

First let me express my appreciation to Professor Tucker for offering me this moment to remember Cleanth Brooks and the vital part he played at the beginning of my career. I regret that I am not at Murray in person to say this thanks myself.

I met Cleanth Brooks at a party at Donald Stanford's in the spring of 1969. He had returned from Yale to Louisiana State University as a distinguished ^{visiting} professor for the spring term. He had also returned to the place where he and Robert Penn Warren had helped change the direction of American Literature--certainly the direction of the way we think about American Literature. His arrival was an occasion, rather like today, of celebration.

I had arrived at LSU in the same semester, somewhat less propitiously. I was to be an instructor in Creative Writing--on the basis of a few published poems and by the fact that David Madden had received a Guggenheim and needed a substitute in a hurry.

Of course, Cleanth Brooks was a hero of mine,
as was Robert Penn Warren. Reading Poetry, et al.,
had been the bible textbook my entire generation had
grown up on, just as The Well-Wrought Urn had been
the purest of The New Criticism.

At Stanford's party, Brooks was kind enough to
say that he had read a couple of my poems in the
Kenyon and Yale Reviews and he asked if I had a
manuscript. I had flown to Louisiana from a snowstorm
in Ohio about a month before and was still thawing out.
I must have seemed to Brooks amazed at his question,
since it was about three levels above the literary
small talk I was used to. He was serious, so I half-
lied and said that, yes, I did have a collection of poems
assembled in somewhat rough form--which is to say that
most of my poems at that moment were in rough form and
that I had nowhere near enough for a book.

He must have sensed that I was stretching the truth, and as if to make me more comfortable he brought up the fact that his good friend Red Warren had recently sent him a new manuscript of the shortest poetry book he knew of. He said Warren thought it the best poetry he had written but he, Brooks, was not yet quite sure. It was a strange meditation entitled Audubon: A Vision.

Brooks asked me to lunch. And over the next few months we saw each other fairly regularly. He always wanted to see what I was working on, and sometimes he actually read the poems in front of me, holding his huge magnifying glass over the poems as if he were examining them as much as reading them. I did not discover until later just how frail his eyes were, nor that for extensive reading, such as an entire manuscript, he needed the assistance of his wife, who read to him at night.

This is the image I will have of Cleanth Brooks:
of a great and brilliant gentleman going to great pains
for a young man he hardly knew--leaning over, with his
great glass in his dark blue suit, the least poems in
the world.

Through Brooks's encouragement and commitment my first
collection of poems was completed and then published a
year later. After that, if I got a grant or received an
award, I knew that Brooks's care was somehow involved.