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A Consonance of Civility and Good-Will

KEEN BUTTERWORTH

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: A Literary Correspondence, ed. James A. Grimshaw, Jr. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998, xxvi, 444 pp. \$39.95, ISBN 0-8262-1165-8.

In October 1985 Louisiana State University held a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the *Southern Review*. Among those on the program were Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, Ernest Gaines, Gloria Naylor, Houston Baker, Elizabeth Spencer, Henry Louis Gates, James Olney, and a number of other literary figures who had contributed to or had some connection with the *Review*. Most important of these were Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, who had been instrumental in getting the magazine started in 1935 and had performed most of the editorial duties until the *Review* was discontinued in 1942. During the first day of the meeting one of the participants attacked Warren's poem "Pondy Woods," purposely misconstruing Warren's intent and focusing on a line he considered offensive. The attack was alien to the spirit of the celebration and obviously unwarranted. But such things happen at literary gatherings, personalities and politics being what they are, and I think most of us had forgotten the attack, or pushed it to the back of our minds, when the celebration resumed on the following day. But Cleanth Brooks had not forgotten, or forgiven. Upon assuming the lectern, he mounted his own attack, defending Warren's poem and chastising the offender—not only for his willful misreading, but for his lack of manners as well. It was obvious to us all that Mr. Brooks considered redress of the affront more im-

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portant than his own completed paper and had spent some time preparing a response. And he was angry—with an anger that bordered on outrage. He had cast aside that "tone of civility and sweet reasonableness" that his biographer Mark Winchell says he always maintained.¹ His colleague, collaborator, and closest friend had been wronged, and he had taken it upon himself to set matters right. His ire was a measure of the strength of his friendship and of his sense of rectitude.

The strength of Brooks's friendship pervades his letters published in *Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: A Literary Correspondence*. Just as obvious is the strength of Warren's attachment to Brooks. Throughout these letters, extending from 1933 to 1988, mostly concerned with literary and professional matters, a tone of respectful deference obtains, but breaking through that tone quite often are glimpses of their heartfelt affection for one another. These glimpses usually come at the ends of letters, when the business matters have been concluded and one expresses his desire to see the other and his family, or is particularly warm in communicating his affection. The closes are usually "As ever" or "Regards" or "My best," but on a few occasions these become "Love to both of you" or "Our love, all around." And, in several instances, when the drudgery of putting together one of their textbooks has become too much to bear, Warren, particularly, will relax the professional tone and vent his exasperation—as he does in a letter of 30 June 1947:

Well, I'll sign off, for the clock is striking midnight.
God bless us one and all and let's finish this damned
book and make a million dollars and blow it all on
riotous living to recover our souls.

On many occasions they request criticism of a piece they have written, either for one of their textbooks or to be published elsewhere. Brooks appears most reluctant to offer criticism of Warren, although he occasionally does so, but always with

tactful qualifications. For instance, in 1962 Warren sent Brooks a copy of his essay "Fiction: Why We Read It," asking for suggestions. Brooks's answer of 14 March lavishly praises the essay, calling it a "little masterpiece," then adds, "I have set down (on the next page) a few very tiny suggestions and queries. None of them amount to much and I shan't mind if you pass over them all." There follows a full page of suggestions. Warren is less reluctant to offer criticism, but he too is always tactful. When Brooks asked for criticism of one of the essays to be included in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, Warren praised the essay in his letter of 6 December 1943, then offered two pages of suggestions, ending: "Well, all of my remarks are trivial. The paper is damned enlightening, and ought to stir up something. As I read it I was filled with nostalgia for our old arguments and discussions and collaborations. 'Ah Ben, say when—.'" Particularly moving is a passage in Warren's letter of 16 September 1983. After thanking Brooks for having gone over the typescript of *Altitudes and Extensions*, he continues:

I only fear that you were too easy on the book—which is like you. But this leads to a broader thought, which I have thought for a long time. You must—you plural—must have known of the dimension of our attachment to Brooks and admiration. I can look back longer than Eleanor, but with no more feeling. But I want to say something more special now. 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 the *UP*—not to mention all 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 often 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 how you'd give an embarrassed shrug and disclaimer. Anyway now I can say it without your interruption.

Warren added in script in the margin: "This does not cover so many other indebtednesses." And at the bottom of the page: "No answer, please." This consonance of civility and good-will is never disturbed in the entire collection of letters. And it seems to me a notable triumph that they could sustain, in their lives as in these letters, such deport-

ment into the latter decades of the twentieth century—particularly in the face of increasing criticism from a new generation of critics and poets during the last two or three decades of their lives.

