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*Observations on Robert Penn Warren's
"The Day Dr. Knox Did It"*

JAMES A. PERKINS

Robert Penn Warren's poem "The Day Dr. Knox Did It" was written between December 8 and December 20 in 1965. The first page of the manuscript, which is in the Beinecke Library, notes that the poem was "actually begun in another version in 1963."¹ In its earliest form, the poem was untitled. The first typescript was titled "Cerulean Springs." That was crossed out and replaced by hand with "The Day Dr. Knott Did It." In the fourth draft, that title changed without explanation or clue to "The Day Dr. Knox Did It." In all, the poem went through seven partial or complete drafts, including one sent to Allen Tate for comment, before it appeared in 1966 in the September issue of *Encounter*.² It was reprinted in *Selected Poems: New & Old 1923-1966* and in *Selected Poems 1923-1975*, but was omitted in *New and Selected Poems 1923-1985*. The published poem, which was dedicated to William and Rose Styron, is 178 lines long. It is divided into five sections, each titled and each composed of a number of quatrains and a concluding couplet.

This long and complex poem has received little critical attention, and what it has received is varied in its opinion of the poem. Victor Strandberg, in *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren*, calls the work "one of Warren's finest in this book,"³ in a discussion of *Selected Poems: New & Old 1923-1966*. On the other hand, Marshall Walker, in *Robert Penn Warren A Vision Earned*, says:

¹The manuscript material discussed here is housed in the Robert Penn Warren Papers in Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University: YCAL MS 51, Box 225, folders 3989-3992.

²The poem appeared in volume 27 of *Encounter* on 22-24 with Arabic rather than Roman numerals marking the divisions. With the exception of manuscript drafts, the version quoted here appears in *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1998), 202-207, and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

³Victor Strandberg, *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 93.

The long-windedness of “The Day Dr. Knox Did It” (SP, pp.167-73) is somewhat redeemed in its last part by a compelling account of how the speaker, fleeing from the implications of his neighbor’s suicide, discovers the mysterious fact of death pursues him everywhere:

My small daughter’s dog has been killed on the road.

It is night. In the next room she weeps.

The speaker’s daughter, too, is being instructed in the central role of death in the world of experience.⁴

Floyd Watkins, in *Then & Now The Personal Past in the Poetry of Robert Penn Warren*, calls the poem “one of Warren’s most extended and substantial Guthrie or Cerulean Springs poems”⁵ and does his usual fine job of establishing the probable factual background for many of the poem’s details. Unlike Walker, Watkins is aware of the two-fold layering of time in the poem. He says: “The poem is a study of the man thinking of the boy thinking of the thinking of a man preparing for suicide.”⁶ Watkins does a workman-like job of unfolding the poem for inspection.

Calvin Bedient does not even mention the poem in *The Heart’s Last Kingdom: Robert Penn Warren’s Major Poetry*.⁷

I believe that “The Day Dr. Knox Did It” deserves more attention than it has so far received, and in this paper, I will consider an important motif from an unpublished Warren novel that is repeated in this poem; suggest some interesting correspondences between Warren’s poem and the work of Ernest Hemingway, especially the short story “Indian Camp”; and invite other scholars to reread this rich, complex, well-wrought and reflective narrative.

The reflective narrative is the combination of two poetic modes, the meditation and the anecdote. In his essay “Episode and Anecdote in the Poetry of Robert Penn Warren,” Cleanth Brooks explores

⁴Marshall Walker, *Robert Penn Warren: A Vision Earned* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 156-57.

⁵Floyd C. Watkins, *Then & Now: The Personal Past in the Poetry of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 105.

⁶Watkins, 107.

⁷Calvin Bedient, *In the Heart’s Last Kingdom: Robert Penn Warren’s Major Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

Warren's method of combining these two modes in some of his most effective poems:

I do not want to imply that these meditative and anecdotal modes are sharply separate. They are not. The lyric "Speleology" that I have just discussed really combines the two modes—thus, the memory of the boyhood incident provokes in the grown man, long afterward, the meditation on the meaning of life.⁸

Mr. Brooks's statements about "Speleology" could well be applied to "The Day Dr. Knox Did It." In this poem, real time, the present, is the time represented by the composition of the poem, the time shortly after the death of the daughter's dog. Time in the poem moves in a simple chronological pattern.

The first section, "Place and Time," presents the Edenic situation at about three p.m. on a hot August day in the summer of 1914, just before the nine-year-old speaker heard "the sound" (203). August of 1914 was the last moment of innocence. The sound in the poem, a single gunshot, shatters the innocence of one nine-year-old boy just as the guns of August, not mentioned in the poem, are opening up on the innocence of the world.

