

Thomas H. Landess

Andrew Lytle, RIP

When Andrew Lytle died this past December, he was almost 93 years old. He had lived long enough to witness America become the nation he had warned against as a young man—a society driven by the engines of pride and greed. Principally a man of letters, he was also a conservative political philosopher, a teacher of famous pupils, and one of the most entertaining speakers and storytellers of our time. The loss of Lytle did more than that of most to remind us that everyone is ultimately irreplaceable, that each of us is unique and infinitely valuable. The difference between Lytle and the rest of us is that his value was so obvious.

First of all, he was a distinguished writer of fiction, one of the most skilled and sophisticated practitioners of his craft in an age when good novelists abounded. Each of his works is substantially different from the others, and each will be read a hundred years from now for its artistry as well as for its enduring rendition of virtue and frailty. *The Long Night*, has been called “the best Civil War novel ever written,” and *The Velvet Horn*, also set in earlier times, is an innovative masterpiece, grimly realistic, yet transcendent in its depiction of the timeless human family.

Lytle also rendered an invaluable service to the community of letters as longtime editor of the *Sewanee Review*, which, dur-

ing his tenure, was widely regarded as the most important literary quarterly in the English-speaking world. He not only published the works of established poets and novelists, but also gave talented newcomers their first exposure to discerning critics—a gamble for some editors, but not for Lytle, who knew the real thing when he saw it.

As a teacher of literary technique, he was unsurpassed. He taught at the University of Iowa and the University of the South, and founded a famous writing program at the University of Florida. Over the years, his students included Flannery O’Connor, Madison Jones, and James Dickey.

In reporting his death, the press largely ignored these literary achievements and emphasized instead his role in the “Agrarian movement” of the 1930s, which produced two volumes of highly controversial essays—*I’ll Take My Stand* and *Who Owns America?*—and scandalized a nation hooked on the idea of progress. Lytle was the last living member of the original twelve Agrarians, and one of the few who, while broadening his outlook, remained faithful to the spirit of the movement. As a consequence, a number of his obituaries were patronizing and inaccurate, since few people today know

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what the Agrarians believed and said.

Such has been the case since the twelve original members published *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930. Rather than take the volume seriously, its critics dismissed it with laughter and contempt. The Agrarians were seen as latter-day Luddites who rejected the flush toilet in favor of the outhouse. Their cry was "back to the soil" at a time when farming was increasingly unprofitable. They were academics who had never hoed a bean field. They were aristocratic poseurs. They were in love with the insubstantial illusion of the Old South, with its images of vast plantations and happy-go-lucky, banjo-plunking slaves. They were utopians, myth makers, Neo-Confederates, apostles of moonshine. At best, they were hilariously loony. At worst, they stood in the way of Progress, twentieth-century America's strapping, strident god.

It became increasingly clear that the literati who made such charges had never read *I'll Take My Stand*, but attacked instead a strawman of their own creation. In the first place, with one or two exceptions, the contributors didn't view the Old South with unmitigated admiration. Their model was the rural South *circa* 1930, a society based on the family farm. Such a society was neither utopian nor mythic. It existed—and not just in the South but also in other regions of the country, as the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* had carefully demonstrated.

Far from being aristocratic, the Agrarians specifically argued that the South had never produced an "aristocracy" in any meaningful sense, a term they understood far better than their detractors. Lytle's essay for the volume, "The Hind Tit," is particularly instructive, since it focuses on hard-scrabble farmers whose income was meager but whose life was rich in basic virtues and in simple pleasures. It is these people, rather than kindly Ol' Massa, that the Agrarians

believed in and defended. (In this regard, only Stark Young's atypical essay played into the hands of the Agrarian's detractors.)

As for their Luddite tendencies, the Agrarians didn't want to return to anything, nor did they oppose industrialization *per se*. (As a matter of fact, this symposium clearly advocates some new industry as a necessary complement to farming.) They simply wanted to preserve the then current balance between agriculture and industry, rather



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than to encourage what they regarded as an ideological commitment to urbanization.

Ironically, it was the New South critics of the Agrarians who were the utopians, the imbibers of moonshine. It was they who longed for a society not yet in existence, an idealized world in a perpetual state of becoming. (Indeed, the New South hasn't arrived yet, as far as its prophets are concerned. After all, there's still Mississippi.) On the other hand, every awful thing the Agrarians predicted of industrialized

America has come to pass—and their critics have largely been silenced.

As for being Neo-Confederate, in *I'll Take My Stand*, the contributors not only recognized the existence of similar cultures in other regions, but also considered the possibility of uniting with like-minded people in a national Agrarian movement. No such movement developed, in part because critics of the Agrarians, ignorant and opinionated, refused to read the book.

Warren, Ransom, and Tate would distance themselves from their Agrarian pronouncements, move North, teach in the best universities (Yale, Kenyon, Princeton), and watch their literary careers prosper. Lytle would remain close to home and continue to hold a conservative view of society and culture, one that broadened with the years and finally became quintessentially Christian. Once he began to see history in terms of its relationship to eternity, he transcended his Agrarian viewpoint without in the least abandoning it. The South and other traditional pockets of culture became for him the remnants not merely of Western civilization, but of a larger and more inclusive Christendom.

As sworn enemy of modernism, Lytle came to believe that mankind had fallen twice, once in the primal state and a second time in history, with the rise of modern materialism and the advent of the secular state. It is this second fall, he believed, that had brought about the disintegration of the modern world and the consequent problems in twentieth-century American society.

These ideas are more Christian than Southern—and Lytle's discussion of them in *From Eden to Babylon*—a book of political essays published when he was in his eighties—is remarkably persuasive, provided one accepts the premise that God exists and that submission to His Will should

be the ultimate good of any society. Those who believe they understand the nature of a Christian polity are deluding themselves if they haven't read Lytle on the subject.

Lytle's last book, *Kristin*, a work of literary criticism, was published when he was in his ninetieth year, and reminded his many readers that he was also one of the most original interpreters of literature—a critic whose insights reintroduced modern audiences to such classics as *Madame Bovary* and *War and Peace*, as well as to the more contemporary works of Conrad, Joyce, and Faulkner. Lytle believed that literature was the truest mirror of reality, truer than what the cluttered eye sees in its random wanderings. "Life," he once said, "is melodrama. Only art is real."

Yet in the final summation, those who knew him best value most the life he led. They miss the man himself, the charm and good humor he brought to every gathering, whether in his own log cabin at Monteagle or at Piety Hill or in living rooms of friends around the country, where people sat and listened to his wonderful stories and brilliant repartee. Wherever he was, people were having a good time.

Despite his dark view of the modern world (and a life punctuated with personal tragedy), he laughed more than others, enjoyed the company of an ever-widening circle of friends, and mocked time as the shadows grew longer. Those who attended one ISI seminar in Dallas, will remember Lytle at the age of seventy teaching a Tennessee folk dance to a group of students, all of whom collapsed in exhaustion while he continued dancing well into the morning hours. Indeed, it is difficult for his many friends to believe that the dance has finally ended. But, as he himself would remind us, he now lives in eternity, where the dancing goes on forever.