Although both were born in Kentucky, within thirty miles of one another, they did not meet until 1925 when Brooks became a freshman at Vanderbilt. Their friendship seems to have been immediate: Brooks recalled later that Warren, a senior, even took an interest in his fledgling efforts at freshman essay writing. Later their paths crossed at Oxford, where both were Rhodes Scholars. But the bonding that would seal their exemplary friendship did not occur until 1934 when Warren joined the faculty at LSU, where Brooks had been since 1932. It was there they became collaborators, first as editors of the *Southern Review*, then on a series of textbooks. The first of these, *An Approach to Literature*, grew out of the needs of their own teaching: students, they found, had no concept of how to read literature, and the traditional teaching methods, reflected in available textbooks, failed to address the problem. Their understanding of literature, influenced largely by the practices and theories of I. A. Richards, T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, and Allen Tate, required a new and radically different kind of textbook. The first edition of *An Approach to Literature* appeared in 1936, and underwent four subsequent editions, the fifth and final edition appearing in 1975. This initial collaboration led to four additional textbook collaborations, two of which—*Understanding Poetry* (1938) and *Understanding Fiction* (1943)—revolutionized the teaching of literature in America by employing close readings of texts and providing the tools with which to analyze work under examination: they were manuals explaining and applying the principles of the New Criticism. The widespread adoption of these textbooks at colleges and universities throughout America assured the dominance of the New Critical approach over the next four decades; and, despite the overlays of postmodern criticism with theories based on philosophical, psychological, and sociological models, the methods of Brooks and Warren are fundamentally the ones taught in the classrooms of most colleges and universities today.

The third of these collaborations, *Modern Rhetoric*, a freshman text, was the most difficult for Brooks and Warren. Although they began work on the book in 1945, problems with approach, content,

and organization delayed completion and publication until 1949. Warren refers to it on several occasions as “that Goddamned textbook.” And although it went through three editions, it was never as successful as their other textbooks, largely because of its conservative—even reactionary—concerns with English usage. (Interestingly, this seems to be the only textbook that the pair undertook strictly for monetary reasons.)

Their fourth collaboration, however, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1973), is certainly the best anthology/textbook ever published on American letters. The choices of texts are exemplary and comprehensive (they included selections from Native American culture, folk traditions, African American slave narratives, spirituals, blues, and so forth); and the lengthy historical essays and critical commentaries make it a rich resource for students and teachers alike (I recommend it as an overview to all my Ph.D. students studying for comprehensive examinations).

Nearly all the letters in this collection deal with Brooks and Warren’s collaborative projects: divvying up chores, asking for copies of work completed, relaying reactions and suggestions from publishing houses, discussing works to be included, inquiring if one or the other can find competent secretarial help. And, quite frankly, this makes for very boring reading. There are a few newsy and interesting letters: Warren’s letter of 15 July 1948, describing in some detail his travels in Italy and the landscape around Taormina, where he was living; Brooks’s letter of 29 November 1964 from London describing his activities as cultural attaché; and, particularly, Warren’s letter of 1 August 1953 recounting the birth of his daughter Rossana on the living room floor—with Warren as midwife. But these nodes of interest are few and far between. (In his editorial notes Grimshaw says that he has omitted some passages containing “personal information” but gives no reason why he has done so.) Also, because most of the letters concern details of projects at hand, it seems to the reader that these matters must be absorbing the lives of the two men. One tends to forget that throughout the period covered by the correspondence Warren was turning out novels, poetry, plays, and other kinds of literary criticism at a prodigious rate. Or that Brooks was editing the letters of Thomas Percy and writing some of the most important critical books of his time:

Modern Poetry and the Tradition (1939), *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), *The Hidden God* (1963), *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963), *A Shaping of Joy* (1971)—and this is only a partial list. Or that both were teaching classes at major universities, as well as responding to other professional and social demands upon their time.

