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Narrator Myopia in “Goodwood Comes Back”

BILL McCARRON AND PAUL KNOKE

In Robert Penn Warren’s short story “Goodwood Comes Back,” published in *The Southern Review* in 1941, the anonymous narrator makes the following observation about his childhood friend turned professional baseball player, upon learning of Goodwood’s triumphant but brief second chance in the Big Leagues: “He came back with great success, it looked like at first. I was mighty glad when I got a clipping from my sister with the headlines, *Goodwood Comes Back*. ...But it didn’t last. ...Then he came back home” (112).¹ Goodwood’s return to his hometown doesn’t “last” either, given that the narrator bewilderingly concludes his reminiscence with the news that Goodwood has been murdered by his brother-in-law. However, what the narrator cannot comprehend, in his naiveté, is that however short-lived, Goodwood’s personal comeback has been as triumphant as his foray into baseball. The narrator’s ignorance of sports and the contrasting sterility of his own personal life, in fact, only serve to underscore Goodwood’s accomplishments.

Warren used his Guthrie, Kentucky childhood friend Kent Greenfield, three years Warren’s senior, as the historic model for his characterization of Luke Goodwood. Greenfield was an avid hunter, expert marksman, and the young Warren’s baseball mentor, so proficient at pitching that he spent more than five years in the Major Leagues.² We cite this fact to accentuate the verisimilitude of Warren’s Goodwood persona juxtaposed with his fictional “biographer.” However, in Warren’s story, the narrator and the ballplayer are separated by depth of knowledge about the game of

¹ Originally published in *Southern Review*, 6 (winter 1941), 526-536, “Goodwood Comes Back” became part of *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), 108-119. Parenthetical references are to the CA edition.

² Kent Greenfield made it to the Big Leagues in late 1924 when he pitched the final regular-season game for John McGraw’s pennant-winning New York Giants, though Greenfield yielded a home run to Philadelphia Phillies slugger Cy Williams and lost the game. Ironically, Greenfield’s first outing marked the only time he was a member of a first-place finishing team. Greenfield never appeared in any of the seven World Series games that the 1924 Giants lost, 4-3, to the (footnote continued on next page)

baseball. Warren sets the narrator up as a deliverer of baseball balks and Goodwood as the hurler of balls and strikes. Indeed, the narrator's baseball knowledge matches that of a front office accountant with an eye only for press clippings and salary levels, whereas Goodwood manifests the concentration and skill of a true lover of the game.

To be sure, Luke Goodwood is a remarkable baseball player. We learn, firsthand from the narrator, that, even as a kid, “[w]hen he was pitching, it didn’t matter much who was fielding... because there weren’t going to be any hits to amount to anything in the first place” (108). But not so the narrator. We learn that “Luke Goodwood could always play baseball, but I never could, to speak of,” and that, because he is “little” for his size, “if it hadn’t been for Luke, I never would have been able” to “play with the boys in my class.” He only plays catcher “because I had the best mitt” and admits, “I was a little shy about standing up close to the plate on account of the boys flinging the bat the way they did when they started off for first base” (108). So although Luke gives his little friend the opportunity to be his battery mate, he ends up having to banish him to the outfield.

And it is from his secondhand, “outfield” perspective that the narrator must recount the remainder of Luke’s baseball exploits. After he finishes school and leaves home, he loses all personal contact with Luke for years. Instead, he relies on the letters and

(footnote continued from previous page)

Washington Senators. The Guthrie native’s subsequent career included two more seasons with the Giants, a split season with the Giants and Boston Braves, a full season with the Braves, and another split one with the Braves and Brooklyn Robins—reminiscent of the three or so teams that Goodwood has played for. Kent’s lifetime record was 41-48 with a 4.54 ERA and two shutout wins. By age 27, Kent was out of Major League baseball and, presumably, back in his hometown, where he died and was buried in 1978. The information and statistics for Greenfield come from the *Baseball Almanac* at www.baseball-almanac.com. This site also enabled us to correct a few minor errors in the otherwise useful Kent Greenfield home page maintained by Western Kentucky University at www.robertpennwarren.com. For an extensive discussion of Warren’s association with Greenfield and Greenfield’s reactions to Warren’s story, see Will Fridy, “The Author and the Ballplayer: An Imprint of Memory in the Writings of Robert Penn Warren,” *Mississippi Quarterly*, 44, no. 2 (spring 1991), 159-166. In a recorded interview with Fridy, Greenfield admitted, “I believe he had me in mind when he wrote that; [i]n between the lines you can figure it out” (159). See also the very useful summary on Greenfield in James A. Grimshaw Jr., *Robert Penn Warren: A Documentary Volume*, vol. 320 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006), 25.

newspaper clippings his sister sends him; and initially, the word is good. Muses the narrator, “I never found out exactly how he broke into real baseball and got out of what you call the sand lot,” but break out he does. His sister claims that, eventually, “Luke was making nine thousand dollars playing for the Athletics, which was in Philadelphia. The papers called him the Boy Wizard from Alabama” (111). Note, in addition to his errant grammar, the narrator’s awkward baseball phraseology, e.g., “the Athletics, which was in Philadelphia,” as opposed to “the Philadelphia Athletics.” Obviously the narrator is still baseball-unsavvy. He goes on to report that, soon afterwards, Luke “pitched in the World Series, for the team that bought him from the Athletics, in Philadelphia, and he got a bonus of three thousand dollars, plus his salary” (112).³ The awkward references to the Athletics in Philadelphia are not the only slips the narrator makes. Earlier he refers to alcohol driving Luke “out of the big league” (109). The plural “Big Leagues” is the accepted baseball parlance, just as the narrator’s reference to Luke being “back in baseball, but not in such a good team” (112) represents another miscue: *on* a good team is what a true baseball fan would say. In any event, the actual baseball performances of Luke in the Big Leagues receive, at best, passing attention. Rather than supply us with added insight into Luke’s ball playing, the narrator instead only makes very pointed remarks about Luke’s salaries at various stages of his career. Money seems more important to the narrator than any focus on Luke’s realization of the American baseball dream.