The second section, "The Event," describes the sound and introduces the man who "had climbed to the barn loft // to arrange himself" (203-204). Certainly the infinitive "to arrange" calls attention to itself, especially since Warren repeats it in the third section of the poem. While it does mean "to settle" and "to organize" and "to align," it also suggests the phrase we use to discuss funerals and burials, "to make arrangements." The irony is that a man who arranges himself with a shotgun is going to "unsettle" and "scatter" and "disorganize" things. The speaker wonders:

That man—how long had he lain, just looking?
That was the thing that stuck in my head.
I would wonder how long he had lain there, first. (204)

⁸Cleanth Brooks, "Episode and Anecdote in the Poetry of Robert Penn Warren," *Yale Review* 70.4 (July 1981): 552-567; this quote 553.

The third section, “A Confederate Veteran Tries to Explain the Event,” occurs after the event and describes the speaker asking, “But why did he do it, Grandpa?” (204) This is the second thing the speaker wonders.

The fourth section, “The Place Where the Boy Pointed,” occurs ten days after the event and describes the speaker being taken by the son of the man who committed suicide to see the place where it happened:

I stared at the place, but the hay was clean, which was strange,
for I'd been hearing them tell how a 12-gauge will make an awful
mess if you put the muzzle in your mouth.
I kept thinking about how the place looked clean.
I kept wondering who had cleaned up the mess. (205)

In the fifth section, “And All That Came Thereafter,” time continues to move chronologically toward the present, toward the writing of the poem, but much more time elapses. The first two stanzas describe the speaker leaving the loft and going to a stream to wash away the stain of his recent questions. The descriptions are evocative of the Edenic setting of the opening section. Through this cleansing, the speaker believes once again in the innocent immortality of youth:

. . . and I would lie with my eyes shut tight, and let water
flow over me as I lay, and like water, the world would flow, flow
away, on forever. . . . (206)

The next word on that line is “But,” and the rest of the poem undercuts this momentarily regained vision of Eden, first with a memory of feelings on Telegraph Hill and then with the memory of a woman whose face the speaker can no longer recall. These two memories cause the speaker to conclude that “there is // no water to wash the world away” (207). Then this anecdotal meditation ends in the present with an announcement of the drama that brought it into being:

My small daughter's dog has been killed on the road.
It is night. In the next room she weeps. (207)

I am fascinated in this poem by the fact that the event, the death of Dr. Knox, is never really described. However, as Watkins has told us, “The suicide of the doctor is not the point.”⁹ We get instead what the speaker wondered about, what he asked about, and what he noticed. He wondered “how long the man had lain there, first.” He asked his Grandpa why the man had done it. He noticed that “the hay was clean” and he “kept wondering who had cleaned up the mess.”

This is not the first Warren character to wonder who had cleaned up a mess after a shooting. Steve Adams, the central character in Warren’s second novel, an untitled and unpublished work “written about 1933-34—in Tennessee,” saw his friend Jim Hanks dead on the floor of the drug store. After Steve left the drug store:

He wondered if they had begun to wash up the tile floor inside the drug store yet where some of the blood had spilled. He had seen it oozing on the colored tiles. He had felt no revulsion, no horror, nothing at all. Would they wash up the tile floor while people stood around and watched, or would they make the people get out while the floor was being washed? Who would wash it? Would they get old Uncle Simon, the old negro man who cleaned up every morning? Or was that disrespectful to the deceased? Would a white man have to wash up the blood that was so bright on the worn color of the tiles? A rag or a mop? And then, as plainly as day, he saw a mop being dipped in a bucket of water and being wrung out and the water stained. And he knew that at that very minute, back in the drug store, a mop was being dipped and wrung out. He could not see what hands held it.¹⁰

A look at section four in the first manuscript version of “The Day Dr. Knox Did It” reveals that the speaker had a very similar quandary. The lines that end the section read:

⁹*Then & Now*, 111.

¹⁰This unpublished Warren novel is housed in the Robert Penn Warren Papers in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University: YCAL MS 51, Box 220, folders 3833-35. It is listed as “Untitled Novel,” but in a November 8, 1941 letter to David M. Clay, Warren referred to it as “But Not the Lark.” See William Bedford Clark, *Selected Letters of Robert Penn Warren: The Southern Review Years, 1935-1942*, vol. 2 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 340-44.

I kept thinking how the straw looked clean.
I kept wondering who had cleaned up the mess.

However, the second lined is crossed out and replaced with:

And thought how some nigger must have cleaned the mess.

