

CLEANTH BROOKS AND ROBERT PENN WARREN:  
A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

*by Mark Royden Winchell*

The story of their first meeting has been told so many times that it has become part of the folklore of modern Southern literature. One day, during the fall of 1924, Robert Penn Warren stopped by Kissam Hall on the Vanderbilt campus to visit his friend and classmate Saville Clark. With Clark was his new roommate, a freshman named Cleanth Brooks. Although only a year and a half older than Brooks, the precocious Warren was already a senior and an important member of the group of poets that called themselves “Fugitives.” Despite his local eminence, Red Warren took enough of an interest in his new acquaintance to look at one of Cleanth’s freshman themes and to compliment him on his “natural style.” As Humphrey Bogart said to Claude Rains at the end of *Casablanca*, it was the start of a beautiful friendship.<sup>1</sup>

That friendship continued for the next sixty-five years, ending only with Warren’s death on September 14, 1989. For most of this time, the two men were in close proximity to one another. When Brooks arrived at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in October 1929, Warren had already been there a year and left a note in Cleanth’s room welcoming him to campus. Then, from 1934-42, they were colleagues in the English department at Louisiana State University. During the last seven of those years, they edited the original series of the *Southern Review*. By 1947, Brooks was teaching at Yale, where he was joined by Warren in 1950; they would be neighbors in Connecticut for the next four decades.

For several reason, the friendship of Brooks and Warren did not flourish during their undergraduate days. Not only was Cleanth less advanced in intellect and less committed to the literary life, he also possessed a very different temperament from Red. At eighteen, Cleanth Brooks was a preacher’s kid (son of the Reverend Cleanth Brooks, Sr., of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South) who had experienced no adolescent rebellion to speak of. His years at a small Tennessee prep school were spent in an environment morally consistent with everything he learned in his father’s home. Although not sinful in themselves, dancing and card playing were considered dangerously frivolous. Frowned upon at any time, drinking was strictly forbidden now that Prohibition was the law of the land. Courtship was permitted but sexual liberties were not. (The boys at prep school even had to take an oath not to leave campus after dark.) Had Cleanth chafed under any of these restrictions, the more open atmosphere at Vanderbilt would have been an invitation to bacchanalian revels. In fact, he neither participated in such revels nor condemned them. He simply seemed interested in other things.

In contrast, Red Warren was a creature of the Jazz Age, whose nocturnal exploits read like something out of a Scott Fitzgerald short story set on a small Southern campus. Warren’s frequent companion in these exploits was a student of French named Bill Bandy. As Warren recalls, Bandy “had the only Stutz Bearcat on the campus. About three o’clock one morning, with several of us as passengers, he undertook to climb the great story-high stone flight of entrance steps to Wesley Hall in the Bearcat. He succeeded, and then made

a hair-raising descent, bouncing back step by step in reverse as astonished theological heads popped out of the upper windows of the building. Bandy leveled off at the bottom and sped away. The culprits were never identified" ("Reminiscence, 208). On another night Red Warren, so drunk on bootleg liquor that he could not make it back to his own lodging, appeared at Kissam Hall and collapsed in bed with Cleanth Brooks.

It was not until their time at Oxford that the friendship of Brooks and Warren matured socially and intellectually. Their academic work differed, as Red was pursuing a B.Litt degree while Cleanth was enrolled in the Hours B. A. program, but they spent many an after-hours session either in Red's lodgings in Wellington Square or among friends in Exeter College. Cleanth recalls a night at Exeter when a group of young men (some Rebels, some Yankees, some British) began discussing the War Between the States: "It was a matter of intense interest to Red and he promised to lay out before us then and there precisely what had gone on at the Battle of Gettysburg and particularly what had gone awry for the Confederate side.... Unfortunately, just before the batteries opened up on Cemetery Ridge in preparation for Pickett's Charge, the college bell began its hideous racket, warning that one had to be in his rooms before 12:15. So Pickett's Charge was over before it began, Red was out of the room in a trice, his scholar's gown fluttering behind him as he fled" ("Brooks on Warren," 20).

The B.Litt program Red was finishing was for an advanced research degree similar to a Ph.D. in an American university. He was also writing poetry noticeably influenced by the extravagant and baroque imagery one finds in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Unlike Donne, who was better known for the logical development of a controlling metaphor, Warren sought psychological unity through an accumulation of striking, often violent, images rendered in archaic diction. (He had already developed an interest in Elizabethan drama, which would become one of his primary teaching areas during his later academic career.) At the same time, Red never got so absorbed in the literature of another age and another land that he lost his American roots. (On many an evening at Oxford, he enjoyed hearing Cleanth's angelic rendition of "Frankie and Johnny," an American folk song about a homicidal woman and the man who "done her wrong.") His year in England had also made Red more of a Southerner than he had been back in Tennessee. His book *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* came out in 1929, and his participation in the Agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) kept the fate of Southern culture on his mind.

