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Confessions of a Footnoter

PAULA NEWMAN MINER AND JAMES A. PERKINS

Hello. My name is Jim, and I am a footnoter.

For me, it started innocently enough. William Bedford Clark, the founding editor of *The Selected Letters of Robert Penn Warren*, who had just completed the first two volumes in that series, asked Randy Hendricks and me to join him on Volume Three. The plan was that Bedford, who had done the serious groundwork by rounding up all the letters in the first place, would continue as general editor, and Randy and I would divide the rest of the labor.

Warren wrote a tremendous number of letters. Bedford probably managed to discover most of them. My rough guess is that in the three volumes I have had a hand in, we are using slightly less than 50% of those we have. One of our first tasks was to decide which letters to include. I soon proved useless at this. I was fascinated by every letter I read. I wanted to include them all.

Randy chose the letters and sent them to me. Carole Morrow keyed in the text and proofed it for the first time. I proofed it again and sent it back to Randy. He ran through the letters for a particular year and he sketched some of the early footnotes, relying heavily on Joseph Blotner's *Robert Penn Warren; A Biography* and James A. Grimshaw, Jr's *Robert Penn Warren: A Descriptive Bibliography, 1922-1979* and other resources. Then he sent Bedford and me a list of things he wanted run down for footnotes. Bedford went through this list and, off the top of his well-filled head, answered nearly half of the questions. Sometimes I am astounded at the amount of information about Warren's social network that Bedford has in his mind. Some of the questions were simple enough and could be quickly answered using standard library sources. Generally left were the hard questions, the footnotes that require a bulldog mentality and dumb luck. My bulldog nature comes in handy when I am running down titles in the *National Union Catalogue*,

identifying names mentioned in letters in *Who's Who* or *Contemporary Authors*, or finding an obituary in *The New York Times*.

One of the most difficult of these identifications involved the Irish writer and diplomat Denis Devlin. Devlin and his wife Caren were good friends of Warren; Warren and Tate edited Devlin's poems for publication in 1963 after Devlin died. I wanted to know more about Devlin; specifically, I wanted to know his son's name. I found everything I needed right in the Westminster College Library in a reference book on contemporary Irish literature that I would have never found without the help of our reference librarian, Dorita Bolger.

Warren did not write his letters with an eye to posterity. He never expected them to be read by anyone other than the individuals to whom they were sent. The letters are, for the most part, one side of a casual conversation between friends. And like such conversations, the letters assume a shared knowledge and experience that can make them difficult for readers to understand. They employ a great deal of synecdoche, although most of them were composed outside of the state of New York.

In his conversational way, Warren often catches his friends up on what he has been doing by saying: "I finally finished the poem." Since the text of John Burt's edition of *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren* is 624 pages long, such a statement is not very enlightening to the average reader of the letters. My job was to discover, if I could, what poem Warren was referring to. Since he wrote his letters in batches and since he often included a copy of the poem with his letter, his correspondents often referred to the poem by title or mentioned a line from the poem in their return mail. By sitting for days in the clean, well-lighted place that is the reading room of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, reading letters to Warren from his various correspondents, I was often able to run down the title of a poem and then, using Grimshaw's *Bibliography*, was able to mention where Warren first published the poem and note the poem's subsequent publication history.

Another common phrase in Warren letters is "I enjoyed

your new book. Thank you for having it sent to me.” This meant that in addition to everything Warren was writing at any given time, I had to develop knowledge of the works of his friends and acquaintances as well. Often this was simple: I merely checked the correspondent’s bibliography or read other letters written by that correspondent in one of the many volumes of selected letters already published on literary figures from Warren’s generation. Often, especially with lesser-known writers, the process was more difficult. Sometimes I had to get Connie Davis to order several books for me through interlibrary loan, and then I had to skim through them to determine which one Warren is referring to.

Many of the letters are to members of the family and deal with family history and personal matters known only to the family. Fortunately, I was able to call upon Warren’s children, Gabriel and Rosanna, and, until her death in 2008, upon his niece, Tommie Lou Frey.

Tommie Lou proved invaluable in sorting out details of Warren’s relationships in Guthrie and Clarksville. Her husband Robert Frey continues to run down information for me now. Without the help and support of these individuals, the factual texture of this series would not be as rich and complete as it is.

