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Some Recollections of Jay B. Hubbell

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I first heard of Jay B. Hubbell in 1925 when a fellow graduate student at Harvard on leave from Southern Methodist University sang his praises as a departmental chairman. Not long thereafter I too served as a temporary instructor at that school, where I found that my friend's enthusiasm had indeed been based on solid grounds. In Dallas I was happily admitted to the company of a choice set of young teachers and graduate assistants all of whom admired "The Judge," as we called him, and looked to him for the cheerful encouragement which he was ever ready to bestow. He had a pleasant, unassuming faculty of making young people feel at ease with him without in the least giving a hint of purposiveness or condescension. At that time English departments were in a state of excitement over the "new" poetry, a natural accompaniment of what was heralded as the "Poetical Renaissance." It was even fashionable to quote Edgar Lee Masters on the way to the bathroom. Mr. Hubbell had conducted a poetry contest for undergraduates and acted as judge a time or two; hence his nickname. As my year in Dallas advanced he and I became more intimate, for we had much in common despite the gap in our ages. We were both preachers' sons, had received an old-fashioned undergraduate grounding in the ancient classics, had taught in public high schools, and reacted similarly against the old-line philology then characteristic of the graduate regime at Harvard. I was the only one of his young teachers who intended to specialize in the study of the literature of the United States. Toward the end of the year he told me in confidence that he had been sounded out for a post at Duke University. Though a hill-country Virginian, he had really adopted Texas, married a Dallas lady, and felt himself firmly rooted at S. M. U. as a founding father. He left Dallas reluctantly, and ever after eagerly received any word as to the activities of the college or of his multitude of friends there.

Shortly after Christmas, upon his return from a meeting of the Modern Language Association, of whose new and insignificant American Literature Group he was chairman, Mr. Hubbell fairly bubbled over with enthusiasm for promoting a new magazine, to be wholly devoted to research in the national letters. The best bet thus far, he said, had been special issues of *Studies in Philology*, thanks to the zeal

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of Norman Foerster, then at Chapel Hill, but the number of English professors interested in the field had increased to the point of making a new journal imperative. He both flattered and surprised me one day by asking me to accompany him to a meeting with the dean of the graduate school, whose aid, he explained, was essential to getting such a venture started at S. M. U. The conference took place in a pleasant bedroom where the dean was found sprawled out comfortably. A geologist by profession, he often took to his bed, the Young Turks gossiped, in order to escape the heat and burden of his office. A rugged red-bearded man, he listened carefully while Mr. Hubbell neatly outlined his project and in due season asked a number of rather pertinent questions, some of which suggested that his comprehension of the necessity for such a new organ was befogged by his understanding that English professors already had the journal of the Modern Language Association as an outlet. At that point, with my usual youthful cockiness, I entered the conversation and explained that the situation was somewhat similar to that of the geologists, who had a general publication but that a host of other magazines somewhat allied existed, among them *The Coal Trade Journal* and a half dozen others whose names I fished up from memory, where they had been stored ever since I acquired them as an undergraduate debater discussing government ownership and operation of coal mines. He seemed to get the point of my remarks but terminated the session by indulging in a brief soliloquy on the financial difficulties then impeding any new departures in the graduate school. I was, of course, a novice in recognizing the dodges of university officials seeking to escape from problems in which they have no essential interest. At the end of the year when Mr. Hubbell disclosed that an offer had actually been made by Duke, he told me that one of its attractions would be the prospect of founding the much-desired journal there. Certainly *American Literature* would never have been started at Duke without his determined efforts. In all likelihood it would have seen the light first at Brown University, which likewise made an offer to the American Literature Group after Mr. Hubbell had maneuvered one from the authorities in Durham. Only his known zeal for the cause, his unselfish endeavors in behalf of the struggling organization of American literature specialists, and his shrewd politicking counterbalanced the prevailing opinions that New England provided a more intellectual atmosphere than the South and that an older institution promised

better than one as yet untried in the world of scholarship. But he never looked upon his feat — for that it really was — as a personal triumph. To him *American Literature* was, rather, a logical advance in the progress of the discipline to which he had devoted himself. He was a skilled promoter — of good causes. He was pleased when, after his retirement, I became Chairman of the Board of Editors and insisted that his name remain on the masthead of *American Literature*. The title I cooked up was “Founding Editor.” He was that, in more ways than one.

