

## A REVIEW OF A HUNDRED YEARS

ROBERT BRADFORD<sup>1</sup>



William Peterfield Trent (c. 1892)

T. S. Eliot, this century's most influential man of letters, wrote in 1952: "The *Sewanee Review* has now reached the status of an institution - by which I mean that if it came to an end, its loss would be something more than merely the loss of one good periodical: it would be a symptom of an alarming decline in the periodical world at its highest level."

What makes Eliot's statement remarkable is that it came only 10 years after Allen Tate and Andrew Lytle had transformed the *SR* from a modest periodical in the humanities to a major magazine that was focused on literature and criticism. During the mid-1940s Lytle and Tate established the editorial position of the *Review* as it exists today; their vision ultimately led to the *Review* being recognized nationally and internationally as one of the finest magazines of its kind. To tell the story of the *Review* as it now stands, therefore, one must not start with its founding in 1892, but with its rise over the last 50 years.

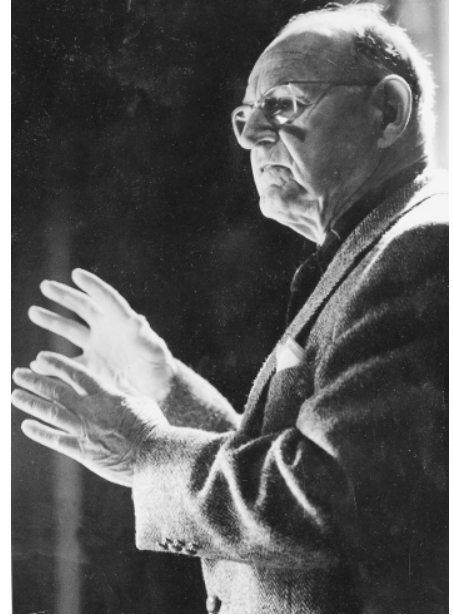
Lytle was, in many ways, a reluctant editor. He was teaching history at the University and trying to manage three farms when Vice-Chancellor Alexander Guerry asked him to serve as managing editor in 1942. While Tudor Seymour Long, chairman of Sewanee's English department, was given the title of active editor, Lytle was, in fact, editor of the *Review*, and he initially served in that role for two years. (He later edited the *Review* from 1961–73.)

Sitting on the porch of his Monteagle home, Lytle recalls, "I didn't want the job of editor. I was a writer. But I agreed to help out the vice-chancellor, and I did the best job I could."

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from *Sewanee* magazine, Summer 1992, with the author's kind consent.

Under Lytle's editorship in the early 1940s, the *Sewanee Review* began to make its mark in the literary world. He published the first short story in the *Review's* history in the winter 1943 issue, and in the spring issue he featured a long excerpt from Robert Penn Warren's second novel, *At Heaven's Gate*. He also published critical works from some of the nation's finest writers: Cleanth Brooks, Randall Jarrell, Donald Davidson, Robert Lowell, and his long-time friend Allen Tate, one of America's most distinguished critics and poets.



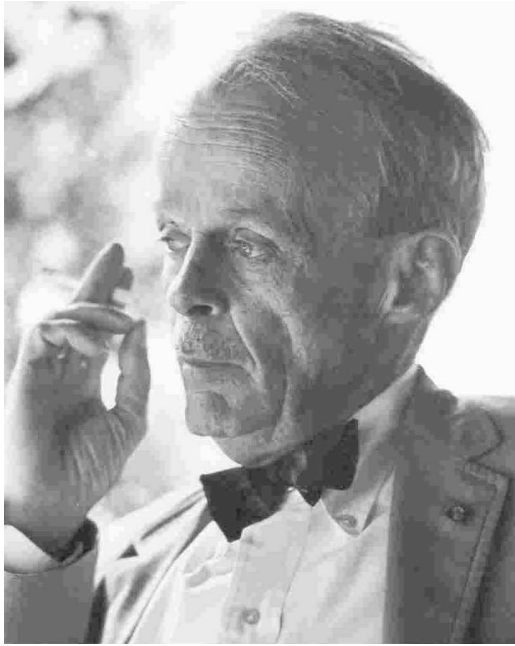
[Andrew Lytle](#)

