A Personal Reminiscence

Literary Images, Values, and Mushrooms



Professor Lytle enjoys the company of well-wishers Dr. Francis G. Middleton, C'62, of Charleston, South Carolina, and Dale Richardson, chairman of the English department.

Andrew Lytle Party Was a Literary Event

The occasion was a literary event more stirring than Sewanee has experienced in many years. Friends and acquaintances gathered on the Mountain December 3 to surprise Andrew Lytle with a birthday party—a celebration of the author's eightieth.

In so doing they celebrated as well a southern literary heritage that has been significantly influenced by the fiction and criticism of Professor Lytle. His considerable influence on generations of students at Sewanee and elsewhere was also recalled.

Tributes by Cleanth Brooks and Lewis P. Simpson were presented. Walter Sullivan contributed a personal remembrance. A toast from Robert Penn Warren was read by Brainard Cheney; Donald Davie read his poem "The University of the South" (dedicated to Mr. Ly-

in part: "I salute Andrew in all his roles, as a literary artist, a distinguished editor and teacher, a historian of the past and of his own time, and a solid churchman. Yet, bundle all of these roles together and you still do not have Andrew. You have not captured the essential quality of character and personality that renders him a treasure and delight to his friends. Andrew Lytle is inimitable, a true original."

Simpson's tribute ended: "The man who possesses the use of letters is in a more important sense possessed by the use of letters, and in a still more important sense is possessed by the mystery of the use of letters. Andrew Lytle knows this. In him the man of letters, who in his greater function is a literary artist and in his lesser function is a literary critic has not disappeared

by Walter Sullivan

In 1942 I was a sophomore at Vanderbilt, enrolled in advanced composition under Donald Davidson. This was a pivotal year for me. It was the last year I would spend as a civilian until World War II was over. And it was the year of my introduction into the serious study of literature. I had read books when I was coming up, but not enough good ones, and those with not much understanding. I had listened to Eddie Mims lecture on poetry during my freshman year. But even so I came into Mr. Davidson's class innocent of any understanding of literature in general and of fiction in particular. Mr. Davidson set about to remedy that.

He assigned a text called Contemporary Southern Prose, which contained essays and serious book reviews, all of which I read when I was told to do so. Best of all was a collection of stories which included "Jericho, Jericho, Jericho." I remember the first time I read that story; the chair I was sitting in and how the light fell on the page and, most of all, how I was transported from my own life into the life of a dying old lady. "She opened her eyes." That is the first sentence in Andrew's story, and I would like to tell you that I recognized then the wonder of its simplicity, the manner in which it immediately engages the reader with the narrative. But the truth is that it was only after I had studied under Andrew, and heard him explain, for example, the virtues of the opening sentences of "The Open Boat," that I knew enough properly to appreciate his own accomplishment. Be that as it may, when I had finished my first reading of "Jericho," I knew what I had only suspected before: I wanted to spend my life reading literature and talking about literature and writing it myself, if I could. I do not intend to say that Andrew is solely responsible for my misspent life. There is blame enough to go around, but he must take some of

at literary study were interrupted. I went into the Marine Corps, and I did not encounter Andrew's work again until the war was over and I was stationed at Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C., waiting to be discharged. Somebody who had more enterprise than I found his way to the post library—I never did discover where it was—and brought back to the bachelor officers' quarters a copy of The Long Night. I stole the book, of course, and still have it. It was stamped Post Library front and back; it was weakened from much handling, and many of its previous readers had left critical comments on the fly leaf: "Good" and "Very good" and "Excellent." However decrepit the physical book was, the book, the real book, was fully intact: it was Andrew again, weaving his spell, and it helped bring me from the world of the military back to that other world into which Andrew had helped lure me in the first place.

