classroom, in his office in Calhoun Hall always willing to converse with a student (professors entered his office with trepidation), he encouraged me to keep on writing. And it was Mr. Davidson who suggested I apply to the University of Florida. I could do a creative thesis, directed by Andrew Lytle. "Andrew may not follow all the rules but he can write like a fool," I recall Mr. Davidson saying, with a twinkle in his eyes, sunlight filtering through the venetian blinds. A few months later I got off a Greyhound Bus at Gainesville, groggy from riding all night.

I was nearly a thousand miles from my home town, Kokomo, Indiana. Gainesville was proving to be an unwelcome change from Nashville, and all that Vanderbilt meant to me. The English professors I'd been exposed to, unlike those at Vanderbilt, seemed aloof and excessively pedantic. The friends I'd made at Vanderbilt were elsewhere. Meeting Andrew Lytle in his office, I'd felt reassured, in touch with a common tradition. And he had been kind enough to ask me to his home.

The days went by slowly. Finally I was plodding down a sandy stretch of road departing from Sixth Avenue North, ending at a pale butternut brick ranch house. A Cadillac was parked in the carport. Andrew Lytle's wife, Edna, came to the door, ushered me through glass doors to the terrace out back, seated me in a wrought iron lawn chair. She was wearing a skirt and blouse, loafers, very casual. We sat out on the patio, Miss Edna, as we were to call her, smoking, sipping bourbon from a silver cup, and watched a man in his fifties vigorously swinging an ax, splitting firewood, his torso exposed, sweat running down his chest and back. Here was the author of "The Hind Tit" in *I'll Take My Stand,* of novels imbued with with violent action and trenchant detail, the man who directed Flannery O'Connor's thesis at the University of Iowa—here he was splitting firewood in Gainesville, Florida, oblivious to everything but hefting the ax, swinging through.

It wasn't long before Mr. Lytle propped the ax up against a shed, put his shirt back on, strode across the back yard to the patio, cordially greeted me. It was time for an afternoon bourbon and branch. He had Rebel Yell, a pretty good bourbon, he remarked, and reasonably priced. He left me with Miss Edna and soon reappeared with a silver cup for me, and his own silver cup, "the Lytle cup," as he was later to call it, for himself. Sitting next to me, he asked me how I happened to go to Vanderbilt, and I told him my father went there for one year, that my Uncle Kenneth taught violin at Ward Belmont. My father, I went on to say, had John Crowe Ransom for freshman English, that Mr. Ransom said of my father's writing, "you write well, Mr. Rose, but you don't know where to put the commas." Mr. Lytle smiled at that awkwardly delivered anecdote. We had a second drink, the afternoon went by. For the first time, he addressed me as *l'enfant terrible,* which he was to do many times. *L'enfant*, he would say. When it was time for me to leave, Mr. Lytle escorted me out the front door, chatting with me a few moments in the driveway, something he did with all of his visitors.

I walked down the sandy road, back to the bus stop on University Avenue, the shabby room, rented for twenty dollars

a month, the couple in the back bedroom, an impoverished mill worker and his wife, and picked up a book, once more alone, wishing I were back in Kokomo with my family, on the Vanderbilt campus where I felt at home.

In his preface to our literary publication, *Pursuit*, (what, I wonder now, were we pursuing?) Donald Davidson had linked us tyros to the Vanderbilt tradition, and more importantly, expressed what writing was all about: "Realization of the world, and along with it, in one indistinguishable act, realization of self—that is what it means to be a writer, or any true artist." Or so, at the time, I thought, without foreseeing the "self's" manifold contradictions, as they were to show themselves later on. "You must take the risk," Mr. Lytle used to say to me, "you must bring it up." And there was Conrad's Stein, in *Lord Jim*, counseling, "you must immerse yourself in the destructive element, and let the deep deep water bear you up." But Gainesville was no exotic Patuasan, and the water was far deeper than I foreseen.

I had ninety dollars a month to live on from a meager graduate assistantship. I rode the bus an ever lengthening University Avenue to Anderson Hall, attended stultifyingly boring seminars, missed classes, pecked out stories on a portable typewriter. I can't remember how many times I walked up the sandy road. I baby sat with the girls, Pamela, Katherine Anne, Lily Langdon, read them stories, absorbing a comforting quietude in Mr. Lytle's armchair. Over the Thanksgiving holidays I was to sit out in the hall of the rooming house, smoking cigarettes for the first time, rereading *War and Peace*, one of Mr. Lytle's more daunting assignments.

Gradually I felt less alone. For Mr. Lytle had taken others under his wing, encouraged them, opened up to them—Al Shumsky, a Hopwood Prize winner at the University of Michigan, Jerry Mason, an undergraduate, quiet but purposeful, Smith Kirkpatrick, a former Navy flyer, after serving in the Merchant Marine. I felt like we were an enclave in a foreign country, subtropical, hedonistic mid-century Florida.