Lytle and Tate had known each other since the 1920s, when they were both students at Vanderbilt University. The two became friends in New York City, where Tate was trying to make his way as a free-lance journalist and Lytle was acting in off-Broadway productions. They left New York to distinguish themselves as American writers of the first rank. Tate wrote many books during his career, ranging from a novel and two biographies to poetry and criticism. Lytle has written several novels as well as a handful of critical works. Throughout most of their careers they maintained a close relationship, discussing their common ideas about literature and life.

Tate collaborated closely with Lytle as an advisory editor as they worked to remake the *SR*. The two had an understanding that Tate would succeed Lytle as editor of the *Review* so Lytle could get on with the business of writing and farming. In 1944, when Vice-Chancellor Guerry offered Tate the full-time position of editor, he accepted, but only after hammering out certain terms.

For the first time in its 52-year history, the *SR* would pay all contributors for their work, Tate mandated. All first-rate journals pay contributors, he argued, and he was determined to

make the *Review* comparable to the two major journals of the time: John Crowe Ransom's *Kenyon Review* (1939– ) and Brooks' and Warren's *Southern Review* (1935–42). Writing to Lytle in 1944, Tate explained, "The whole thing comes down to a very simple matter. For the first time



Allen Tate

they have somebody really interested in doing the job, and they are backing him with money and a full-time assistant. That's the whole story."

With the financial support of the University, Tate in a mere two years as editor moved the *SR* to new levels. He had P. J. Conkwright, one of the nation's best book designers, redesign the magazine.

He increased advertising significantly and worked to boost the circulation from about 500 to more than

2,000 by the time he left. And he made sure that the

major book stores of the literati—Brentano's and the Gotham Book Mart in New York City, among others—had copies of the *SR* prominently displayed for their customers.

Yet far more important than Tate's marketing of the *SR* was the group of writers which he attracted. T. S. Eliot, Jacques Maritain, Malcolm Cowley, Kenneth Burke, and Donald Davidson contributed essays to the magazine. Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, Jean Stafford, Andrew Lytle, and Peter Taylor wrote short stories, and Randall Jarrell, Wallace Stevens, and Dylan Thomas had their poetry featured in the *SR*.

Tate established the *SR* as a quarterly with national and international ties. Lytle, writing to Tate in 1944, was obviously pleased with the direction of the magazine. "The copy of the *Review* came today. It looks very fine, and it certainly is loaded against big and little guns. . . . It

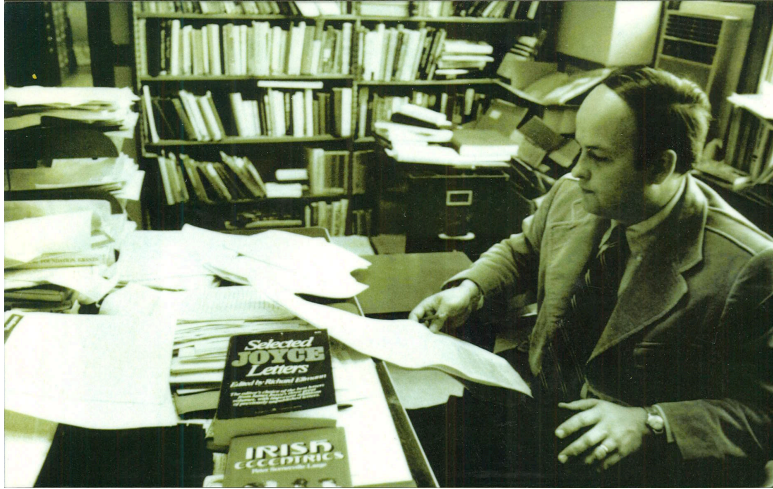
will not only carry on but will in many ways be much better. I don't think Sewanee can fail to understand now what it is to have you there. The obvious fact, at least, that you have the widest literary connection in the country all are bound to see."