Unlike the English department at Vanderbilt, the program at Oxford was not hospitable to new developments in literary criticism. The nearby University of Cambridge, however, was a different matter. Like Vanderbilt, Cambridge in the twenties produced what George Core calls a "fifth column" of young writers and critics who were challenging the old orthodoxy (Core 23). If there was a difference (other than the greater distinction of the English university), it was that Cambridge criticism was more fully integrated into the official curriculum. In 1921, a young Cambridge graduate named Ivor Armstrong Richards joined the faculty of his alma mater as a lecturer in English and Moral Science. By the end of the decade, he was giving lectures that were so popular that some had to be held in the streets—the first time that had happened at Cambridge since the Middle Ages.

When Cleanth and Red were at Oxford in the late twenties, the former Fugitives had, as yet, published little criticism. Although their poetry had inspired an interest in

contextual analysis and close reading, their critical insights tended to be random and untheoretical. Cleanth, in particular, believed that Richards was raising some of the questions inchoate in the Fugitive approach to poetry.

In 1929, Richards published a book called *Practical Criticism*, which was based on a series of classroom experiments conducted among honours students at Cambridge between 1925 and 1928. Richards gave out a total of thirteen unidentified poems to those students and asked for their response. When judged by commonly accepted literary standards, five of the thirteen poems would have been considered bad; six good to great; and two borderline. Richards's students, confronting the text without the benefit of history or biography, not only varied widely in their judgments but also fell prey to every conceivable form of misreading. Although it would have been easy enough for Richards to give them the "right" answers, his concern was with nurturing the sort of critical intelligence that would enable his students to come up with those answers on their own.

Like the textbooks that Brooks and Warren would later edit, *Practical Criticism* was, at heart, an exercise in pedagogy. Whatever else it may be, applied criticism is also a form of remedial reading.<sup>2</sup> In letting his students make mistakes, Richards played the role of a diagnostician, who observes a problem in order to discover its causes. The problems he found included an inability to discern the plain sense of a poem, a failure to apprehend its rhythm and movement, difficulties in visualizing its imagery; irrelevant associations from the reader's personal life, stock responses to the poem's theme, an excess of sentiment (sentimentality), a deficiency of sentiment (hardness of heart); doctrinal prejudices (usually political or religious), technical preconceptions, and other critical expectations. In identifying these deficiencies, Richards indirectly defined a positive approach to criticism. As Brooks himself observed, "if one is able to point out a sufficiency of errors made by others, he has at least implied the general lineaments of a sound reading" ("I. A. Richards and *Practical Criticism*," 38).

## I

After he finished his degree at Oxford, Cleanth Brooks was hired to teach English at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. (At the time, the Dean of the Graduate School, Charles W. Pipkin, was actively recruiting promising faculty in all departments.) During his first four years at LSU (1930-34), Cleanth had little direct contact with Red Warren. Although he recalled seeing a picture of a dark-haired California girl on Red's dresser at Oxford, he did not realize that Red was already secretly married to Emma Brescia, who was called "Cinina" by her friends. The new bride, with whom Red began to live on his return to the Untied States, had been born in Ecuador of Italian parents (her father later became a music professor at Mills College in Oakland, California) and spoke several languages fluently. It was as a young married man that Red had to decide whether to pursue a safe career as a scholar or to take his chances with poetry, fiction, and criticism. Deciding for the latter, he turned down a fellowship to complete his doctorate at Yale and vowed never to contribute an article to a scholarly journal (Bohner 25).

With a new wife to support and his years as a best-selling author still in the future, Red accepted a one-year appointment to teach English at Southwestern College, an exclusive liberal arts school in Memphis. In 1931, he left there to take a temporary position at Vanderbilt. Returning to the scene of his past triumphs, Red might well have

thought that he had entered a time warp. Although the Fugitive group had disbanded, two of its founding members, John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson, were still on the scene, still writing poetry and criticism. At the same time, their activities on behalf of the socially conservative Agrarian movement were gaining them the sort of publicity that the New South liberals who ran Vanderbilt found embarrassing. The English department chairman Edwin Mims, in particular, considered *I'll Take My Stand* an attack on the progressive values he had championed in his own writing. If Ransom and Davidson were well-established members of the department, Warren was little more than an upstart, and it is a small wonder that Mims agreed to hire him at all. The year Warren graduated from Vanderbilt, Mims resigned from a position teaching night school at the Watkins Institute in Nashville, but when he learned that Red had applied for the job and would be his successor, Mims rescinded his resignation out of pure spite.

At the end of the 1933-34 school year, Warren's contract was not renewed. (Years later, John Ransom wrote to Cleanth: "The letting go of Warren, who asked so little as a reward for staying, is the most nearly criminal thing in the Vanderbilt record"; Ransom, *Letters*, 277). Once again, Charles Pipkin came to the rescue, inviting Red to the LSU campus for a lecture and hoping that the English department chairman, W. A. Reed, would do the rest. Given Red's greater prominence in the literary world, his appointment to the LSU faculty was more nearly a foregone conclusion than it had been for Cleanth. Brooks and Warren were now together for the third time in their careers and ready to embark on a collaboration that would alter the literary history of our time.

