
History of the *Southern Review* Original Series, 1935–1942

THE BEGINNING OF THE *Southern Review* was casual, sudden, and in so far as the future editors were concerned, quite unexpected.*

On a bright Sunday afternoon in late February, 1935, the president of the Louisiana State University drove up to the door of Robert Penn Warren's residence on the outskirts of Baton Rouge and asked him, his wife, and a guest, Albert Erskine, to go for a drive. While the official black Cadillac crunched the gravel of the back roads, President James Monroe Smith revealed the motive of his invitation. Was it possible, he wanted to know, to have a good literary and critical quarterly at the university. Yes, was the answer he got—yes, 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. There was one more stipulation: that quality must not be diluted or contravened by the interference of academic committees or officials. How much would it cost? Toward \$10,000 a year.

After a few minutes of meditation, President Smith suggested that Erskine and Warren confer with Cleanth Brooks, then a member of the university English department, and with Charles W. Pipkin, Dean of the Graduate School, and prepare a statement. If the statement came in the next day, he would, he said, sign an authorization for the project.

That evening, Brooks, Pipkin, Erskine, and Warren drew up a plan for a quarterly, and the next day President Smith, as good as his word, signed the authorization. He hoped that a first number might be off the press as early as June. Actually the first number appeared in July, 1935. By that time the editors had agreed upon a name: the quarterly was to be called the *Southern Review*.

* Reprinted from *An Anthology of Stories from the Southern Review*, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953).

There was some background for the conversation in the official Cadillac. For a year or two before, Louisiana State University had contributed to the support of the *Southwest Review*, which was published in Dallas, Texas, by the Southern Methodist University. Before this collaboration between Louisiana State University and the Texas neighbor, the magazine had had, under the editorship of J. H. McGinnis and Henry Nash Smith, a very distinctive character as an expression of the cultural interests peculiar to the Southwest. But under the new arrangement the policy of the magazine was in the hands of a rather large and heterogeneous editorial board drawn from both universities, and a certain amount of drift and confusion was inevitable. This drift and confusion was not enough to impair the basic quality and change the basic direction of the *Southwest Review*, but it took no prophet to see that if the situation prevailed very long, the magazine would lose its old virtues without acquiring new ones. Pipkin, Brooks, and Warren, as members of the joint editorial board, were convinced of this, and so were the Texas editors from the old regime. All members of the board who had any real interest in the project felt that the personally agreeable, but theoretically uneasy, collaboration would eventually reduce the magazine to an academic hodgepodge.

The Southern Review was founded with Charles W. Pipkin as editor, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren as managing editors, and Albert Erskine as business manager. Pipkin was a political scientist, and his dearest concern was, naturally, with public affairs. Brooks and Warren were teachers of English, and their chief concern was with literature. But there was never any real division of function among the four members of the staff. Erskine, though business manager, was an instructor in English and had as much to do with the editorial side of the magazine as anyone else. Every member of the staff read every item that could be seriously considered for publication, and by and large, all decisions were joint decisions. There were, of course, disagreements on matters of taste and policy, but the disagreements worked, on the whole, to keep the atmosphere of the office brisk and healthy during the seven years of life of the magazine.

During that period, there were only two changes in the organization of the magazine. When Erskine went East, in November, 1940, to begin his career as a publisher, John Ellis Palmer, who was later to become the editor of the *Sewanee Review*, succeeded him, but with the title of managing editor, and Brooks and Warren were given the title of editors. Pipkin's death occurred in the summer of 1941, and no third editor was named.

The Southern Review was extremely fortunate in the office secretaries who served it through its seven years. They were, in succession, Bessie Barnett, Mae Swallow, Jean Stafford, and Frances Stewart.

It must be granted that when the editors began the magazine, they did so with some fear of political interference. In the atmosphere of the Louisiana of that time, the apprehension was real. The editors agreed that if any interference came they would resign. Their resolution was not put to the test. There was never any interference, on either academic or political grounds.

The name of the *Southern Review* was an expression, certainly, of the regional and sectional piety of the editors, but the editors hoped that that piety was somewhat different from the chauvinistic and uninstructed variety. They wanted the magazine to make some contribution to the cultural life of its region, and they were youthfully ambitious enough to want it to become a kind of focus for that life. But they felt that a regional piety that pretended to be more than shallow or sentimental demanded that they relate southern problems and southern literature to the world outside the South. A problem in economics in the South could not be dissociated from the economic problems of the rest of the world, and a southern poet could not be considered without some awareness of the broad tradition of poetry and some awareness of the contemporary manifestations in, for example, France or England.