Following my stay in Dallas I spent another year at Harvard and then transferred to Columbia where I luxuriated in a University Fellowship, \$3000 in amount. Mr. Hubbell and I were in constant communication, for he solicited my help in covering a number of periodicals unavailable in Durham for the checklist on current articles which added to his labors and constituted a regular department of the new journal. That was the beginning of my activities as a scullion in the huge kitchen of scholarship, as I like to say of a bibliographer. He also had me help to beat the bushes for manuscripts written by fellow graduate students in seminars at the two schools. A paper on Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” which I submitted was promptly accepted, and he honored me by running it in the very first number, for March, 1929.

It was he, of course, who was responsible for my going to Duke in the fall of 1930, and I was responsible for Charles Anderson, who accompanied me. Neither of us taught American literature at first. We found that Mr. Hubbell himself had a class in contemporary European drama. His chief teaching assignment, however, was an undergraduate survey of American authors, which was already quite popular and had a large group of students enrolled voluntarily. It was known amidst the local ivy as “Hubbell’s English.” Majors in education planning to teach English in the high schools of North Carolina were required by state law to take such a course, a circumstance existing in several states which provided the earliest effective stimulant to collegiate study of the national letters. It was the need of a teacher for this undergraduate survey which led the authorities at Duke to hire him. Previous to his arrival the course had been shunted about among several teachers who had no special knowledge or interest in the subject and by following a path of least resistance had actually been taught by Allan Gilbert, a Renaissance specialist. He ran the students

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along the development of letters in the United States as quickly as possible, in order to arrive at Longfellow, and with that poet's rendition of Dante's *Divina Commedia* he spent the rest of the year. Emerson once opined that were he a professor of rhetoric he would use Dante as a textbook. Allan Gilbert far outreached the Sage of Concord in calling upon the Tuscan. Graduate students in our specialty gradually increased at Duke as word was spread that the new university encouraged the subject. Especially was this true in the summer sessions, to which numerous high school teachers flocked, to the point that visiting professors had to be hired to meet their demands. Among the stellar visitors at one time or another were F. L. Pattee, George Stewart, Robert Spiller, Sculley Bradley, Walter Blair, and Henry Nash Smith, all of whom, thanks to Mr. Hubbell's foresight, were asked to help order books in their particular provinces for the library.

While The Judge served on the board of the Duke Press, the Research Council, and a variety of special committees both within and without the university, his labors for the library were always paramount. He was a member of its council and continually checked book-dealers' catalogues and solicited special grants to make up deficiencies in the holdings of Americana. I had barely settled in at Duke before he had a \$500 grant put at my personal disposal to add new books. The year was 1930 and I was overwhelmed by the munificence of the gesture of welcome. He scoured the countryside along with the historian W. K. Boyd in search of old newspaper files and manuscripts, and in his very last days wrote to a large circle of friends and acquaintances to obtain materials for the archive on the history of American literary scholarship which was named in his honor and to which he turned over an extensive collection of manuscripts preserved in his home. He had been a pioneer in such endeavors at S. M. U., starting there a collection of books in his field from scratch, so that he was well experienced in the art and craft of building a library before he came to Duke. When at the end of World War II he went to the University of Vienna for a session or two he started another collection from scratch in Austria, obtained a foundation grant to help with purchases, and proceeded to make out in long hand lists of hundreds of books to be secured through dealers. He even rounded up a file of *PMLA* for the library in Vienna, soliciting help from friends in the United States who might have broken sets to send overseas. My own

copies of that journal were so used. When he went off to teach elsewhere he haunted local bookstores in search of items missing from the shelves at Duke. Since he had ordered so much of the literary Americana there he knew more about the holdings in his field than any librarian. The resources of three important libraries were thus enriched by his zest for books.