The event that set all of this in motion occurred on an otherwise unremarkable Sunday afternoon in February 1935. LSU president James Monroe Smith drove his black Cadillac limousine up to the cottage Warren was renting on Park Drive in south Baton Rouge. Smith invited Red, his wife Cinina, and their boarder Albert Erskine for a drive in the country—an unusual courtesy for a university president to extend to an assistant professor who had yet to complete his first year on the faculty. Smith, however, had concluded that LSU needed a literary quarterly, and he wanted Warren's advice on how to bring this dream to fruition. Red advised the president that the project could be accomplished for approximately \$10,000 a year, "if you paid a fair rate for contributions, gave writers decent company between the covers, and concentrated editorial authority sufficiently for the magazine to have its own distinctive character and quality" (Brooks and Warren, *Anthology*, xi). At Smith's urging, Warren and Erskine joined forces with Cleanth and Charles Pipkin to draw up a plan for the magazine; and, the next day, Smith officially authorized the project. The first issue of the *Southern Review* appeared five months later.

The beginnings of the review were so hectic that the magazine tended to define itself along the way. Although the presence of Pipkin as nominal editor assured that the journal would give some space to social and political issues, Brooks and Warren were the young workhorses who soon determined the character of the publication. Red Warren, in particular, seemed to be either directly or indirectly acquainted with most of the important contemporary writers in the English speaking world. Although many early solicitations fell on barren ground, enough were answered to produce a choice crop of contributors. With strong financial backing, the *Southern Review* was able to pay a cent and a half per word for prose contributions and thirty-five cents a line for poetry. What was even more important to writers who could command higher fees from commercial magazines was

the select company they kept in the *Southern Review*.

In addition to putting up with the daily nuisances of running a magazine, Cleanth Brooks read ninety manuscripts a week, taught three classes, did his own writing, served on university committees, and maintained a multigenerational household in the depths of the Great Depression. Although he received no additional summer compensation, he was also the person most responsible for keeping the magazine functioning twelve months a year. (Without such vigilance, a quarterly simply cannot exist.) With Red frequently gone from campus (spending a guest semester at another university or the summer in Italy), the day-to-day operations of the magazine fell increasingly to Cleanth and the review's business manager, Albert Erskine.

It was on the *Southern Review* that the legendary collaboration of Brooks and Warren began taking shape. In editorial conferences occurring as often as two or three times a week, they fashioned a literary quarterly that would set the standard for all such magazines in the future. According to Albert Erskine's successor John Palmer, Red and Cleanth resembled agreeable colleagues less than they did two different parts of the same person. Red Warren was a creative genius, who filled any room that he entered with his expansive gestures, staccato brogue, and inimitable Kentucky horse laugh. For him, criticism was not a sullen and lonely art but a social act—the meeting of kindred spirits to talk about books. The circle of friends might be as intimate as himself and one other person, as dynamic as a group of poets calling themselves Fugitives, as recalcitrant as a typical class of university sophomores, or as amorphous as the reading public itself. When Robert Penn Warren was at work, the surrounding area would soon become a godawful mess. He would jot an idea or an image down on a piece of paper, wad that paper up, and start over with a fresh sheet. Very few of the wads ever made their way to the wastebasket.

In contrast, Cleanth kept a tidier desk and a more orderly mind. If Red's light could be as blinding and diffuse as the sun itself, Cleanth's was more like a laser beam—less primal but more focused. Typically, Red would originate an idea to which Cleanth, with his penetrating logic and encyclopedic knowledge of literature, gave structure and substance. But, as with many generalizations, the reverse could be true. Cleanth (certainly one of the most original critics of the age) was sometimes the source of insight, to which Red (the maker of too many completed works to be a man of inspiration only) supplied shape and closure.

When they collaborated on a textbook, their personalities would blend; when they edited the *Southern Review*, those personalities were submerged. At least since the Renaissance, artists have generally signed their names to their works—both literally and figuratively. The editorial art, however, is almost medieval in nature. It is the destiny of the editor to be anonymous; he lives to make others look good, while rendering himself invisible. (For Cleanth, this meant reworking, and rewriting, the syntax of many of the articles submitted by Pipkin's friends in the social sciences—John Dewey among them.) Like a gothic cathedral or a well-made movie, a magazine is a group effort. The editor is not only an architect but one of the bricklayers; he is both director and cameraman. He also has to be something of a public relations expert. The public with whom he deals can include everyone from the local printer to the university bursar, not to mention legions of contributors and would-be contributors. They send manuscripts and queries in every mail and sometimes even call on the telephone or show up in person. John Palmer remembers when the secretary of the *Southern Review*, Jean Stafford, came into his office to inform

him that Henry Miller was out in the waiting room. The notorious expatriate, whose writings were banned in this country, was trying to sell enough of his work to finance his way west to Taos, New Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