Most of all, however, the editors felt that they could best serve their region by insisting on the highest possible standards of excellence for the magazine itself. The phrase “highest possible” is a tricky thing here. What is “possible” for any magazine is what is actually available, from issue to issue, for its pages. And what is “highest” is what the editors feel to be highest. So, in a fashion, a magazine is at the uncertain mercy of the morning mail delivery and the taste of its editors.

In any case, the editors tried to choose from available material with as much discernment as possible, without reference to the “southern-ness” of the subject matter or the birth certificate of the author. Once, after the magazine had been operating for several years, the editors, out of mere curiosity, did make a check on the local origins of their contributors. About 51 per cent were southern. (A great many were not even American—Bonamy Dobrée, F. R. Leavis, Mario Praz, L. C. Knights, to mention only a few.) But the word southern is, in itself, not too clear. Is Oklahoma, or Kentucky, southern? It is hard to say.

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As the editors did not inspect the birth certificate of an author, so they tried not to inspect the reputation. Despite awe and human frailty, they tried not to let the greatness of a name sway their judgment. Work by Nobel Prize winners was, on occasion, rejected, and work by college sophomores was published. There were, of course, many contributions by then illustrious and still illustrious writers—Mark Van Doren, T. S. Eliot, Herbert Agar, W. H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, John Crowe Ransom, Aldous Huxley, Allen Tate, Katherine Anne Porter, Ford Madox Ford, Kenneth Burke, and Caroline Gordon. But there was also very early work by writers who have since those days made their mark in our time—Eudora Welty, Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, Peter Taylor, Mary McCarthy, Nelson Algren, and R. P. Blackmur. And naturally, since many contributors were very young, and since the editors did make a consistent effort to get work from the young, some of the names that appear in the magazine are of people who have long since found vocation elsewhere than in writing. But they, too, have a place in the story. . . .

It is only natural that when an affinity is discovered between a magazine and a writer, the work of that writer will appear there rather often. It was to the great good fortune of the *Southern Review* that certain writers did discover such an affinity. To comment on fiction only . . . Katherine Anne Porter published in the *Southern Review* three novelettes—titles that appear among her best known work, “Old Mortality,” “Pale Horse, Pale Rider,” and “The Leaning Tower”—and two short stories; Eudora Welty published seven stories; and Peter Taylor published three. At that time Miss Porter was already entering into her fame, but Miss Welty and Mr. Taylor were at the threshold of their careers, Miss Welty a young lady living in Jackson, Mississippi, and Mr. Taylor a student in college. There were, of course, other writers who published with some regularity in the *Southern Review*. . . .

What did the *Southern Review* cost? For the *Southern Review*, like all quarterlies, ran at a deficit. There was the cost of contributions, a cent and a half a word for prose, and thirty-five cents a line for verse. This, for a quarterly of some two hundred pages an issue, ran to approximately \$1,200 a year. The print-shop bill, in those far-off times, was not what it would be today but even then amounted to almost as much per issue as the payment of contributors. The two managing editors, who were teachers before they were editors, received a reduction of 25 per cent in teaching load—that is, one course—and so that proportion of their salaries could theoretically be charged against the *Review*. Then there were the salaries of the part-time business manager and the full-time secretary. The paid circulation, except for special issues, such as the Thomas Hardy number, which ran considerably

higher, was about 1,500. The deficit, aside from the proportion of the salaries of the two managing editors, averaged about \$7,000 a year.

Who read the *Southern Review*? There were the approximately 1,500 subscribers, but the heavy library subscriptions, with duplicates in some libraries, indicated a fairly large ratio of readers to the copy and indicated also, presumably, a fairly large ratio of young readers. As for the geographical distribution, the concentrations were rather well marked: the middle South, New York and the East, and the West Coast. There was, relatively speaking, a large circulation in England. Calcutta and Tokyo, as the editors were once forced to notice, had, either of them, more subscribers than Atlanta, Georgia. The editors never quite decided what this meant about their self-appointed mission.

In 1942 the *Southern Review* was discontinued. The war had begun, and the gravity of the crisis made some members of the administration of the university feel that there was now no place for such a publication—that funds and energies should be committed elsewhere. Some members of the administration, too, had from the beginning lacked sympathy with the aims of the magazine and viewed the whole enterprise as unrealistic and remote from the fundamental concerns of a university. Some others, however, emphatically favored the continuance of the magazine. By order of President Smith, the magazine suspended publication with the spring issue of 1942. With that issue it had completed the seventh volume.

The Kenyon Review offered to fulfill the unexpired subscriptions to the *Southern Review*. The offer was gratefully accepted, and as part of the arrangement the editors became advisory editors of the *Kenyon Review*.

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CLEANTH BROOKS

ROBERT PENN WARREN