I first met Andrew in 1947 or 48 under dour circumstances. He and I were at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Housing was poor, the climate was bad, the people seemed alien, and I was not one of his best students. I had not been married long, and when I went to Andrew's office to discuss one of my manuscripts, he told me that it was an old Jewish custom for men to take a year off after they were married this on the theory that they would not be much good for anything until they got accustomed to their new domestic situation. I never knew whether this was true or whether he made the whole thing up to suit my circumstances, but I can testify that it was at once the kindest reprimand I ever received and the worst thing Andrew ever said to me. As bad as I was—and looking back on the stuff I wrote then, I was pretty bad—Andrew did not banish me. Not then. Not subsequently. For once you have become his student, you remain his student, and he continues to give you the most precious gifts he has in his naccacion hic affaction hic advice



For the Andrew Lytle party, Donald Davie reads a poem he dedicated to Mr. Lytle. (Photos: Lyn Hutchinson)

He was himself a student of Andrew's, as I think everybody knows, and he had, in his day, enjoyed a good deal of Lytle hospitality. But now Madison was a bona fide writer himself and he knew the importance to a writer of time—not only time to write, but time to think, to brood about what he did or did not get put on paper today and what problems might have to be faced tomorrow. Madison's concern over Andrew's visitors was not born solely out of his affection for Andrew. Madison and I believed that Andrew's work was too important to be interfered with. We wanted him 'left alone so he could produce more writing for us to read and to cherish. What we-or at least I-did not understand then was that without Andrew's generosity, his willingness to share himself with his friends, all the stories and books and essays that we loved would not have been quite the same. Andrew would have been a different person and the work that he produced would have been different work.

Joseph Conrad said that "fiction appeals to temperament" and that, more specifically, it is "an appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments" which will respond to what the writer with his individual temperament has written. This means, among other things, that the source of what a writer writes is his whole being: his mind to be sure, but also his heart, his beliefs, his values, all the large and small commitments of life. Jacques Maritain was apparently thinking along these lines when he said "Only a Christian, nay, a

ningly wrought artifacts as art only after we had diverted them from their intended purposes and, in many cases, removed them from their proper locations. Crucifixes and holy pictures and figures of saints were created to be aids to the faithful in their worship, as were the statues of Greek and Roman and Egyptian deities. Portraits, whether done on canvas or in stone, were either part of a family's history or memorials to great events in the lives of cities or states. The holy picture was good to the degree that it created an atmosphere for fruitful worship; the bust of an ancestor or a soldier or a king was valuable to the degree that it kept public or private tradition alive and preserved and elucidated public or private history.

But consider what happens when the statue is taken from the temple, the crucifix is removed from the church, the ancestral portrait is lifted off the living-room wall, and all are gathered under one roof as a part of a museum's collection. All these objects are given a new reason for being: they are no longer aids to worship or to memory but are now works of art to be admired for themselves, for the brilliance with which they have been conceived and the skill with which they have been executed; they are to be perceived and experienced as things of beauty, and the experience of perceiving them is often profound. But they exist in a realm of their own: they have been segregated from the main thrust of human experience.

The history of literature is more complicated than that of the plastic arts, but as we move from ancient to modern times we see it turning away from the celebration of faith and nation and family to a new consciousness of literature as an end in itself and of the writer as a superior being not because of his moral qualities but because of his aesthetic vision. In thinking this way, the writer embraces a shrunken concept both of himself and of the world in which he lives and about which he writes. The temperament of which Conrad spoke becomes distorted. Maritain's mystical quality which enables the novelist to discover "what there is in man" is displaced by a mundane pursuit of literary technique. Any writer who sets out to stand against this