Grimshaw tries to give a broad view of the activities of both men by providing a chronology at the beginning of the book, and by his own substantial introduction. There is a foreword by Lewis P. Simpson, who, along with Don Stanford, revived the *Southern Review* in 1965 and is author of the study *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work* (1976), and an afterword by R. W. B. Lewis, Brooks and Warren’s colleague at Yale and collaborator on the textbook *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*. Both are appreciations which give some idea of the scope and importance of the correspondents’ work. Grimshaw has also provided footnotes to help the reader follow along. But I found all these aids inadequate, if one wants to know what is going on in the two men’s lives at the times the letters were written. The footnotes are sparse and at times arbitrary: helpful information is provided here and there, but at other points one is left uncertain about what project is being referred to; people referred to in the text are usually identified but sometimes not. If readers really want to follow the course of the pair’s lives as they peruse the letters, they must sit with Joseph Blotner’s biography of Warren² on the one hand and Mark Royden Winchell’s biography of Brooks on the other. And this makes for rather hard going. But that is a problem with any collection of letters of this type, because their mutual concerns represent only a limited aspect of their lives. And, in all, Grimshaw has done a credible and careful job.

Grimshaw is a Regents Professor of the Texas A&M University System at Commerce and has previously contributed to scholarship on both authors. In 1981 he published *Robert Penn Warren: A Descriptive Bibliography* (the most comprehensive bibliography of Warren’s work available) and he has edited *Robert Penn Warren’s Brother to Dragons: A Discussion* (1983), *“Times Glory”: Original Essays on Robert Penn Warren* (1986), *Cleanth Brooks at the United States Air Force Academy* (1980), and *Friends of Their Youth: Cleanth Brooks/Robert Penn Warren* (1993). His knowledge of these friends and correspondents

is generously manifest in his fine introduction. And I have only a few quibbles with his editing of the volume. All originals of the letters in the volume are deposited in the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Most are in typescript, but a few are holograph, and Grimshaw explains what problems he encountered in reading and transcribing the handwriting of both, and the typing of Warren. He has included all marginal insertions and marginal comments with appropriate bracketing to indicate their nature. Return addresses are recorded even if they are letterhead and not indicative of the writer's location at the time. Only obvious typographical errors have been silently emended, but Grimshaw has added a "few" commas for the sake of clear reading (I, for one, wish he had left the commas alone). And all suppositional readings of illegible words are indicated by pointed brackets. A helpful feature is Grimshaw's indication of where each new page in a letter begins, so that scholars consulting the originals can find passages more easily. My only serious reservation in regard to editing procedures is that Grimshaw does not explain how transcriptions were made—from photocopies or the originals, and if from photocopies whether the transcriptions were checked against the originals. Nor does he explain what proofreading procedures were used to insure accuracy. In reading the volume, however, I noticed only one typographical error in the texts, and only one demonstrable error—in a footnote which refers to Poe's "A Descent into the Maelström" as a poem rather than a story. The book has a generous index; however, in my spot checking I found a number of errors and omissions: Brooks's most important comment on Faulkner is not listed, under *Modern Rhetoric* a number of pages are listed which refer only to *Understanding Fiction*, and references to Don Marquis and several other figures are missed. These errors and omissions may not be extensive, but the ones I discovered lead one to distrust the accuracy of the index, which is such an important tool for scholars.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: A Literary Correspondence is a welcome addition to the shelf for those of us studying this pair who had, as Peter Taylor once said, "two of the finest literary minds in America." The volume is, however, provisional: there are gaps in the correspondence. In a number of cases, answers to included letters have not been located. Letters for the years 1935, 1937,

1938, 1952, 1984, and 1987 are entirely missing. These may have been lost, but if they exist (as many likely do) and are later made available, the volume will have to be redone. Also, the letters printed here will not become an important source for scholars since so much of them concerns the details of making their textbooks: the letters afford scant glimpses into their personal lives or their literary minds. For their ideas and insights one must go to the textbooks, essays, and creative works themselves, which these letters only talk about.

Notes

1. Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 268.

2. Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1977).

NHPRC Grants

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission announced grants of \$1,362,863 for eight founding-era documentary editing projects and publication subvention of seven volumes produced by these projects. Receiving awards are the Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution; the Papers of Thomas Jefferson; the Documentary History of the Supreme Court, 1789–1800; the Papers of George Washington; the Papers of Benjamin Franklin; the Documentary History of the First Federal Congress, 1789–1791; the Papers of James Madison; and the Adams Papers. Publication subvention awards went to the publishers of the papers of James Madison, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin.

The Samuel Gompers papers project will host the 1999–2000 fellowship in historical documentary editing. A second fellowship, at the Margaret Sanger papers project at New York University, will be awarded if funds permit.

In addition, the Commission awarded up to \$982,042 for nine state board and collaborative records projects, and \$297,436 for two electronic records and technologies projects.