Mr. Lytle had begun his latest and most complex novel, *The Velvet Horn*. Up at four AM, he had been working in his study on the other side of the carport. "I got one line today," he would tell us, ensconced in his armchair by the fireplace, cradling his goblet of bourbon and branch. Other times he'd say, "It just won't come, boys." (Were we boys? I think not.) He had spent most of the morning reading Eric Neumann's *The Origin and Function of Consciousness*. We gathered around the fireplace, the living room's glass doors infused with pale November light. Miss Edna would come in from time to time, most likely picking up a reference to the great mother, to the *pharmakos*, the sacrificial victim, to the hero's night sea journey. Or he might be tossing a salad in the covered patio off the living room "—this is a ceremonial part of having lunch, often with guests, the Lytle cup close at hand, expatiating on whatever came to mind, his childhood in north Alabama, Nathan Bedford Forrest's victory at Brice's Crossroads, D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—Lawrence has it wrong. He sees the gamekeeper as virile, but he should have asked himself, how did the master get to be the master?" He would talk about his acting days in New York. He'd met an actor who'd become a movie star, he said once, in an offhand way, Humphrey Bogart. He'd relate anecdotes concerning Allen Tate, Hart Crane, Katherine Anne Porter. He said he had taken up smoking again. He would quit, find abstinence tedious, start in again.

There were the forays to Henry's across the Alachua county line for whisky, usually in Smith Kirkpatrick's Chevrolet. We'd have a few drinks in paper cups, Al Shumsky, Jerry Mason, "Kirk," myself, and in a floppy straw hat, a sport shirt, Mr. Lytle would talk country with the proprietor, the actor in him coming out, the writer adroitly hidden. Or he might be talking about Native Americans, for whom he had an abiding respect. Long before it became fashionable, he was saying we broke every treaty we made with them. He would describe suspending a youth over a slow fire, forbidding braves on the warpath to urinate, burning a captive at the stake. "It was a test of manhood," he'd say. I can visualize him in the classroom or seminar room wearing a Brooks Brothers sports jacket or a

navy blue blazer, khaki trousers. In the middle of talking about a point of view he would divagate from literary matters to expound on what once held sway in Western Europe, namely Christendom, the Anglo-Saxon God's wealth as opposed to the insidiously democratic commonwealth, for Mr. Lytle, a high point of western civilization, preserved in the pre-Civil War South. Nobility, clergy, peasantry, each knowing its place in the divine dispensation. The code duello, for ensuring manners and settling disputes. Once he spoke of an encounter he had had with a liberal sociologist. "If we were living in the twelfth century, I'd be in a monastery and you'd be dead." We listened, waited for him to read one of our stories, or incisively comment on technique. I'll never forget Mr. Lytle enlarging on the opening to Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" "None of them knew the color of the sky. But all of them knew the color of the sea."

He greatly admired Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*, set in medieval Norway (his last book, *Kristin: A Reading*, was published in 1992, three years before his death). Although the novel remains cloudy for me, I do remember how well Undset rendered what he termed the enveloping action, what is there at the beginning of a novel or play and remains at the end, for instance, Flaubert's Yonville, broadly speaking bourgeois France, or Tolstoy's mother Russia, after the action has run its course. The term comes from Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction*, refined and elaborated on by Andrew Lytle in critical essays on Flaubert, Faulkner, Caroline Gordon, Malcolm Lowry, and James Joyce. The other side of the enveloping action involves the play of archetypes, the hero, the terrible father, the maiden/witch, the pharmakos or sacrificial victim—drawn from Carl Jung, Eric Neumann, and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Some of these archetypes informed my own writing. I continue to believe they recur, as Jung maintains, in dreams, myths, and religions.

He used to tell us he was a slow writer. Certainly his books didn't spin out one after the other. Perhaps this was due to his appetite for life—he was to comment on this on occasion. Or did his ongoing vision need to gestate, be informed by age and

experience? The free and easy storytelling of *Bedford Forrest and his Critter Company*, and his first novel, *The Long Night*, gave way to the archetypal resonance of *The Velvet Horn*. In his memoir, *A Wake for the Living*, written late in life, he returns to his past, his family.