The letters demonstrate that Warren deeply loved and was extremely proud of his children. They are full of details of their growth and accomplishments. Rosanna has patiently answered what must by now be a hundred e-mailed questions, and when she did not know an answer, suggested other possible sources. Once, when I had told her that we were nearing the end of what I thought then was the final volume of the project, she wrote:

Good for you—I admire the tenacity with which you keep at this. And for me it’s a LITTLE like drowning—watching my early life pass by . . . (Not really like drowning—I don’t mean to frighten you).

Warmly
Rosanna

Gabriel responded to all my e-mails and helped me identify

various teachers, in both the sculpture studio and academic classroom; skiing companions; the top-rate sail maker who made the sails Gabe designed for the 26-foot boat he constructed in the Warren's yard in Vermont; and the name of the man he crewed for in the far north Atlantic. The details Warren's children provided have allowed me often to construct footnotes that flesh out the sometimes telegraphic narrative of Warren's notes to his friends—often, but not always. There have been a number of occasions when neither of them knew what a reference was to. In fact, there are many things mentioned in these letters that I just couldn't find.

In Volume Three, we had a letter that mentioned a man named Jones (or was it Smith?) who had recently come back from Europe. There is another mention of a Jones who, it seems, was as much a bastard as the person Warren was comparing him to in the letter. This was in a letter written in the 1940s. I looked high and low for Jones. I spent days on it. Finally, as a good managing editor should, Bedford wrote me an e-mail in which he said: "Some Joneses are known only to God." There are sins of omission in the *Selected Letters*, but trust me, I have a stack of 3 x 5 cards in my shirt pocket, and I am still looking.

One of my biggest surprises in creating footnotes for this series was the usefulness of the Internet in all of its guises. As a veteran of freshman composition classes, I have spent nearly two decades warning students not to trust what they find online. "If you find it in a reference book," I tell them, "you can assume that a number of reputable scholars have agreed on the 'truth' of that information. However, if you find it on a website—say, 'Bob's Basement Bibliography'—all you know is that Bob has paid his electric bill." While I still generally mistrust information on the Internet (and berated Randy when he sent me a preliminary footnote with Wikipedia as its source), I must admit that I find Google searches as useful as bound encyclopedias for initial surveys. Let me assure you that the computer and the Internet have made the preparation of these volumes easier than such work was back when I was working on my dissertation, before even photocopiers were in widespread use. I love cut and paste.

And e-mail is an amazing research tool. Let me give you a couple of examples.

We had a letter in Volume Three from Warren to Frank Owsley (January 31, 1950) in which Warren recounts how Robert Rossen did such a good job in creating the movie *All the King's Men*. The letter mentions one Norman Corwin who wrote the original script for *All the King's Men*. I was given the task of discovering who Norman Corwin was. The first thing I did was Google him, and I found that he was still alive and teaching at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California. I e-mailed him on May 14, 2004:

I am editing the Selected Letters of Robert Penn Warren for LSU. In a letter dated January 31 1950 to Frank Owsley (the Historian), Warren writes: "Rossen did a good job with AKM. First, he wouldn't have the star system, and cast the thing his own way, with two small concessions only. Second, when he came on the job he found that they were going to use a script by Norman Corwin. So he looked at the script, threw it away and fired Corwin. Then he wrote it himself, directed it himself, and produced it himself."

I would like to have your side of these events.

I would also like to know if your script survives.

If it does I would very much like to have a copy of it.

Norman Corwin answered my e-mail later that same day:

I struck out on that script. Feeble consolations for me were that Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle also struck out occasionally, plus the worn old adage that no one can win 'em all. Rossen went on to do a great job by himself, and he deserved the honors that came to him.

It's a small matter, but there is no substance to W's notion that "they," implying a studio, "were going to use" my script. The issue was and remained strictly between Rossen and myself, and I fully agreed with him on his reservations. Because of overlapping commitments at the time I was not available to redo a rewrite, and Rossen acted properly and providentially in dropping my draft and proceeding to redo the script by himself. He was already an accomplished master of the medium and I was a still a cinema tyro. My chief regret then as now, is that I was not on the project long enough to learn from him.

Mine was a first draft. I have always agreed with Hemingway's famous dictum, quoted here verbatim, that "all first drafts are shit." Still, one wonders about W.S.'s and Miss Dickinson's first drafts.

No copy exists of my script. It was not terrible, but so so-so that I had no hesitation about chucking it in the trash can.

Good luck on your project.
Norman Corwin

About a year ago, I was working on a letter Warren wrote to Peter Taylor, the short story writer, on March 12, 1974, in which he said in part:

I was recently at Duke to give a reading and while there met a girl named Paula Newman, who will be at the U of V next year. Since she is delightful in a nice clear-eyed straightforward, clean American girl way, and since she is by common report very gifted as a writer, I made bold to say that she should hunt you and Eleanor up. By the way, she comes to the U of V as a swimming coach, so no wonder she looks clean. Anyway, she comes as a new and great admirer of PT—so she writes me.

