

## La Florida

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

At the Moon's Inn

by Andrew Lytle

Introduced by Douglas E. Jones  
Tuscaloosa: The University of  
Alabama Press; 400 pp., \$18.95

In an expedition that began in 1538 and endured until 1543, Hernando de Soto and six hundred men failed to discover in what is today Florida and the Lower American South that which they craved most to find—gold. Four centuries later, a young writer, poet, and novelist native to the region trained his genius on records pertaining to this expedition and thereby produced alchemically what De Soto and all his brave men never seized on. *At the Moon's Inn*, first published in 1941 and out of print for nearly fifty years, is pure gold—24-carat poetry of a luster that shines among the pile of goldbrick novels that contemporary American “literature” comprises. To say that it is the best work of fiction published in 1990 is to be guilty of a hilarious critical understatement.

Here, as in all of his books, Andrew Lytle is preoccupied with the most massive concerns of human experience: pride, valor, death, love, and reconciliation. It may be that *At the Moon's Inn* owes something to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and it is even conceivable that it is owed something by an immediately recent novel, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, which shares with it historical and thematic affinities. Yet Lytle's imagination, unlike the great majority of novelists' imaginations, is essentially sacramental and allegorical, creating textures, effects, and layers of meaning that an equal majority of readers and critics are unprepared to deal with. If in *The Velvet Horn*, a later novel of Lytle's published in 1955, some of the signs and symbols seem to eclipse one another, with *At the Moon's Inn* the significations are as sharply immanent as the stars that bore in from the black sky beyond Christendom, above De

Soto's westerling fleet. When we consider the novel's thematic complexity and the skillful subtlety of its prose, the clarity of the poetic meaning is astonishing.

In Lytle's hands, Hernando de Soto becomes a tragic hero, and it is a tribute to the novelist's genius that we can never, while reading his book, imagine De Soto as anything else. For Lytle, De Soto is a man of his times, but under the illusion that he represents an age of Spanish chivalry immediately past, when the united kingdoms of Aragon and Castile successfully concluded their nearly mystical warfare against the Moors. Like almost every other tragic hero, Lytle's De Soto is warned at the outset of his venture by his wife, who, having waited for her husband's hand for 17 years while he fought with Dávila in Nicaragua and Pizarro in Peru, now urges him, “Let us take the goods you have won and live among the worshipful of our station. . . . Let us have some pleasure in ourselves,” and calls Florida “an evil place”; by Cabeza de Vaca, one of three survivors of Pánfila Narváez's fatal expedition to that land; and, more broadly, by the old Marshal of Seville. The Marshal is a veteran of the fall of Grenada that occurred in 1492, the same year Columbus discovered America. Calling the great discoverer “an alchemist” and charging that he had “made such a hole in Christendom I fear me it may never be plugged,” he offers a toast before De Soto and De Soto's guests, the men whom the host has invited to back the expedition: “Señors, I give you poverty, that poverty of the Cross which is Spain!” But he drinks alone; and the hero, with his six hundred men in seven ships, departs for Cuba, from where the invasion of Florida is to be launched.

In Cuba, De Soto breaks his second-in-command, Nuno de Tovar, to the ranks after learning that he has impregnated De Soto's ward. Tovar, in search of a priest to confess him, goes into the chapel where he sees a branch with four green leaves on it growing out of the Sanctuary. “The sap, Fa-

ther!” he cries. “In God's house. . . . The wilderness grows here, too.” The development of these two themes—Western man's Faustian urge to pursue unrealizable dreams, and the ambiguous relationship between Christian civilization and heathen barbarism—constitute the enveloping action of *At the Moon's Inn*, whose title, a poetic reference to sleeping out-of-doors, suggests the will to live an unbounded life without enclosure, as the Creek and Cherokee Indians live in the flesh and the Europeans exist in their boundless desire.

As a Southerner and an Agrarian Mr. Lytle had in mind something more than the clash of Christian European and American aborigine. The Creek and Cherokee tribes are peoples he had studied and understood, and his sympathy for them translates into a historical irony that is both deeply moving and dramatically compelling. This sympathy reaches its apogee in the novel's third chapter, “The Wilderness,” when Father Francisco of the Rock offers a Mass for Juan Ortiz, a survivor of the Narváez expedition who had lived as an Indian among Indians for 12 years before De Soto's men stumbled upon him. Following his capture, Ortiz had been bound to the frame and ordered to be burned alive by an old cacique horribly mutilated by the Christians, then spared at the last moment by the intervention of the cacique's young daughters, who afterward nursed him back to health. For a test, the Indians sent him to guard the corpses of the newly dead at the burial ground, where he fell asleep and dreamed that his benefactress was leading him beyond time and the seasons to “No-place, the last station,” and a vision. Waking, he discovered that a wolf had stolen the body he was meant to watch, but after he tracked the animal and killed it with a stone dart the cacique ceremonially presented him with a purgative drink, which he promptly vomited at the old man's feet. Oblivious to the Mass that is being said for him, Ortiz remains lost in contemplation of his experience, from which he is finally returned by

the *Ite Missa est* and De Soto's words: "You live again as a Christian, Señor. Among Christians." The apposition of the heathen shriving and the Christian one, the bitter black brew in the conch shell and the silver chalice containing Christ's blood, though implicit, is unmistakable.