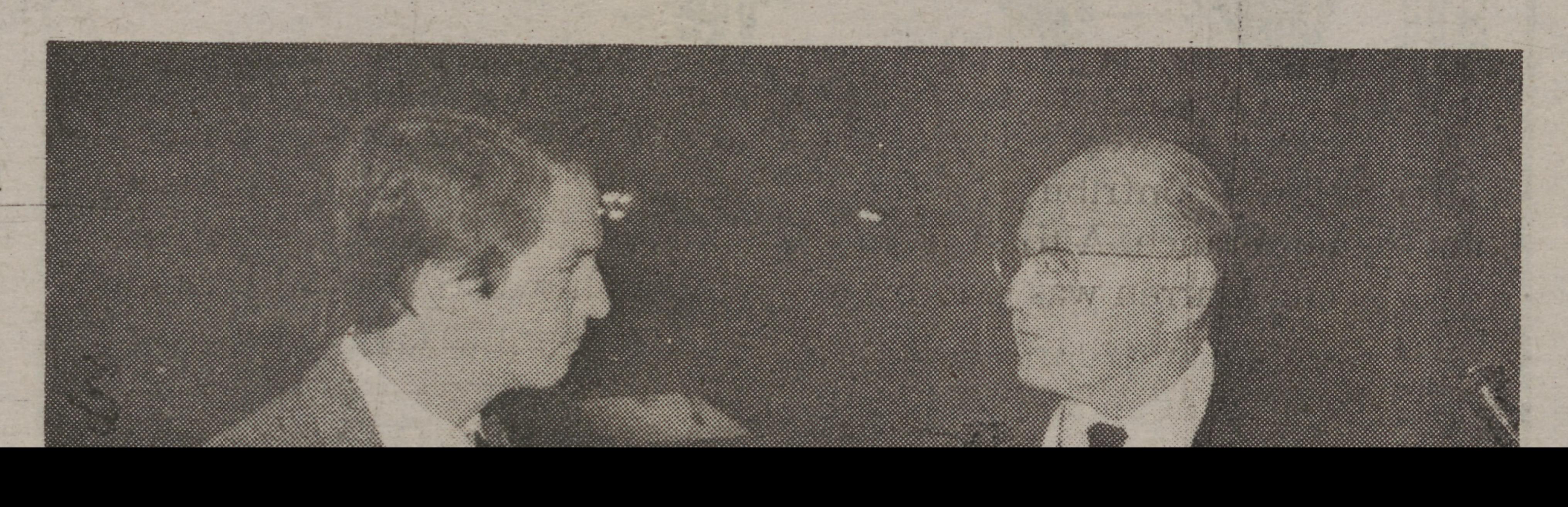
anda to drink out of the usual silver cups. Andrew was laying a brick patio just off the porch where we were sitting. He discoursed on the joys and difficulties of farming. He had begun work on *The Velvet Horn*, which he was also willing to talk about, but only in those guarded terms which most writers employ when the project is still under way and the exploration of the theme remains unfinished.

In my memory this visit has assumed the dimensions of a parable. Behind us on the wall of the covered porch was an enormous Confederate flag. The children, Pamela and Kate, were fed their early supper in silver porringers. As the long twilight wore on Andrew began to think of making a salad. "In a minute," he said, "we'll go to the woods and find some mushrooms." Surely I was not rude enough to ask how we were going to distinguish the good mushrooms from the bad. I am certain that I did not raise the question. But Andrew has a finely tuned sense for the concerns of others which is one of the foundations of his impeccable manners.

Andrew told Jane and me that there was no cause for concern. He had recently been studying up on mushrooms, and he had a book with excellent illustrations of both the good and the bad. He set out to reassure us, but his writer's sense of the dramatic would not be stifled. You may remember the opening sentence of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, which all novelists interpret as one of the basic rules of their craft: "Happy families are all alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." This means that only unhappy families are worth writing about. Andrew, sitting on his porch in Robertson County, extended this principle to include mushrooms. Certainly there are differences among safe mushrooms, but Andrew's attention was captured by those which could do us harm. One

called the Destroying Angel-I am not certain of this name: it may have been the Avenging Angel, but it was some kind of angel and it was bad—was particularly hard to distinguish from one of the more succulent safe varieties with a safe, and therefore totally forgettable, name. The notion of this evil mushroom masquerading as a beneficent and edible plant inspired Andrew's imagination. One of Andrew's great virtues as a writer and as a human being is that his mind never wanders far from the myth and the truth of our origins: our creation by God in His own image; our temptation and our fall from grace. Those of us who have read Andrew's books have learned from them that the drama played out among Eve and the Serpent and Adam in the Garden of Eden is played out over and over again in all our lives. That afternoon on his veranda, Andrew suggested that the same theme is manifested in the vegetable world by the evil mushroom, decked out as was the Serpent in handsome apparel, waiting to do you harm. The ambiguity of the bad mushroom's name enhanced the situation and made it even more pleasant and profitable to contemplate.

Andrew's good manners overcome all obstacles—including the joy of being able to think like Andrew Lytle—so he turned from the moral symbolism of mushrooms to the comfort of his guests. He declared once more, modestly of course, that he knew his mushrooms; but in the unlikely, not to say impossible, event that he made a mistake, there was a simple procedure to determine whether a mushroom were poison. Eat a piece the size of a dime. If you did not get sick within the next twelve hours, the mushroom was harmless; if you did get sick within the next twelve hours, the mushroom was toxic, but having eaten a piece no larger than a dime, you would not die. I confess to you that in thinking about the



matter off and on for three decades, I have not yet figured out the logistics of this procedure as it applied to our circumstances. Putting aside the question of who was to eat the test piece of mushroom, what were we going to do with the salad while we waited twelve hours to see if the tester got sick? I cannot answer this question because the test was never made. We were absolved by Demon Rum-or Heaven Hill, if you insist on absolute accuracy. We lingered so long over our cups that by the time Andrew had got his basket and we had walked to the woods, darkness had fallen. We ate a fine dinner with a good, but mushroomless, salad and talked far into the night.

