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University of the South

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A Journey South
Andrew Lytle

Introduction by J. A. Bryant, Jr.

The Kentucky Review is fortunate to be able to print Andrew Lytle’s “A Journey South,” a warm and beautiful piece of literary reminiscence and valuable in its own right. “A Journey South” has special interest, however, in that it deals with several of the writers who brought the Southern Literary Renaissance into being, and it is written by one of the most gifted of those writers. Although focusing on Allen Tate, the noted Kentucky poet, novelist, and critic who died last year, the essay presents for inspection a common conviction that bound together such different personalities as Tate, Ransom, Warren, and Lytle himself, and kept them all spiritual brothers in spite of circumstances that later scattered them, literally to the four winds. That unifying conviction has been summed up for us, and perhaps was summed up for them also, by T. S. Eliot, who wrote in 1920, “Tradition... cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves... a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.” For Lytle and Tate, the labor that revealed the presence of the past involved an immersion in the masterworks of classical literature; and current readers who, like them, have found their early literary nourishment in Homer and Virgil will recognize immediately in Lytle’s account parallels with Odysseus’s visits to Circe and to the mouth of Hades and will understand that we are being shown, with an authority that few other living authors can match, the fare that gave some of our most distinguished southern writers, from Faulkner to the Fugitives and Agrarians, their unique life and character.

I was a freshman at Vanderbilt when Allen Tate was an upperclassman. I did not know him then. I met him later when I
was at Yale studying playwrighting under George Pierce Baker. Our
teacher, John Crowe Ransom, wrote us both and brought this
about. Allen and Caroline and their daughter, Nancy, were living
in the Village on 27 Bank Street. They had the basement apartment,
Allen as a sort of janitor in the sense that he got the quarters free
for firing the furnace. Writers liked to live and congregate in the
Village. It still had the virtues of a village. It was fairly cheap and
for artists free of restrictive conventions. Not all but many felt very
Bohemian. These were not the best craftsmen.

Those were the days of speakeasies and Italian restaurants where
you could get an ink-like red wine with your meal. But first you
had to be peeped at through a hole in the door. Usually this was a
formality, particularly if you were a regular customer. Prohibition
had its own mores. For example, if you were short of funds, you
took the subway to Hoboken, bought a beer or two, and ate for
free, slices from an ample roast beef, cheeses, sauerkraut and other
foods. If the joint was raided, the proprietor just moved next door,
with scarcely a pause in his service. There was a string of these
houses, looking all alike.

Allen and I were soon talking about the Dayton, or “Monkey
trial,” in Tennessee. We were in entire agreement about this, as had
been our philosophy professor, Dr. Herbert Sanborn, almost alone
at Vanderbilt in exposing the fallacy in the argument that the trial
was about academic freedom. I’ve forgotten our discussion in
detail, except that we were in agreement that scientism’s position
was a Liberal attack on our traditional world. Now I see it in other
terms: Reconstruction’s breach of the citadel. After the economic
exploitation of the South, this attack in the name of knowledge on
a belief in a literal Genesis denigrated us before the world and made
us laughed at; but the real aim was more insidious: a forced
acceptance of faith in a secular order for guidance rather than in
divine authority. Practically this would mean a total, instead of an
economic, dominance by the Northeast. There had been a partial
seduction of the Southern mind, but not yet of its spirit. The soul is
not so easily traduced, especially of a people who live by the land.
Such are naturally religious. Even though the tactics of defense was
inadequate at Dayton, depending as it did upon a strict
construction with its literal fallacy, so was the Liberal attack
equally fallacious. Darwin’s theory was only a partial truth, not the
whole understanding of the mystery of the universe, which only
God understands. Along with this came H. L. Mencken’s
journalistic description of the South as "the Sahara of the Bozarts." This is like the thief who robs a house the second time and complains that the owners do not eat with silver.

This was felt but none of it was entirely clear. It was a common habit for the young men in the South and West to go East to thrive. Allen would complain later that a gifted young man had to go to New York and do well before he would be accepted at home. I once got a prize in Nashville for a one-act play, to be put on by the little theatre. Jesse Beesley, former playmate, a known wit, and later editor of my home town paper, printed "Local boy makes good at home." Progress was the word, and it was like Dorian Gray's portrait. Out of victory's euphoria in the European war, it was easy for the young to believe in progress and that the South was taken back into the Union and that the great metropolis of New York was as much ours as anybody else's. It was also easy to say that the arts rarely prosper, but there was always the possibility that any artist could. There is no telling how many thousands were sacrificed for the making good of ten. Allen lived as a free lance writer, joining no cliques and respected in that role. He wrote a great deal for The New Republic and became friends with the editors, certainly Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley and the one Southerner on the staff, Stark Young. But this was precarious. Once he wrote an editor for an advance. This was at Benfolly in Tennessee, so the problem was not fixed by location.