Of course, it was my task to discover who Paula Newman was. Good grief.

On Thursday, October 30, 2009, I e-mailed Victor Strandberg at Duke, asking if he remembered Paula Newman. The next day, he replied that, although he remembered Warren's visit vividly, having invited him to the Duke campus, he had no recollection of Ms. Newman, but that I might try John Stevenson at the University of Colorado. He had been a graduate student in 1974 and was in charge of arrangements for Warren's reading. I e-mailed Stevenson immediately. He replied on the 5th:

Boy, this brings back some memories! 35 years ago this week! Yes, as editor of the student literary magazine, *The Archive*, I did bring RPW to campus under the auspices of the Blackburn Literary Festival (our other visiting writer later that spring was a still relatively-unknown Canadian named Margaret Atwood, so it was a pretty good year for the Festival). Warren gave a public seminar and a reading on the 28th and did a little

workshop with some students on the 1st.

Paula Newman may have been part of that group but I can't recall any specifics. The two people doing most of the creative writing teaching at Duke then were Reynolds Price and James Applewhite and they might be able to help—they certainly participated in the events of that visit.

I then e-mailed the poet James Applewhite and the novelist Reynolds Price. Price replied on the 6th that Paula Newman was an old and dear friend and former student of his and that he had seen her a couple of times in the past year. He graciously gave me her e-mail address.

I then e-mailed the famous clean American girl who, now Paula Newman Miner, responded on the 7th:

I can't begin to describe how peculiar it was for me to open your e-mail and suddenly be transported back in time 35 years. I was a senior English major at Duke when Robert Penn Warren came to give a reading. As with most seniors who are not on a traditional professional/graduate school track, I was struggling with what I was going to do after graduation. During my time at Duke I studied with Reynolds and had received some positive feedback on my writing, not only from him but a few other instructors as well; and so pursuing my writing further was one of the options I was toying with. Robert Penn Warren gave a wonderful reading (although I must admit I would be hard pressed to tell you the substance at this point). Anyway, he was very warm and friendly throughout his talk, and I was 21 and outgoing and I went up to him after the reading and waited until others had finished speaking to him. I remember that he talked to me for quite a while and was incredibly kind and encouraging and gave me his address. I know that I wrote to him (I think I may have sent some of my writing) and he graciously wrote back.

I went to UVA to coach swimming (it was a team affiliated with the University, not the UVA team) to support myself and to be near a rock quarry as I was also dabbling in sculpture at the time. I did, in fact, audit a writing course with Peter Taylor who was also very gracious and encouraging to me. It was a very creative period in my life as my days were consumed with sculpting and writing.

Alas, reality eventually intervened and I was forced to make a sustainable living. Both my writing and sculpting were

relegated to “hobbies.”

I have stayed in touch with Reynolds who remains a friend; in fact had several delightful dinners with him over the last couple of years.

I hope this answers your questions. If you need anything else please feel free to write again. While it’s a little sad to be reminded of promise wasted, I am thrilled to know that I will be a footnote in history and a clean one at that (that absolutely killed me)!

I was so enchanted by her e-mail that I tried to convince Randy and Bedford to publish it, as is, as the footnote I was supposed to write. She was delighted by the prospect. On the 9th she wrote: “I would be delighted to have you use my email as a footnote. I always knew I would be published!”

Ten days from beginning to end. Imagine how long that research would have taken before the advent of e-mail. Even when I am doing what I am supposed to be doing, I am having fun. To echo a word: I can’t imagine a more delightful occupation.

Unfortunately, problems of space and consistency forced us to reduce Paula Newman Miner’s response to a dry recitation of the bare facts:

² Newman, at the time a senior English major and student of the novelist Reynolds Price at Duke, describes Warren as “incredibly kind and encouraging” during their conversation and reports that they corresponded afterward. She did, in fact, audit a course with Taylor at the University of Virginia, where she coached a swim team affiliated with the University, not the UVA team. (The editors are grateful to Paula Newman Miner for this information, as well as to Victor Strandberg, John A. Stevenson, and Reynolds Price for helping us get in touch with her.)

Rather than try to explain to her why she wouldn’t be published after all, it occurred to me that we could collaborate on an article for *rWp*.

And that is what we did.