If the general academic progress of LSU during the political reign of Huey Long seemed an anomaly to the outside world, the existence of the *Southern Review* in Long's Louisiana was even more remarkable. It is certain that James Monroe Smith would never have proposed a literary quarterly to Red Warren had he thought that the Long would have disapproved. In a perverse bit of argumentation, Robert Gorham Davis suggested years later in the *New York Times* that Huey needed the *Southern Review* to give him respectability and provide cover for his political venality. Long partisans argue just as implausibly that Huey was actually a misunderstood patron of art and literature. William Faulkner was probably nearer the truth when, in "Knight's Gambit," he has Gavin Stevens tell his nephew Chick Mallison that "Huey Long in Louisiana had made himself the founder owner and supporter of...one of the best literary magazines anywhere, without ever looking inside it probably nor even caring what the people who wrote and edited it thought of him" (229-30).

## II

Back in the mid-thirties, while they were doing the writing and editing that would make them world famous in the profession of letters, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren were earning their keep primarily as college teachers of English. As Brooks recalled the situation forty years later: "Our students, many of them bright enough and certainly amiable and charming enough, had no notion how to read a literary text. Many of them approached a Shakespeare sonnet or Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' or Pope's *Rape of the Lock* much as they would approach an ad in a Sears-Roebuck catalogue or an editorial in their local newspaper." A student to whom Red was teaching *King Lear* mournfully shook his head and muttered: "I just don't like to read about bad people" (Brooks, "Forty Years," 5). The practical question Cleanth and Red faced was a more acute version of the one that I. A. Richards had faced at Cambridge a decade earlier—how to teach literature (particularly works of some difficulty and sophistication) to such students.

The available textbooks were of little help. James Dow McCallum's *The College Omnibus*, published by Harcourt Brace in 1933, was the standard anthology, both at LSU and elsewhere. One could obviously criticize this text on historical grounds. With none of its selections written before 1800, it gave its readers no sense of the development of English literature prior to the Romantic era. From the standpoint of criticism, it was even more deficient. Anyone teaching Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" would have to be content with a short biographical introduction and a dollop of impressionistic response. ("The song of the nightingale brings sadness and exhilaration to the poet and makes him long to be lifted up and away from the limitations of life. The seventh stanza is particularly beautiful"; McCallum, 670).

A reasonably competent English teacher might be expected to know when Keats lived and to have a vague emotional response to the poem already. What he might not have was an effective means of explaining to a class full of college sophomores (most of whom have probably never been "half in love with easeful death") what this poem has to say that would be of any interest to them. Reading the poem with dramatic emphasis (the Edwin

Mims approach) might heighten appreciation but not understanding. For a conscientious teacher, it was simply not enough to say what Louis Armstrong said about jazz: "If you have to ask what it is, you wouldn't understand if I told you."

Fortunately, many students, then as now, had dirty minds; so the poems with double entendres, such as *The Rape of the Lock*, were easier to teach. In fact, the sort of analytical skills necessary to discern Pope's hidden meanings were precisely what students needed to read poetry in general. If McCallum's *Omnibus* and the other existing textbooks were not teaching such skills, Warren argued that he and Brooks would simply need to provide their own text. Consequently, at the suggestion of W. A. Read, Warren prepared a thirty-page mimeographed booklet on metrics and imagery. This class handout was first used by Brooks, Warren, and a graduate student named John T. Purser in the spring semester of 1935. By the fall of 1936, the three had published a critical anthology of poetry, fiction, drama, and expository prose under the title *An Approach to Literature*.

As Thomas W. Cutrer has pointed out, the depth of the Depression was not a propitious time to bring out a new textbook, especially with the McCallum anthology being so recent and so widely accepted. Nevertheless, Marcus Wilkerson, director of the new LSU Press, approved of the idea, and President Smith promised financial backing. (The enthusiastic young Purser had to be dissuaded from seeking the political influence of his friend O. K. Allen, who had succeeded Huey Long as governor; see Cutrer, 181). Perhaps because the book represented such a radical departure from the McCallum approach, it was not greeted with universal approval, even in Baton Rouge. When threatened traditionalists started referring to it as "The Reproach to Literature," Brooks and Warren picked up on the joke and began calling it that in their private correspondence.

Not only was the *Approach* short on biographical and historical information but—horror of horrors—it included a generous selection of Southern writers, where McCallum had none. Many of these were either Agrarian allies of Brooks and Warren or contributors to the *Southern Review*. Even if this could be seen as cronyism, the cronies of Brooks and Warren included some of the finest writers of the day. Thomas W. Cutrer believes that "Brooks and Warren were making an attempt to remove their native region from the educational imperialism which had been its lot since *McGuffey's Reader*, *Webster's Dictionary*, and the Yankee schoolmarm invaded the South in the nineteenth century" (182). It is therefore ironic that among the first schools to adopt the new book were the universities of Maine and New Hampshire.