What you going to do when the meat gives out?
Stand in the corner with your chin poked out.

What you going to do when the meat comes in?
Stand in the corner with a greasy chin.

He put a footnote to this. "My chin," he said, "is perfectly immaculate."

His mother-in-law arrived one day from Kentucky. She casually remarked that she had had no breakfast. When told there was no food in the house, she and Caroline went out and replenished the larder. Being a Meriwether from Kentucky, whose family had held large holdings in land and slaves, and still had much land, if under different circumstances, it must have been incomprehensible to her not to have food in the storeroom. When her visit was over, she took her grandchild home with her. Only for a while of course.
I don’t want to overemphasize the effects of either the Dayton trial or Mencken’s journalism, or even what his purpose was, for he was a sound scholar. Nevertheless it was about this time that Allen began his research on Stonewall Jackson. Actually it began the unfolding of his history. I add this, because too much has been made of the letters crossing in the mail between brother Agrarians concerning what came to be the symposium *I’ll Take My Stand*. In fun we later addressed ourselves as Generals. I called John Ransom’s wife, Major. My most pleasant memories of this later time were the seven years we enjoyed one another socially as well as treading in the vineyard of the cause. Allen was working on the Jackson when I met him. That was in 1927, as it came out in 1928.

I don’t remember when the Tates moved into the Cabinet of Doctor Caligari. This was an old building on Hudson Street, once a Revolutionary inn and more recently the headquarters of the Hudson Dusters, a modest association of gangsters before the great explosion of crime engendered by the Puritan law against drinking. There were bullet holes in the ceilings, but the proprietors were very sensitive about the place’s respectability. Each floor had a toilet fallen somewhat into desuetude, but there hung in plain sight a warning not to throw rags down it. And a well-known writer and a better-known banker for his help to artists were thrown out after a too riotous party.

This I was told, but I can speak with more authority about an experience of my own, which will indicate the cosmopolitan tone of the apartments; perhaps more succinctly demonstrate the relevance of its name, *Caligari* being an action in the mind of a madman. I had come down from Yale to spend the weekend with the Tates. Having other guests, they put me in the apartment of a friend who had gone to Long Island for the weekend. I had a cold and was getting ready for bed when I heard a knock at the door. I opened it and a young lady came into the room. She said, “Are you living with Della?” I replied that I did not have the honor, whereupon she said her name was Marguerite and she wanted to borrow Della’s victrola. I told her it was not mine to lend. She sat on the bed beside me, and we talked until I knew her better. Later, on another floor, I stood with the records and music box in my arms before a door behind which a party was obviously going on. As the door opened, a cloud of Russian cigarette smoke puffed in our faces. It was stale and larded with greasy odors of foreign food.

Two women confronted us and barred the way. One of them, a
tall pale woman with marble eyes looked me over and told me I couldn’t come in. If she had had a red cap on, she would have looked like a Révolutionnaire. A year later she ended up in a sailor’s dive in India. I met once her husband, a forlorn painter, dressed in shabby Pre-Raphaelite clothing and beard. I met once also their son, a nice boy working for a reformed fur thief. He is on my conscience. I could see he was hungry and intended to invite him out to dinner and see what I could do. But I didn’t and he turned on the gas, leaving a note for his employer’s wife, complaining that her husband would not pay him and he was hungry.

The other woman came to my defense. She had sandy gray hair out of control and a combative manner. She was Margaret Sanger’s sister, the woman everybody knew once as the girl who went to gaol defending birth control. Miss Sanger won, and I was allowed to come in, I must say with diminished cheer. Somebody poured me a drink, but even as I was reaching for it, another hand was quicker than mine. And so it went. There was a gangster there with a gold tooth, and the general conversation was about being beaten up by Irish policemen, with a tone of boasting about it. Near me leaned a striking woman from the Isle of Man, with lovely but not quite clean hair, and it bristled over her face, and her eyes looked out of it like a fox. She was saying, ‘He invited me to tea, and when I came, he put his hands upon me and said, ‘I would like to rape you.’ And I said, ‘Why do you not rape the Virgin Mary? You would get more satisfaction.’ And with that he hit me.’

All talk finally settled upon one subject, somebody called Harry, who they believed was in a bar nearby. It soon became clear that he was a gangster, too, and furthermore the intimate friend of Marguerite. At once my position became ambiguous. I rose to leave, but was not allowed to. I began thinking very hard when Miss Sanger and Marguerite went to fetch him. They were gone a long time. Once more, about to escape I was urged to stay. At some point the door opened and there stood Marguerite, disheveled, bruised in the face and with a dry hysterical sob only a woman can make. It came out that she and her friend had found the bar and Harry was there. But right away Miss Sanger began picking up beer mugs and tossing them at the patrons. It was a confused story, ending with Harry rising like the gentleman he was, to the lady’s rescue. They fell to the floor together, whether in defeat or amnesia I did not learn. But I was learning cunning. As
the comforters crowded about Marguerite, I slipped quietly away. Next morning I recounted this adventure to the Tates and Katherine Anne Porter.