In his novella *The Bear*, William Faulkner wrote that the land of the American South—Andrew Lytle's land; the land that Hernando de Soto was the first Christian in history to lay eyes on—had actually been cursed by the evil of slavery. In *At the Moon's Inn*, Lytle implies, through Tovar, that this same land has been cursed by God long before slavery. For Lytle, the New World as the *conquistadores* discovered it, though it may indeed have been a paradise, was already a fallen one. "Following de Soto," Tovar reflects:

. . . the Christians had stumbled upon the world and before any knew it, all were drawn fast by its coils. The world that was flesh was everywhere, its power each man knew in himself, its temptations and its triumphs. But this land was the very body of the world. Not through any agent but through its proper self it worked its evil. Where but in one place could this happen? Where but . . .

He put out his hand and grasped the pole to steady himself. Had they perchance stumbled upon Eden, abandoned of God, running its unpruned seasons, ignorant of the generation of man, yet throughout all those generations growing heavier with the bloom that cannot die, the decay that cannot live, for the dry rot and the odor of that fruit which blooms and falls, falls and blooms, at the garden's pole?

"As I have done with this water," the cacique Mocoço says after sprinkling water upon the hands of his Christian guests, "so may you do with the blood of your enemies." Yet for Hernando de Soto, *la Florida* is much simpler than that: "Did you ever think why it is the Indies have been so long unknown to Christians? . . . It is because Satan has made of these worlds his private domain."

Closed behind pride and his nearly superhuman will, De Soto remains the distant enigmatic fascination that his alienated second, Nuño de Tovar, alone appears to understand. Lytle has rendered him wonderfully, while deliberately making Tovar and the guide Ortiz the central intelligences of his narrative. Ortiz is more than a guide, and he is an interpreter in more than the restrictive sense of the word: he is "one who had been lost that all might know the way." Ortiz and Tovar are apparently the sole members of the expedition to have some comprehension of its meaning. Tovar—a believing Christian filled with betraying carnal appetite—grasps instinctively the significance of the tarnished cross he lifts from the fingers of the skeleton he finds in the ravaged Indian village of Talimeco, and after taking an Indian mistress in Cutifichqui he "marries" her in an Indian ceremony that makes him a legitimate member of her family of the Wind. Like Ortiz, Tovar has a foot in each camp, and cannot be wholly caught up in the grim adventuring for fame and gold—and what else?—that De Soto has inspired, but that ends in talk only of maize and women. In both Tovar and Ortiz, the chivalry and the poverty of the Marshal's Spain live on in the wilderness that has become abruptly imperial Spain.

In the novel's final chapter (ironically titled "Conquest"), with De Soto dead of fever in an Indian village on the bank of the Mississippi River and what is left of his army lost in the swamp around it, Tovar has a vision in which he beholds the Governor reclining on the dirt floor of his quarters and wearing his full suit of burnished armor with the lid of the casque closed down. He hears De Soto speak:

"The will is not enough. It is not enough for one bent on his own destruction. Did I lead the chivalry of Spain to the sacred groves, the blessed land of Jerusalem? No, I am the alchemical captain, the adventurer in gold. Gold the wanderer. Pursuing, I found the world's secret, the alkahest and the panacea. They are one and the same. The universal menstruum is this . . ." Slowly

from the ground the arm raised up, the bony hand reached forth, white and shining, and the voice thin and distant, "Only the dead can prophesy."

Andrew Lytle ends his novel with the following sentence. "Tovar moved forward into the light."

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## An American Elegy

by George Garrett

Rabbit at Rest

by John Updike

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When a writer lives with and writes about a character in four books and for more than thirty years, as John Updike has done with Harry ("Rabbit") Angstrom—central character of *Rabbit at Rest* and of the quartet that began with *Rabbit, Run* in 1960—author and character get to know each other, strengths and weaknesses, good habits and bad, like an old married couple. Like old feet easy and comfortable in an old pair of shoes. Updike and Angstrom always shared some particular things—a Pennsylvania home and a feeling for it, a fine-tuned and alert sense of perception, a heightened sensitivity to persons, places, and things that easily transcended the differences between their vocabulary and education and experience. Some of these differences . . . Angstrom was an outstanding high-school athlete, a basketball star some of whose feats have been remembered for a generation. One reads, here and there, that Updike shoots a little golf (so does Angstrom, as it happens) and both in print and by the twitching grapevine one is told that Updike is a country fair golfer. But nobody that I know of has ever yet singled out and identified John Updike as a jock. Nevertheless it needs to be said that some of the best writing in *Rabbit at Rest*, lively, energetic writing, concerns Angstrom shooting golf and playing basketball (in memory and in the pres-