His book of criticism, The Hero with the Private Parts, centering on the archetypes fermenting within the text, continues to hold significance. Unlike most commentators, he saw Emma Bovary as admirable. Her religious longing, though misdirected and unrealized, stands out from the deadening bourgeois pettiness incarnate in the pharmacist, Homais. The essay on Faulkner's A Fable delineates Faulkner's mythic substructure, which, in various manifestations, we see in As I Lay Dying, The Sound and the Fury, Light in August. Like Quentin Compson or Darl in As I Lay Dying, the corporal in A Fable is a victim, sacrificed to perpetuate the nightmare of war. Here Faulkner's reach was beyond his grasp, for his rendition of the action was vitiated by pervasive allegory. There are also fine essays on Go Down Moses and The Unvanquished, on Malcolm Lowry's Under the Volcano.

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In telling a story you go forward, then back. Ford Madox Ford employs this method in his memoirs. So I will leap forward to the summer of 1992, near the end of my teaching career at Auburn University. In the intervening years I had read and taught and, when I had time and impetus, written and published short fiction. Mr. Lytle had left The University of Florida in 1961. He had become a professor at The University of the South and editor of *The Sewanee Review*. From time to time he gave a lecture or reading at Auburn University, and we would chat over drinks afterward, amid much conviviality.

In the summer of 1992 I attended the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Mr. Lytle was living in nearby Monteagle. Toward the end of ten days of intensive literary exposure I ventured to call his number and ask if I could come visit him. He remembered me, said that would be fine.

Early in the evening, on a Thursday, I believe, I drove into Monteagle, passing motels, convenience stores, countrified restaurants serving plate lunches, barbecued pork, collard greens, displaying all sorts of touristy items, quilts, baskets of walnuts, wicker chairs, droll ashtrays. I took a road to my left to the Monteagle Sunday School Assembly. Here Ford Madox Ford and his companion Baila, had visited the Tates; here Robert Lowell had camped out on the lawn in front of their cabin. Monteagle had become a gated community. I had to give my name at a kind of a checkpoint to a youth who regarded my second hand Honda as if it belonged in a junkyard, not here. Admitted, I drove on, passing various manifestations of genteel wealth—rustic homes, tennis courts. The road wounding upward, at last I reached the cabin. I got out of the car, moved to the porch, found the front door. From the other side of the cabin I heard voices. I wielded a heavy knocker. A middle aged, mild mannered man answered the door, Tam Carlson, a professor at Sewanee. He told me he had been looking after Mr. Lytle, now in his early nineties. And he had been to Auburn with Mr. Lytle years ago, gotten to know members of our congenial English Department. "You didn't know what you had," I remembered him saying.

Tam escorted me through the cabin. A photograph of Nathan Bedford Forrest hung on the wall by the front hall bookcase. The Hessian firedogs I had seen in the Lytles' home in Gainesville were stationed on either side of the fireplace. Coming out onto a sunlit porch, I was warmly greeted by my former mentor. He was wearing a floppy straw hat, a sports shirt hanging over his belt line. He looked wizened, but by no means decrepit. I remember him saying he had stocked a good bourbon, at a reasonable price. He got up to get me a drink, walked inside, clearly knowing where he was going and why. He came back with a familiar silver cup, and with a mannerly nod, handed it to me.

A Sewanee student, youthful and prepossessing, and a young woman doing an interview for the student newspaper were also sitting out on the porch. Twilight hazed into dusk as the conversation meandered along. We had a second round of

drinks. Mr. Lytle seemed attentive, yet I felt he was somewhere else, in the past, his own and the South's. The Civil War came up. Somehow we got around to Jay Gould, one of the robber barons. All of a sudden Mr. Lytle became his old, buoyant self as he excoriated Jay Gould, how Gould had crossed the Hudson River to New Jersey to escape prosecution after looting the New York treasury. Apropos Jay Gould's pusillanimity, he quoted Gould with gusto, "Nothing is lost save honor." Or did he say this another time, much earlier, in Gainesville? What I do remember is the motion, the vigor, the sweep of his left hand, ice rattling in his silver goblet.

Soon after, it was time for me to leave. We made our way to the steps off the porch. In the thickening darkness Mr. Lytle seemed wraithlike. His voice became wistful, for he was remembering a day in his childhood, imparting its poignancy to us. His parents had taken him to the circus. He had gotten lost, had become terrified at his abandonment.

There was a susurrus in the trees. Then I heard his voice for the last time. "Life is sad," he said quietly. He turned and walked along the porch. He would enter the cabin, resume his way of life, burdened by many years, yet still himself, indominable. I would drive back to Sewanee, out of one time, into another.

Charles Rose received an Alabama State Council on the Arts Fellowship for 2004-05 in literature/fiction. NewSouth Books recently published his memoir, In the Midst of Life: A Hospice Volunteer's Story. He has published short stories in numerous reviews, including *The Sewanee Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Willow Springs*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *Blackbird*, and *Shenandoah*. One of his stories appeared in *Craft and Vision: The Best Fiction from The Sewanee Review* (edited by Andrew Lytle). He retired from teaching at Auburn University in 1994.