By the second draft of the poem, the “straw” in the first line becomes “hay,” to be consistent with the rest of the poem, and that curious second line replaced by the one crossed out originally. I mention this because in addition to this passage’s curious connection to Warren’s unpublished and untitled second novel, it is useful to remember that Warren’s concern with and for blacks is always an informing force in his work, whether it finally shows or not. In 1965, when Warren was writing this poem, he had just spent several years preparing his massive non-fiction work, *Who Speaks For The Negro?* which helped Warren clean up the mess of segregation in his mind and allowed him to reclaim important sections of his own past, including events from a certain day in August in Cerulean Springs.

The attention to detail—“the clean hay”—which diverts the speaker and the reader from the event—“the suicide”—reminds me of a passage from Ernest Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*:

For myself, not being a bullfighter, and being much interested in suicides, the problem was one of depiction and waking in the night I tried to remember what it was that seemed just out of my remembering and that was the thing that I had really seen and, finally, remembering all around it, I got it. When he stood up, his face white and dirty and the silk of his breeches opened from waist to knee, it was the dirtiness of the rented breeches, the dirtiness of his slit underwear and the clean, clean, unbearably clean whiteness of the thigh bone that I had seen, and it was that which was important.¹¹

The speaker in “The Day Dr. Knox Did It” focuses on what he actually saw and actually heard. By describing the clean hay and wondering

¹¹Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1932), 20.

about it, he creates a moment of contrast similar to the one Hemingway describes.

Having made some observations about motif and sources in this poem, I would now like to suggest some correspondences. Hemingway will continue to be important here, especially his early short story "Indian Camp." The events in that story roughly parallel key events in "The Day Dr. Knox Did It," up to a point. Nick Adams is present when an Indian commits suicide while his wife is struggling to give birth. Unlike the speaker in the poem, Nick sees everything: "Nick standing in the door of the kitchen, had a good view of the upper bunk when his father, the lamp in one hand, tipped the Indian's head back."¹² Nick questions his father in the way the speaker in the poem questioned his Grandpa:

"Why did he kill himself, Daddy?"

"I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess."¹³

This answer is as vague as the answer the Confederate Veteran gave the speaker in the poem: "For some folks the world gets too much, . . ."

After that, like the speaker in the poem, Nick Adams washes his hands of it all, cleanses himself, and is baptized in that remarkably renewable innocence that is so maddening to readers of the Nick Adams stories:

They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, his father rowing. The sun was coming up over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.

In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die.¹⁴

Hemingway's story ends there as do the correspondences between it and "The Day Dr. Knox Did It" and the correspondences between the attitudes of Hemingway and Warren toward death and loss. Warren

¹²Ernest Hemingway, "Indian Camp," *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1953), 94.

¹³"Indian Camp," 95.

¹⁴"Indian Camp," 95.

presents “the man thinking of the boy thinking of the thinking of a man preparing for suicide.” Hemingway seldom gets beyond a boy thinking, certainly not in “Indian Camp.” The rest of the poem undercuts the final line of “Indian Camp” as surely as it undercuts the momentarily restored innocence of the first two quatrains of the fifth section of the poem. The truth is finally:

We are the world, and it is too late to pretend we are children
at dusk watching fireflies.
But we must frame more firmly the idea of good. (207)

I suppose I finally see “The Day Dr. Knox Did It” as an artistic response to the suicide of Ernest Hemingway. Allen Shepherd, who read an earlier draft of this paper, suggested that the poem might involve Warren’s own attempted suicide, which occurred while Warren was at Vanderbilt, during a fit of depression caused by concern over his eyesight.¹⁵ While the emotion of that event surely colors this poem, the details of the poem have much more to do with Ernest Hemingway, with his work, especially “Indian Camp,” and with the events of a day in August in 1914. Watkins tells us that the suicide on which the poem was based was accomplished with a pistol.¹⁶ Changing that pistol to a shotgun created the mess that the speaker pondered, but it also created a parallel with another suicide by shotgun that occurred in Ketchum, Idaho on the morning of June 2, 1961, two years before this poem was “actually begun in another version.”

When Hemingway placed both barrels of his Boss shotgun “against his forehead just above the eyebrows and tripped both triggers,”¹⁷ he created quite a mess. Perhaps this poem was Warren’s way of cleaning up the mess. Certainly it is a poem in which, as Brooks says, “... the memory of the boyhood incident provokes in the grown man, long afterward, the meditation on the meaning of life.”

¹⁵David Farrell, “Poetry as a Way of Life: An Interview with Robert Penn Warren,” in Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weaks, eds., *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), 363.

¹⁶*Then & Now*, 107.

¹⁷Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1969), 564.