Probably no one in America at the time was better suited for the job of making the *SR* a major journal than Tate. A man who was respected as a poet, novelist, and critic, he combined his interests to forge the editorial philosophy of the *Review*. He championed the New Criticism, which looked principally at literary works rather than biographical or historical elements. And he had the connections to bring to the *SR* the biggest names in literature. But possibly most important was Tate's ethos. Described by the critic William Harmon as "one of the prima-est donnas of all times," Tate had the confidence to assert that the *SR* would be a major force in the intellectual life of the country. "Whatever the new literature turns out to be it will be the privilege of *The Sewanee Review* to print its share of it, to comment on it, and to try to understand it," Tate wrote.

The editorial position of the magazine that was created by Tate and Lytle endures to this day. George Core, who has served the longest tenure as editor, overseeing the *Review* since 1973, says that what makes the journal unique is its remarkable continuity.

"The magazine has had an almost singular consistency over the last 50 years. If you picked up an issue of the *Review* that Monroe Spears edited in the 1950s and one that I edited, there wouldn't be a great deal of difference. And that's all very deliberate. Every editor who has been here since Lytle and Tate in the 1940s has been devoted to literature, not to critical theories. So whatever the latest critical lunacies are, whether it's deconstruction or semiotics or some other form of criticism that seeks more to displace literature than it does to interpret it and elevate it as an art, these forms of critical extremism have been assiduously avoided," Core explains as he sits

in his cluttered St. Luke's Hall office surrounded by books, manuscripts, and correspondence.



George Core (c. 1976)

Core is very much a part of the tradition of *SR* editors. As an undergraduate at Vanderbilt University, he studied under Walter Sullivan and Donald Davidson. After receiving his Ph.D. from the University of

North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he studied under the renowned scholar C. Hugh Holman, he went on to become an editor at the University of Georgia Press before arriving at Sewanee.

The *Review* has thrived, Core believes, because a distinguished group of writers has been devoted to the quarterly and its philosophy since Tate and Lytle forged the journal's new direction in the 1940s. In 1946, for example, a relatively unknown writer named Howard Nemerov submitted a poem to Tate for publication. Nemerov, who went on to earn many honors, including the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry, continued publishing his work in the *SR* until his death last year and was the recipient of the *Review's* first Aiken-Taylor Prize for Poetry.

Core has worked to cultivate the writers that Tate and Lytle and their successors drew to the *Review* while at the same time he has broadened the range of writers. On a cover of the *Review* today one can see the novelist and Civil War historian Shelby Foote's name next to that of Sam Pickering, a Sewanee graduate who has written more book reviews for the *SR* than anyone in its 100-year history. On another cover one might notice the name of the Canadian man of letters George Woodcock, who has been contributing essays and fiction to the *Review* for many years, next to that of the critic and poet Louis D. Rubin, Jr.

All of the writers who contribute to the *SR* have something in common, Core says. "One thing that everyone who has been with the magazine has been wedded to is that something has to be well written. Writing is not profound because it is unintelligible. As long as something is well written, it is going to be taken seriously here."

While Core acknowledges the continuity of the *SR*, he notes that there have been subtle changes in the magazine. He has moved the *Review* toward theme-oriented issues. Over the years, he has devoted issues to topics ranging from Irish literature to the modern Catholic novel, from war to the *New Yorker*. Core makes it clear that while the *SR* has in some ways expanded its scope, it is by no means attempting to cover the latest literary trends.

"The main emphasis is on British and American literature, as it has to be. The difficulty in editing a literary quarterly is that you cannot cover everything. And if you try to cover everything, you're going to end up covering nothing," he says.