While at first the chores of editing *American Literature* were far from being as demanding as they become at the end of World War II, they were nevertheless burdensome the year round, though the management of circulation was always in the hands of the Duke Press, as were all fiscal matters. The press also dealt with the printer, for many years the Seeman Printery, then a family business, located in Durham. It held a general contract for most of the printing needed by the university and tucked the publication of books and periodicals for the press under its general umbrella. We never could be sure just when we should receive proofs or when an issue would be mailed out. At the outset a small office in the quarters assigned the press was reserved for *American Literature* ; later there were two rooms, one for the Chairman, the other for the Managing Editor, the latter elected annually by the American Literature Group. His duties, so the official appointment stated, were "to assist the editor." In effect he ran the journal half of the year and whenever Mr. Hubbell was away. The press provided only a part-time secretary, a limitation which accounted for many contributors' or reviewers' receiving correspondence typed out by Mr. Hubbell on his own typewriter or sometimes scrawled by me in long hand. The first secretary was the wife of Roy P. Basler, later editor of the works of Lincoln and an official of the Library of Congress. The second was David K. Jackson, now well known as an authority on Poe. Both remained loyal friends and cheered Mr. Hubbell in his old age by personal visits or occasional letters. Many of their successors were students or wives of students; some were very incompetent. One of the very ablest, however, was a faculty wife, Lucretia Duke, who loyally and expertly carried on her duties over the years until the Law School "captured" her and set her up in plush quarters as office manager of one of its new publications. We were entirely at the mercy of press officials in the hiring or retaining of our secretary, and the budget sometimes eliminated any chance of enjoying the services of the best talent. The English Department

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showed little or no interest, though Paull F. Baum helped to design the format.

Mr. Hubbell had to proceed gently in sharing his burden of teaching and editing with me, for he was reluctant to ask for more assistance than his initial spartan arrangements for the journal demanded from the university. As a first step he merely turned over the preparation of the checklist of articles to me, work on which, as reported above, I had been sharing while still a graduate student. I put the collaborators on a more formal basis, listed their names in print, and kept the record of magazines each was to cover. Much later, of course, I insisted that the official bibliographer of the American Literature Group take over this burden, for I had been in the habit of turning over the slips accumulated from my helpers to him anyhow. The best teamwork came when Dan Patterson and Hugh Holman were Group Bibliographers. But The Judge meant to work me into the editing chores also, and when the time was ripe he had the office of Managing Editor established and induced the American Literature Council to elect me. At the end of the first semester following my election he said, "You're in charge, Clarence," and for a half year showed up at the office only to check his personal mail and advise from time to time about the selection of reviewers. He was able also to cut his junior-senior survey course into two sections and to have me released from teaching freshmen. Very quickly he also maneuvered me into graduate courses; he covered the earlier nineteenth century, Southern literature, and Poe; and I the later period, Emerson, and Whitman. Before he left for Johns Hopkins, Charles Anderson relieved him of his undergraduate instruction. It was easier to work me in much faster than would ordinarily have been possible because I had been invited to Columbia to take temporary charge of all the graduate instruction regularly conducted by R. L. Rusk. That broke the ice. When Ohio State University and later other schools offered me professorships Mr. Hubbell used my threats to leave as a means of prying a reduction in our teaching schedules and to put both me and the journal forward in various ways. When he went off on leave he left me fully in charge, took my advice about dropping the list of advisory editors originally run on the masthead, and for many years had me make the annual report on the journal to the American Literature Council. Incidentally, for several years I paid my own way to the MLA meetings in order to represent the journal, and at first I paid for my own subscription. As I

look back on our relationship I wonder that so sensible a man as he could with such sang froid put these responsibilities on the shoulders of a young whipper-snapper like me. If he ever had qualms I never observed them.

The general policies of the magazine had been pretty well established before I came on the scene, and when changes were needed, for example giving up the initial requirement that no articles on living authors be accepted, the Board of Editors was always consulted; then their recommendation was reported to the Council of the Group (later called a Section), who rubber-stamped such recommendations without much ceremony. Any strategies that became necessary in dealing with the university officials or the officers of the American Literature Group he handled. I had no talent in such matters.

Once, when a vacancy in the secretary's office of the Modern Language Association was imminent, The Judge served on a committee of selection which numbered Albert Baugh and other friends of mine. They tapped me for the honor. But political requirements of the post led me to turn it down. It may seem strange that my dear friend would have gladly seen me depart for Washington Square to take the office eventually assumed by William Parker, but his motive was quite clearly explained to me. Personally I should gain in salary and in prestige — so he thought — and, above all, he was convinced that an energetic specialist in our discipline would help to overcome the latent opposition to the study of American literature then still existing in certain scholarly bailiwicks and put emphasis on the last word in the name of the Modern Language Association of America. It is too bad that Mr. Hubbell was never elected to the secretary's job. As for me, in retrospect I suppose that I should have been quite willing to let that huge organization dwindle to a society numbering a few thousand scholars who were real McCoys, so to speak. If as secretary I had been forced to lead that worthy body into the mazes and mire of political action I should have resigned at once. One thinks of the sad case of Milton in politics even while Thoreau's crack runs in the mind: "Read not the times but the eternities."