It could be argued that, in treating literature as a series of technical problems, this text takes some of the magic out of the reading experience. Brooks and Warren were, in fact, accused of being "cold-blooded analysts who found no pleasure, certainly no joy—in literature." Even if this were true, which it is not, their pedagogical approach made literature an accessible mode of discourse rather than a forbidding mystery that could be admired but never known. Moreover, they were intent on making it accessible *as literature*, not as an adjunct to sociology. As Brooks recalled over forty years later, "We were trying to apply the grease to the wheel that squeaked the loudest. Besides, the typical instructor, product as he was of the graduate schools of that day, had been thoroughly trained in literary history, or so we assumed" (*Community*, 82).

The success of *An Approach to Literature* was such that, by 1939, most major textbook companies were trying to buy the copyright from the LSU Press. (Brooks and Warren had

not even offered the book to a commercial house in 1935.) F. S. Crofts (later Appleton-Century-Crofts) won out and acquired both the plates and the rights for two per cent of future royalties. In 1975, forty years after its original publication, the book went into its fifth edition. Had Brooks and Warren never published another textbook, the longevity of *An Approach to Literature* would have earned them a niche in the history of modern English pedagogy. Far from complacent with what they had done, Cleanth and Red were soon at work on a book that would revolutionize the teaching of literature for more than a generation.

The first edition of that book, *Understanding Poetry*, appeared in 1938 with no grandiose ambitions, even if the title itself claimed more than Brooks and Warren had originally intended. They had simply wanted to call the book *Reading Poems*; however, the marketing division of their publisher, Henry Holt, convinced them that that title was too modest. (It is interesting to note that when Wright Thomas and Stuart Gerry Brown called their textbook *Reading Poems*, Leslie Fiedler accused them of a nominalistic rejection of the very concept of poetry.) In fact, the phrase “understanding poetry” is a perfect statement of the book’s purpose—its end is critical *understanding* rather than vague appreciation, and the object of that understanding is *poetry*, not literary history or biography.

Nearly fifty years later, Warren observed that his labors with Brooks were “quite literally...collaborative”:

We sat down and argued out general notions and general plans for the book—only to find as work developed that we were constantly being thrown back to revise original ideas. But very early Cleanth had made a fundamental suggestion. After an introductory section of general discussion, we would get down to individual poems and start with narrative, including folk ballads. Folk poetry has one great pedagogical advantage. It springs from a nonliterary world and some event that has some special appeal to the imagination of that world.... Our whole effort was to show how the non-bookish poetry could lead straight to the bookish: that is to a narrative poem by, say, Frost. (“Brooks and Warren,” 2)

Among the folk poems included was the old favorite of their Oxford days—“Frankie and Johnny.”

Part of the excitement generated by *Understanding Poetry* lay in its being a genuinely *critical* text, which did not hesitate to attack canonical writers, including that favorite whipping boy of literary modernists Percy Bysshe Shelley. Although the book includes nine of Shelley’s poems, the only one analyzed is “The Indian Serenade.” Brooks and Warren correctly note that one’s response to this poem is predicated on one’s reaction to its speaker (the question of ethos). What makes both the speaker and his message suspect is Shelley’s failure to demonstrate or dramatize the emotions the speaker expresses. The famously egregious line “I die! I faint! I fail!” (which seems like a reversal of the normal sequence of actions) might be a statement of emotion genuinely earned, or it might be the hysterical utterance of a self-indulgent adolescent. There is nothing *in the poem* to convince us which it is.

Even before *Understanding Poetry* began making its impact in the classroom, it was hailed by the critics as the first wave of a pedagogical revolution. In the inaugural issue of the *Kenyon Review*, John Crowe Ransom wrote: “Mr. Brooks has established his place among

the subtler critics, while he keeps to himself his own versifying, and Mr. Warren is one of the really superlative poets of our time" ("Teaching," 82). Ransom goes on to note that "the analyses [of *Understanding Poetry*] are as much of the old poems as of the new poems, and those of the old are as fresh and illuminating as those of the new; or at least, nearly. What can this mean but that criticism as it is now practiced is a new thing?... Probably we need the new critics for the sake of understanding our classics even more, and much more than we need them for securing our possession of the strange moderns" (83)<sup>4</sup>

Although Brooks and Warren are now gone, the pedagogical revolution they effected has become so fully absorbed that what was once known as the New Criticism has long since become accepted practice. In a letter to me dated December 6, 1993, the poet and critic Dana Gioia wrote: "The three best selling college poetry textbooks of the past thirty years were probably *How Does a Poem Mean?* by John Ciardi, *Sound and Sense* by Laurence Perrine, and (probably the best selling of all) *An Introduction to Poetry* by X. J. Kennedy. All three are strikingly New Critical as are the legions of their imitators. These are the books that are used by millions of students and tens of thousands of teachers in the classroom. New Criticism, even if it doesn't go by that name, remains virtually unchanged as the method of choice in college classrooms."<sup>5</sup>