The symbolism of this reminiscence is at once obvious and, for me at least, profound. The flag represents the past—tradition, of course, but not in any abstract sense: people, rather, real individuals who lived and fought and suffered and died and who remained, while they lived, willing to die for what they believed in. They were not all heroes: through the long generations before and after the Civil War each group was a mixed bag, but they are what we come

from. It is in terms of them, as Andrew has taught us, that we begin to define ourselves. Those well-behaved children, eating from their porringers, were the future—again no abstractions, but two little girls, to be taught, to be schooled in the ways of the past, so they could take with them into their own futures, and for the benefit of children yet to be born, the best values and customs which were their inheritance from their ancestors.

The farm and the house on which Andrew was working with his own hands are significant because they are the antithesis of the modern technological—or as we put it now high-tech society. I need not dwell on the fact that technology, misused and misunderstood as we always seem to misuse and misunderstand it, is the enemy of individual integrity and of community. It tempts us to think that we can live by bread alone; it develops a myth of progress that induces us to believe in the perfectibility of human nature. Most of us deplore these tendencies in our lives, but as a character in one of Flannery O'Connor's novels says, "You can't just say No....You got to do NO."

Andrew was doing no. His life in his house and on his farm was a repudiation of what is worst about the modern age, its deceitful promises, its damaging fragmentations.

Now about those mushrooms. Andrew was one of the few Agrarians who had lived the agrarian life, and this is one reason that his contribution to I'll Take My Stand is thought by many critics to be the best of the twelve essays included in that volume. Much of The Long Night was written not in a house but in the woods. Andrew could go confidently to search for mushrooms because he was and is at home with nature, which is to say with the mysteries of creation. God said "Let there be light," and there was light. God said "Let there be a firmament," and there was a firmament. God said "Let there be man," and there was man. And somewhere down the line, God said "Let there be mushrooms." The mystical sense of which Maritain speaks consists of being always aware, as Andrew is, that God created heaven and earth and all things therein and that all created things were good until man started to tamper with them. Anyone who has conversed seriously with Andrew has heard him speak of the Puritan heresy which manifests itself in the discovery of evil in the object rather than in the person who misuses the object; and of the mysterious and ultimately unfathomable connection between the Word made flesh and the words which are the incarnations of thought and the raw material of writers. His profound consideration of such themes is one of the sources of his dignity as a man and his success as a novelist.

I have referred to this bit of remembrance as a parable, the moral of which is, I hope, by now clear. But let me pursue it a bit further. Near the end of A Wake for the Living Andrew quotes a famous line spoken by Thomas More at the time of his execution: "I die the King's good servant, but God's first." Tonight we celebrate life, not death, another year successfully completed and many more, we trust, to come. But after a man has lived for eighty years, we are, perhaps, justified in assuming that his