It is possible that the indifferent or hostile attitude toward the rise of American literature studies during his early days made Mr. Hubbell more consciously look for openings to advance his special interest, but there is no doubt in my mind that promoting the study of American literature was a kind of crusade dear to his heart and allied with his

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not inconsiderable talents to gain his ends by strategy. Certainly his going off on Fulbright and other assignments fitted in with his notions of playing missionary for the cause. He was shocked and indignant when the head of the English Department at the University of Athens suggested that since there existed a severe shortage in instruction of advanced courses in British literature he, a Fulbright professor there, should turn a hand and help out. It is also true that his colleagues in Durham, prior to his very last years, more or less took him for granted. As for the journal — that was Hubbell's baby. He asked for it — and he got it, i. e., the headaches. His colleagues in English were more rather than less indifferent. Abroad he was a prominent figure in the humanistic horizon — the editor of a distinguished organ solely devoted to the new study of the national letters of the U. S. A. He had a right to the certain degree of pride he held in his accomplishments. He once told me, however, that perhaps he had made a mistake in going as visiting fireman to so many different schools at home and abroad. He would have done better, he opined, to have spent more time on research. It is visibly true that his chief contributions to scholarship, his book on Southern literature and another on the rating of American writers, came out after he had retired. But undertaking research along with all his regular chores and promotional ventures would have been formidably difficult. I could do no more than bits of editing or bibliographical garnerings amidst the tumult of running *American Literature*, teaching, and directing the work of graduate students. Sustained investigations could be carried on successfully only during sabbatical leaves. I think that The Judge later regretted also his protracted labors on his textbook anthology. To be sure, it was financially rewarding, but it took more of his time than may be supposed. He might well have brought out his monumental overview of the literature of the southern states much earlier if he had spent the time on it.

It may be overlooked that his manifold efforts in founding the first research journal in his field were materially aided by previous experience in running *The Southwest Review*. Before he moved to North Carolina he had learned a great deal about academic journalism, though, to be sure, *The Southwest Review* was a far cry from representing primarily the interests of scholars. When negotiations between the American Literature Group and Duke University were under way he was prepared to put into the initial agreement matters

that most English professors would never have bothered about. For example, it was clearly specified that fiscally *American Literature* was the property of the university, but the Group should manage editorial policies and elect an editorial board of its own choosing except that the Chairman of the Board of Editors should be named by Duke. All articles published had to be approved by a board of scholars elected by the membership of the Group. Shortly after he retired, there were certain members of the Group who felt that the editorial policies had been too conservative, and an effort was made, somewhat covertly at first, to gain control of the periodical in behalf of the "new scholarship." When a committee of the MLA body made their first maneuvers and a copy of the formal agreement was put at their disposal they gave up the ghost — and *American Literature* was spared a divagation in the direction of the "new scholarship," now so dated.

Experience with *The Southwest Review* also was helpfully preparatory to the most difficult aspect of editing a scholarly journal, namely, the conduct of the department containing reviews of new books. Mr. Hubbell knew in advance of March, 1929 the chief hurdles and bugbears and was able to avoid many. How can an editor secure a sound appraisal from a scholar who has been chosen to review a product of long labor written by a friend — or an enemy, or by a young and promising chap who disagrees radically with the general conceptions the reviewer himself believes to be basic? What shall you do when the man chosen as best suited to review a book writes in: "I can't say anything good about his opus, so please count me out as a reviewer of it?" What about the editor's weighty responsibility in isolating from a swarm of new publications the relatively few works that are to receive full treatment? Only experience can help to steer clear of such rocks and shoals, especially if anonymous reviews are *verboten*. And always something may pop up for which even long experience fails to prepare. A case in point, now a humorous memory, was provided by Arthur Hobson Quinn, the world's leading authority on the theater of the nation. He had turned in his usual sound estimate of a respectable study in that field and had of necessity employed the word *theater* in almost every other sentence. He spelled it with an *re*. Since our Chicago *Manual* rule used *er* we had to change his copy accordingly. When proof came back from dear old Professor Quinn all the many *theaters* were restored with the *re* and a most indignant letter accom-