### III

In 1942, a new administration at LSU suspended the *Southern Review*, ostensibly in the interest of war-time austerity. This final indignity prompted Red Warren to take a position at the University of Minnesota. Although Cleanth Brooks also had several opportunities to better himself, he remained at LSU until Yale offered him a full professorship in 1947. In the fall of 1950 Thornton Wilder, who was a longtime fellow of one of Yale's undergraduate colleges and a good friend of Cleanth, suggested that the university might revitalize its School of Drama by hiring more creative writers to teach playwrighting. At that point, Red Warren had left Minnesota and was teaching part time in the Yale English department while living in New York. Because Marc Connolly was leaving the School of Drama, there was a permanent opening in that program. A. Whitney Griswold, the new president of Yale, called Red to his office one Saturday afternoon and invited Cleanth to come along. Although he would be officially listed as Professor of Playwrighting, Red was promised another course in the English department. Thus, for the fourth time in their careers, the same campus was home to Brooks and Warren.

When the Yale registrar called Cleanth in late April 1951, hoping to locate Red, who had not turned in his grades, Cleanth discovered that his friend was in Reno ending his long and troubled marriage with Cinina. The following year, Red and Eleanor Clark were married at Eleanor's mother's home in the Connecticut countryside. It was a small private ceremony with Albert Erskine as best man and Albert's former wife, Katherine Anne Porter, as matron of honor. On the way over, Cleanth had to stop to let his dog Pompey relieve himself. Pompey, with a mind of his own and energy to match, tried to run away, pulling Cleanth against a barbed wire fence. By the time the Brooks contingent arrived at the wedding, Cleanth's shirt was soaked with blood, and he had to borrow a clean one from Red. Despite this slapstick beginning, the marriage turned out to be a spectacular success. Red was happy, perhaps for the first time in his life.

During the time they were separated in the 1940s, Brooks and Warren published

two more textbooks—*Understanding Fiction* (1943) and *Modern Rhetoric* (1947). By the 1960s, when they were both teaching at Yale, they were contemplating an anthology of American literature. This project was delayed, however, when Cleanth went to London to serve a two-year stint as cultural attaché at the American embassy. After Cleanth's return to Yale in 1966, he and Red immersed themselves in what would become a magisterial tome called *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, which was published by St. Martin's Press in 1973.

Because the book required more historical commentary than either Cleanth or Red felt comfortable with, they asked their colleague R. W. B. Lewis to join them as a third collaborator. Lewis recalls convening for two or three days at a time at the Warren homes in Fairfield, Connecticut, and Brattleboro, Vermont, at the Brooks estate in Northford, Connecticut, and at his own master's living quarters at Yale's Calhoun College. At those sessions, they would discuss and criticize each other's individual contributions and work on parts of the book that were genuinely collaborative. Lewis describes how one of these parts, the "Letter to the Reader," was composed:

We were at the Warrens' Vermont place during a summer week, and in between swimming in the mountain pool and striding along the country roads, between chatty meals on the screened porch and leisurely drink-times on the terrace, we met in a small cabin across the lawn from the main house and worked away. Warren sat at a rustic table with a typewriter in front of him; Brooks and I shifted and prowled about. Warren, an erratic typist at best, would listen to different tentative formulations of this sentence or that, and when the right one struck him he would tap in out haphazardly on the page. The resulting script, full of x-ed out lines and proximate spellings, was turned over to Brooks, who took it back home and rewrote it in his own style. That version was then amended, separately, by Warren and me, and Brooks thereafter gave it a final run-through. (569)

This experience convinced Lewis of "an irreducible subsurface regionalism in American literary folk." In fact, as the three colleagues began discussing the mid-nineteenth century, Lewis got "the eerie but enlivening sensation that we were, between us, reenacting the Civil War." Brooks and Warren seemed to him to become increasingly Southern. "To my ear their very accents thickened," Lewis recalls; "and though I am in fact Chicago-born, I felt myself becoming more and more northern and even, like Emily Dickinson, beginning to see 'New Englandly.' When Warren presented me with his selection of Melville's war poems, I remarked that to judge from this lot—all of them springing from northern defeats and disasters—one would be in doubt as to which side had actually 'won' the war" (570).

The book that was actually produced by this collaboration ran to two million words, a fourth of which consisted of commentary. Lewis figures that he, Brooks, and Warren each wrote around five hundred typescript pages each. The result was not just a standard classroom anthology but also a critical history of American literature from the seventeenth century to the present. In fact, the book was so good that it never won the wide acceptance it deserved. Since the 1930s, students had gotten either less capable or less willing to learn.

## IV

When the *Southern Review* was suspended in 1942, Cleanth Brooks and Red Warren knew that life in Louisiana would never be the same again. Even though both eventually left for better jobs in the North, the memory of Baton Rouge went with them. Years later, Red observed that “after Louisiana nothing has been real” (see Simpson 8). What even the author of *All the King’s Men* might have found surprising was the degree to which the Louisiana he once knew had remained the same in his absence. Although Huey Long had been dead since 1935, his son had been in the Senate for half his life. Waves of reform had periodically swept through the state over the ensuing fifty years, but the reformers committed the cardinal sin of being uninteresting. In 1985 the state was ruled by a populist demagogue who might have taught Huey a thing or two. Edwin Edwards was a flamboyant womanizer who went on gambling sprees to Las Vegas several times a year; his administration was riddled with graft, and he considered a federal indictment to be a rite of passage. He once remarked that the only way he could be defeated for election was if he were found in bed with a dead girl or a live boy.