It was from these portals that we set out for the Eastern battlefields. Allen had bought a second-hand Ford for fifty dollars. Its name was “Old Ninety-Seven” from that ballad, “The Wreck of Old Ninety-Seven.” We had got into the habit of singing old songs we had heard at home and telling family stories, a thing none of us did at Vanderbilt in the flush times after the European war. This was the beginning of an awakened interest in our common familial past. The trip was ostensibly for Allen to go over the battlefields in a more thorough way than he had had to do for his Stonewall Jackson; actually, instead of research for his biography of Davis, it became the quest for our common historic past. I have a picture of all of us taken in front of the Ford just at the moment of departure: Allen and Caroline, little Nancy about three, Katherine Anne, and I. We already looked a little travel stained.

We set out in high spirits and spent the night at a rock farm house in Pennsylvania, where we dropped off Katherine Anne. I have forgotten the name of our hosts, nor do I remember exactly the sequence of events or an accurate time table. Of the battlefields I remember best Gettysburg, still haunted by Jackson's ghost. Jackson was still much in Allen’s mind, but at Antietam his presence became almost visible. We stood behind the rail fence behind the cornfield through which the enemy charged at the crucial moment of the contest, as Lee referred to the war. Allen turned to me. “Two thousand of the enemy fell here,” he said with lowered breath. Caroline laughed aloud. She had never seen such glee, she said, in two men’s eyes. But it was not only glee. The intervening years had fallen away and the imagination surcharged by the heart revealed the action as if we had stood there. In action there is no past, only the moving present tense. I felt then, as I’m sure he did, a tradition and its history quickening.

Red Warren joined us at Harpers Ferry, where John Brown’s madness released the greater madness. Three of us were writing or about to write biographies: Red on John Brown, Allen of course on Jefferson Davis, and I about to begin on Bedford Forrest. Since Forrest operated in the middle of the Confederacy, miscalled the West, I would not have felt the necessity to examine so thoroughly the Eastern theatre. And yet my book would have lacked much, if I had not gone on this trip with the Tates. We camped at Harpers
Ferry for several days. When Red arrived, we spent a night in a house. He was fast on his way to Kentucky. The minor irony was discussed: the first person that Brown's men killed was the Negro guard at the bridge. Colonel Washington was awakened in the night and asked where his slaves were. He told them they would have to do what he did when he wanted them: hunt them up. One of the raiders took the Washington sword.

It is the journey itself that is clearest in my mind. From Pennsylvania to Alabama we passed over no superhighways or interstates, only country and state roads, much of it gravel, some paved. Nor was the silence of the countryside afflicted by tires humming through the dirty smell of gas and oil. Old Ninety-Seven sped along with Allen at the wheel, his eyes sealed to the road. If he weren't driving, his head and lips dropped with the most excruciating look of pain, his usual expression of boredom. Sometimes, if we thought we could afford it, we stayed at a tourist home. There were no Holiday Inns; occasionally in towns there would be a small hotel called somebody's House. We had pup tents to make camp with, and frequently some farmer would let us stay where there was water and pick turnip greens free. I sometimes cooked these with the hoecakes. Meal was cheap, but I don't remember much about the food. Caroline is a good cook. The small town restaurants charged thirty-five or forty cents for lunch. If we were tired or hungry, we splurged. We never saw but one tourist camp, and it was just that, a place outside Richmond, Virginia. It had a common washroom with the usual facilities. It was very public. Here we pitched our tents underneath a great oak. In the evenings we dressed up and went to town, as guests to friends of Allen. The bookstores were still selling his Jackson. I got the taste of what it could be to see your words in print. There is no excitement, barring none, quite like that first sight. Once, returning late to camp, we found the great oak blown down upon our tents and scattering our belongings. The night watchman was the grandnephew of John Bankhead Magruder; the camp manager the grandnephew of General A. P. Hill. Hill, you remember, was the general whose name was on the dying lips of both Lee and Jackson.

We would never again, nor would anybody, pass over and take in this world, and that is as true for Pennsylvania as for Tennessee. Pennsylvania had its heavy industry, but we did not see it. The suburbs of Philadelphia ended gradually in fields. Today from Trenton there are only buildings and a blur of light at night. We
parted at my parents' house in Huntsville, Alabama. Little Nancy exclaimed, "Is this Uncle Andrew's camp?"

The Odyssey was under way; but if we had called up the dead to lap blood, it brought Allen finally home to Ithaca.