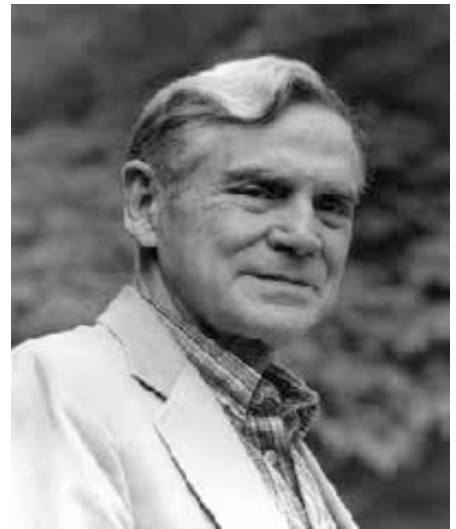
"The *Sewanee Review*, since Tate and Lytle and especially under the editorship of Monroe Spears, John Palmer and myself, is a magazine based in the South, but it is not a southern magazine. It is not nearly so southern as the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, as the *Southern Review* or the *Southern Literary Journal*. Since I have been here, I have written a lot about the South myself, but I have published relatively little about the South. It is true that I have published a lot of southern writers, but their subjects often have not been southern at all."

What concerns Core, however, is a more fundamental issue than the whims of literary theories and trends. He wonders what role the *Review* and similar literary quarterlies will play in a culture that values music videos far more than literature. Today, 50 years after the *Review* became a new voice in American culture, subscriptions have increased to only slightly more than 3,000, and most of those go to libraries.

"One of the real problems facing the publishers of literary magazines is that the decline of reading over the last 30 years or so has been precipitous. People are reading more and more trash and less and less serious literature. One of the odd situations facing the country is that we have too damned many writers and not enough readers. I don't know what the answer to this dilemma is. I don't think my point is just nostalgia," he says.

"There is a cultural crisis going on in this country, and there's not much the editor of the literary quarterly can do about it. We can just hope that the decline of reading is not going to affect people who take this magazine."

Core's colleague Monroe Spears, who edited the magazine from 1952–61, has observed in an essay on the role of literary quarterlies: "The literary quarterlies represent a different function in a different age: they try to be mature, responsible, and dignified, and they prefer to attract instead of shocking and antagonizing the reader. They are institutions, not mere temporary organs for a movement or for publishing a few new writers."



Monroe K. Spears

The institution of the *Sewanee Review*, the institution that Spears and Core and Lytle and Tate and the other editors have respected and nurtured, began in 1892 under William Peterfield Trent.

An English professor, Trent came to the University in 1888. He was an important scholar and teacher "whose influence," as George Core has written, "on the development of American literature as an academic discipline is almost incalculable."

Trent was particularly concerned with the literature of the South, which he found during

the late 19th century to be sentimental and insubstantial. He was determined to provide a critical perspective on American literature and southern literature, and he saw a literary quarterly as an ideal way to further his goals.

He discussed the idea of starting a journal with alumni and faculty. In 1892, Telfair Hodgson, who had resigned as vice-chancellor, offered to provide the financial backing for the quarterly during the first year.

The prospectus of Trent's first issue of the *SR* read: "It will be devoted to such topics as General Theology, Philosophy, History, and Literature as require fuller treatment than they usually receive in the popular magazines, and less technical treatment than they receive in specialist publications."

Trent almost singlehandedly produced the *Sewanee Review* during his eight years as editor. "I got out the first number by hook or crook, writing two articles and several reviews," he said. The editors who followed Trent—John Bell Henneman, John McLaren McBryde Jr., George Herbert Clarke, and William Skinkle Knickerbocker—did much the same. They all worked under trying circumstances with limited financial support from the University, which was itself dealing with financial crises.

Reflecting on the *Review's* rich history, which began with Trent and has been sustained by a group of writers and editors who believe that language and ideas are fundamentally important to our culture, George Core has written: "Longevity alone does not guarantee virtue, even among Old Testament patriarchs and church fathers. Nevertheless, the long life of such a magazine at a small liberal arts college in the South is nothing short of extraordinary: one is tempted to use the word *miraculous*, which often sprang to the pens of the early editors when the magazine endured repeated financial crises and prevailed from issue to issue and year to year."