What *had* changed in Louisiana was the attitude of LSU toward the *Southern Review*. The magazine had been revived in 1965 and by 1985 had been in existence for nearly three times as long as the original series. When the university prepared to celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> year of its own founding, the emphasis was on events that had taken place in its seventy-fifth year—principally the establishment of the literary magazine that James Monroe Smith had hoped would put LSU on the map. On October 9-11, 1985, the Baton Rouge campus commemorated twenty years of the new *Southern Review* and honored those who had started the original magazine half a century earlier. The occasion was also a kind of personal homage to the two men who had played the tired old role of prophets without honor. As so many of the literary giants of 1935 had faded into obscurity, Brooks and Warren had grown in stature. They had also grown old.

Earlier that year, Red had marked his sixty-second year as a professional writer by publishing *New and Selected Poems: 1923-1985*. Because his reputation will almost surely rest on the poems published since 1954, they constitute the bulk of the volume (287 of 322 pages); and because the poems are printed in reverse chronological order, the more recent work enjoys pride of place. Moreover, the sheer length of Red’s career was a wonder in itself. As Louis Rubin has pointed out, when Warren published his first poems in 1923, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Anatole France, Henri Bergson, and George Washington Cable were still alive. “Nobody much had ever heard of William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, or Hart Crane. *The Great Gatsby* would not be published for another two years, [and] Eudora Welty was a thirteen-year-old in Jackson, Mississippi” (137). The standing ovation that Warren received in 1985 was a particularly bittersweet tribute. The obscurantists who had let him go so many years earlier were themselves gone. In contrast, at least one high-ranking member of the current university administration was at every session of the 1985 conference. By living long and well, Red Warren had achieved the best revenge.

If Red was the star of the occasion, second billing would almost certainly have gone to Eudora Welty. The Southern literary community was pretty much agreed that, with Faulkner gone, Warren and Welty were the two most prominent writers in the South. The general populace, which usually did not read poetry or criticism, knew Warren and Welty as popular fiction writers—even if that knowledge did not extend beyond *All the*

*King's Men* and "Why I Live at the P. O." Although no celebrity, Cleanth was far from unknown. Many prominent Louisianans now in their fifties and sixties still remembered having their eyes opened to the complexities of poetry in Brooks's sophomore literature class. The Brooks and Warren textbooks and Cleanth's own best known critical book *The Well Wrought Urn* had long since become standard references for the specialist and non-specialist alike.<sup>6</sup> If literary fashion had passed the New Critics by, no one would have suspected it that weekend at LSU.

Other participants in the conference included Ernest J. Gaines, Gloria Naylor, Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates, Robert B. Heilman, Charles East, James W. Applewhite, Walter Sullivan, Elizabeth Spencer, William C. Havard, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., George Core, Ronald Schuchard, Denis Donoghue, and Walker Percy. One virtually unknown participant was the young filmmaker Ken Burns, who recreated the ambience of 1935 with a documentary film on Huey Long. A few years later, Burns produced a popular documentary series on the "Civil War" for PBS—a project suggested by Red Warren, who had been featured prominently in the Huey Long film.

Only Red's family and friends realized what an ordeal the trip to Baton Rouge had been for him. He had been in failing health and showed every one of his eighty years. (In contrast, Cleanth possessed the energy of a man half his age.) As the conference wore on, Red spent more and more time in his room at the faculty club, drinking bourbon and swapping stories with Cleanth, Cleanth's wife Tinkum, and Eudora Welty. His single public performance (a poetry reading) was interrupted by a fit of coughing so serious that *Southern Review* editor James Olney had to finish for him. The one question that cast a shadow over the festivities was whether Red was simply under the weather or seriously ill. His prolific output of poetry caused some to think that he was ageless. But he was making fewer public appearances and even canceling invitations he had accepted. His brogue seemed to grow thicker, so that his comments in radio and television interviews were frequently indecipherable. Then, in the summer of 1985, he was diagnosed with inoperable bone cancer. Walter Sullivan recalls asking the Brookses what was wrong with Red that final night in Baton Rouge. Ever the diplomat, Cleanth said: "He's not feeling well." The more plainspoken Tinkum replied: "He's doomed."<sup>7</sup>

## V

On September 26, 1983, nearly two years before the discovery of his terminal illness, Red had written to Cleanth about what their friendship had meant to his work:

You can't imagine how much I owe you about poetry—on two counts. Our long collaborations always brought something new and eye-opening to me, seminal notions for me, often couched in some seemingly incidental or casual remark. One of the happiest recollections I have is that of the long sessions of work on *UP* [*Understanding Poetry*]<sup>8</sup>—not to mention earlier and later conversations. The other count has to do with the confidence you gave me about my own efforts. I'm sure that you were over-generous, but even allowing for that, it still meant something fundamental to me. I have often wanted to say something like this to you, but I know that you'd give me an embarrassed shrug and disclaimer. Anyway I can say it now without your interruption.<sup>8</sup>

During the four years that it took for Red to die, he continued to be lionized by a public unaware of his illness. (As George Garrett has noted, Warren received so many honorary degrees and medals “that some anonymous wag called him the General Pinochet of American Literature in honor of his politics not at all, but rather the top-heavy tinkling appearance of over-decorated Latin American leaders”; 50-51). In the spring of 1986, Congress found a new way to honor the country’s greatest living poet by naming him America’s first poet laureate. The job was actually poetry consultant to the Library of Congress (a position that Red had held more than forty years earlier), but the title was new and impressive. It came perilously close to being a posthumous honor.

During the last year of his life, Red was virtually unable to speak. Toward the end, Albert Erskine told Red’s daughter Rosanna to read her father one of his oldest poems, “Bearded Oaks.” Upon hearing the poem’s final lines—“We live in time so little time / And we learn all so painfully, / That we may spare this hour’s term / To practice for eternity”—Red gave a smile of recognition and, with difficulty, spoke the name “Albert.” He slipped back into a coma and never uttered another word.<sup>9</sup> On September 15, 1989, he was gone.

Red’s burial near the family’s summer home in West Wardsboro, Vermont, seemed to come right out of a movie script. Although it was still fairly early in the fall, snow and sleet were already on the ground. The funeral procession made its way from an old church down the long gravel path to the graveyard. Tinkum Brooks’s nephew Carver Blanchard sang that wonderful old Scottish hymn “Abide with Me.” When Red was laid to rest, it was the first time in a hundred years that this old Vermont burying ground had been disturbed. Pondering the final ritual, Louis P. Simpson writes: “We may fancy that this act expressed the last vision of a place to come to by a poet for whom the mystery of his identity was deeply fused with the mystery of place; for a poet who was an unmovable nonbeliever but who said repeatedly that he yearned to believe; for a poet who was southern to the bone—knew that he would never be at home save in the South—and yet knew as deeply that, because of his very nature as a southerner, he was an exile who could never come home again” (“Warren and the South,” 11).

It remained only for Vanderbilt to pay its last respects to its most distinguished graduate. A memorial service was held on campus in November, as the friends and admirers of Red Warren gathered to measure the extent of their loss, while cherishing all that was vouchsafed them in art and memory. After the public speeches in the Vanderbilt chapel, a few of Red’s family members and closest friends gathered in a private dining room in the administration building, Kirkland Hall. After dinner, they swapped stories and reminiscences about the man they had known.

When it came Cleanth’s turn, he spoke of Red’s love of popular music and his amusement whenever he heard the inimitable Brooks rendition of America’s great folk songs. Pretty soon, the entire table was urging a reluctant Cleanth to perform as he had at Oxford sixty years earlier. Finally, Eleanor Warren said: “Do it for Red.” Cleanth pushed his chair back from the table and sat straight, without even touching his back to the back of the chair. He then began to sing in the most proper angelic voice: “Frankie and Johnny were lovers...”<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. Except where indicated, the personal information in this essay was gleaned from a series of interviews I

- conducted with Cleanth Brooks between 1990 and 1993.
2. In an attempt to ridicule what was starting to be called the New Criticism, the historical scholar Douglas Bush dismissed it as "an advanced course in remedial reading." See Douglas Bush, "The New Criticism: Some Old Fashioned Queries," *PMLA* 64, supp., pt. 2 (March 1949), 13.
  3. Interview with John Palmer on June 21, 1993.
  4. The close reading exemplified by Richards and the Vanderbilt critics came to be called the New Criticism largely because John Crowe Ransom published a book by that title in 1941. Ransom's intention was not so much to give a name to a particular school of criticism as it was to call attention to the fact that the professional study of literature (even in the academy) was becoming more critical and less traditionally philological or scholarly. The term caught on, even as the "new" criticism gradually became the reigning orthodoxy in literary studies.
  5. Personal correspondence with Dana Gioia, dated December 6, 1993.
  6. Consider the example of Harold McSween. A native of Alexandria, Louisiana (who was baptized by Cleanth Brooks, Sr.), McSween took Cleanth's class in sophomore literature and later enjoyed a successful career as a lawyer, businessman, and U. S. congressman. After losing congressional races to a dying Earl Long and to Earl's cousin Gillis Long, McSween retired from politics. He later became a widely published writer, contributing fiction, poetry, and criticism to the *Sevane*, *Southern*, and *Virginia Quarterly* reviews.
  7. Interview with Walter Sullivan, April 21, 1992.
  8. The original text of this letter is contained in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.
  9. Interview with Carver Blanchard, June 19, 1993.
  10. Interview with Walter Sullivan, April 21, 1993.

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