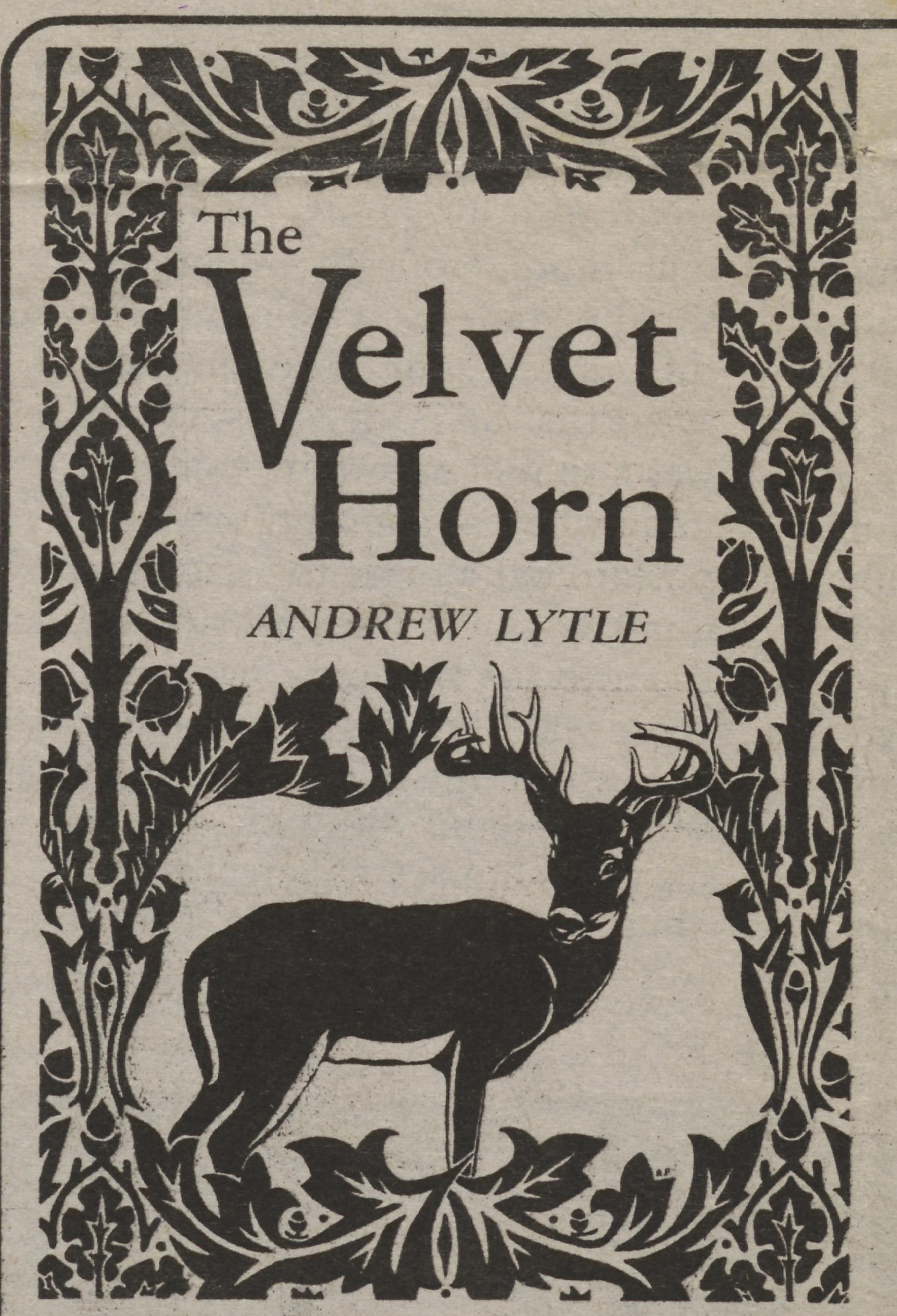
"An Ode on a Grecian Urn," Faulkner claimed, is worth more than any number of gray-haired old ladies. This is not true, of course, as Andrew knew from the beginning of his career. And as Andrew has shown, you do not have to be willing to steal from your grandmother to be a novelist. Andrew had a better idea. He put his grandmother into a book. He wrote about her—and about his grandfather too and his aunts and uncles and cousins and in-laws and friends. This is no mean feat, and much could be said about Andrew's acute sense of the difference between the public and private realms of human existence and the ways in which the two realms complement each other to furnish a fully integrated sense of civilized life. Let me say only this: Andrew has used his family portraits for the creation of art without removing them from the family gallery. They are joined to "the voices of silence"; they become a part of Malraux's imaginary museum and yet remain at home.

Andrew, on behalf of all who have come to help you celebrate this occasion and thereby to express their admiration and affection for you; and on behalf of the many, many more who share that admiration and affection, but who are unable to be here, I wish you a very happy birthday and many more happy birthdays to come.

Walter Sullivan, a novelist, shortstory writer, and critic who is a regular contributor to the Sewanee Review, has taught English at Vanderbilt University since 1948.

Illustrated Bibliography

Andrew Nelson Lytle: A Bibliography 1920-1982, by Stuart Wright, has been published by the University of the South through the office of the Sewanee Review. The book is lavishly illustrated with reproductions of title and copyright pages and of dustjackets from Lytle's major books. Included is a foreword by J.A. Bryant, Jr., a



a landmark in American fiction

Long out-of-print, The Velvet Horn, which Andrew Lytle considers his finest, is being reprinted by the University of the South through the assistance of an anonymous gift.