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panied it, reminding Messrs. Hubbell and Gohdes that he had had occasion during a long lifetime of writing about the stage to use that word more than most and he had always spelled it with the *re*, and in no uncertain terms he demanded that his wishes be followed. Mr. Hubbell chuckled when he read it — and left it to me to calm the troubled sea. I simply wrote an explanation of our rule, admitted it was arbitrary, but noted that a journal couldn't change its spelling from page to page to accommodate the wishes or fashions of contributors. Professor Quinn gave up — and, years later, invited me to contribute to *The Literature of the American People* and sought to make me his successor at the University of Pennsylvania. That contretemps turned out happily. I lost more friends via reviews in *American Literature* than did Mr. Hubbell, thanks to what he had already been through in Dallas.

Mr. Hubbell had a most Christian way of keeping silent when he was wronged or hurt; he only occasionally mentioned a person's faults and never spoke ill of acquaintances. It came as a shock to me that he was never asked to write a chapter for *The Literary History of the U.S.* I found out that he had thus been slighted when he pointed out a few mistakes in portions of that work which he might have been expected to have composed himself. Only once did he mention in my hearing his chagrin that the leadership in the study of Southern literature which he had built up over the years at Duke was allowed to depart to another school seemingly without a qualm. When a favorite grandson met an untimely accidental death and, soon after hearing the news, I called to talk to him in his darkened parlor, an eyeshade draped on his forehead and a sad look on his face, he mentioned the matter only at the instance of his son Jay, who wished me to know, and then quickly thereafter changed the subject to the old days at Harvard when all the graduate students in the English Department knew one another, as well as all their professors. He had his share of griefs and sorrows, but for him the belt of gold concealed the hidden wound. A couple of weeks before he died he described a kind of sharp pain that seemed to shoot through his midriff area once in a while but cheered both himself and me again with reminiscences of his days as a graduate student. Recollections of family, church, and friends enabled him to pass his later years with equanimity, and rare was the day when, staff in hand, he did not stride through our neighborhood on his twice-daily walks.

He never complained about the burden of duties which accumulated during his earliest years in Durham with ever-increasing enrollment in his field and the journal requiring more and more time in order to keep up with the growing volume of manuscripts submitted and new books to be considered for review. When he took his first sabbatical leave he was still teaching four courses in addition to his editorial chores and directing twenty-seven graduate theses or dissertations. The favorite recollection connected with the birth of the journal which he liked to repeat was: "You know, the editor of *Studies in Philology* assured me at the outset that we couldn't get a hundred subscribers in a year." The subscriptions, in fact, paid the costs of printing from the very beginning. For the good of the cause — that sums up his idea of service to the professional students of the national letters. They did well to name their honorary medallion after him. "American literature," Howard Mumford Jones once quipped: "Why Hubbell invented the subject."

Quite apart from his accomplishments in starting the research journal, the faithfulness of his efforts in his field may be glimpsed in several other activities. The monumental history *The South in American Literature* speaks for itself, of course, but its readers may never know from it that its author was literally steeped in a fabulous knowledge of background detail undergirding the information chosen for inclusion in its pages. He started his scholarly career with an essay on Virginia life in fiction and to the end maintained his zest for the province he had originally elected to exploit. The last words I heard from his lips, the night before he went to the hospital, were the lines of a minor Southern poet written about a scuppernong vine. The scuppernong, I perhaps need to say, is the oldest native wine grape in the United States and grows nowhere else save in the South. He had routed out the poem in answer to a query I put to him the day before as to verse dealing with this delectable muscadine. The little poem which he read over the phone was to him a poor thing indeed "and yet mine own," as Shakespeare has it. There is, to be sure, no single clue to any man's character, and, even more obviously, no one can reduce the mind and nature of a humanistic scholar to a solitary boullion-cube phrase, but if I had to come, let us say, near the external reality of The Judge's personality in a word or two I should summon up the old, well-worn expression "Southern gentleman." Gentle he assuredly was. He was also ever devoted to promoting the study of the literature

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of his country. So much for the "outward shows." Deep down within, however, one word will say it for me; and that word is "Friend."