The nearsighted narrator continues his reports of secondhand news by reminding us that Luke “hit the skids after that, drink being the reason that was reported to me.” But Goodwood stages that meteoric comeback to organized baseball and “was shutting them out right and left” until, once again, “drink got him, and he was out of the big-time game for good and all, clean as a whistle” (112). The drinking notwithstanding—and the narrator is obviously horrified by this personal shortcoming—Luke Goodwood *has*, in

³ Regarding the reference to “the team that bought him from the Athletics, in Philadelphia,” one can only conclude that the narrator is ambiguous: it could be some other team in the Major Leagues *or* it could be the National League team in Philadelphia, the Phillies.

fact, made “good” athletically, and has fulfilled a goal which most youngsters, even today, can only dream of.

There is also the way Goodwood spends his money, again revelatory of the narrator’s blurred vision. The narrator, in a mixture of envy and wonder, notes that Goodwood “sent his mother a five-hundred-dollar radio set and a piano, and I admired him for the way he remembered [her], who had had a hard time and no doubt about it. I don’t know why he sent the piano, because nobody at his house could play one” (111). Although he acknowledges Luke’s generosity of spirit, the narrator’s afterthought about musicians in the Goodwood household seems insensitive and demeaning; in Luke’s opinion, his mother is a kind, considerate lady who *should* own a piano. The narrator then adds, “[he] also fixed up the house, which was in a bad shape by that time” (111). Subsequently, Luke tells the narrator that he “leased a farm to put his [bird]dogs on and hired somebody to take care of them for him,” and later yet “bought some more dogs, for he always was crazy about dogs, and bought some Chinese ring-neck pheasants to put on his farm” (116). He also tells the narrator, years afterwards, about the time he and three of his teammates put up “five hundred apiece” to bail a fellow player out of jail (117). Maybe, as Luke says, “a fellow don’t know what to do with real money” (116), but he makes up for his lack of worldliness with his human compassion and love of animals.

Neither the money nor the ring-neck pheasants survive Luke’s post-professional decline into poverty, but he still pursues a dream, this time of buying himself “a little patch of ground back in the country where it was cheap, and just farm a little and hunt and fish.” He fulfills that goal by wedding “a girl named Martha Sheppard, who is related to my family in a distant way, though Lord knows my sister wouldn’t claim any kin with them. And I reckon they aren’t much to brag on.” The narrator concludes, “I guessed at the time...that Luke just married that girl because it was the only way he could see to get the little piece of ground he spoke of. I never saw the girl to my recollection, and don’t know whether she was pretty or not” (118-119). One wonders, given the narrator’s apparent snobbishness, unfamiliarity with Martha Sheppard, and general cluelessness about human nature, whether his surmise is valid.

Indeed, clueless both he is and we are. What, the reader wonders, has the narrator been doing with his own life all of this time? He seems to pity his old friend because he “didn’t finish high school” (111), but given the narrator’s own command of English, he has evidently not gone on with much education of his own. And given that he never mentions any family other than his mother and sister, he himself has obviously never married. He never mentions his occupation; he never reveals his name. True, he is an acute observer of surface detail, and he means this to be Luke’s story and not his, but is he also, unwittingly, revealing an inferiority complex? And then there is the difference between Luke’s attitude towards him and his attitude towards Luke. Luke takes him under his wing, doing his best to include him on that sandlot baseball team, yes, but also taking him “hunting” (110) and inviting him to stay “at the Goodwood house a lot” (109). The Goodwood and narrator households, by the way, are a study in contrasts. There may not be a “Mr. Narrator,” but there is a “Mr. Goodwood,” obviously an alcoholic, who runs “a man’s house with six men sitting down to the table, counting the grandfather” (109), whereas “[at] my house everything was different, for men there always seemed to be just visiting” (110). In other words, Goodwood has, for the narrator, acted as a surrogate big brother for a boy surrounded by women. Such a relationship would seem to foster a close bond, but the narrator only refers to Goodwood indifferently as “the boy that was my friend, you might say” (111).

Again, the years bring on an estrangement between the two due to time and distance. Much later, when the narrator returns home on a visit to his sister, he encounters Luke by chance, and the ensuing verbal exchange is telling: “I said hello to Luke, and he said, ‘Well, I’ll be damned, how you making it?’ I said, ‘Fine, how’s it going?’ Then he said, ‘Fine.’” The narrator can see that Luke and “the other boy” he is with are “both nearly drunk,” and upon Luke’s “invitation” to join him on a trip to “nigger town” for whoring and more “bootleg whiskey,” he replies, “no thanks ...not ever having approved of that, ...for it looks like to me a man ought to have more self-respect” (113). Self-respect is all well and good, but in the process of maintaining it, the narrator comes off as something of a

prude and doesn't seem to understand that Luke can't help himself. Like his father and three brothers, he is an alcoholic, and drinking is his "ruination" (109). Yet though Luke, in the words of an old bystander, has "'threw away his chances,'" he is still "pitching a little ball for the town team that played on Saturday and Sunday afternoons" and "pitching probably...still good enough to make the opposition look silly." And drunk or not, Luke can still, scooping up "a rock from the road like a baseball player scooping up an easy grounder," nail a telephone pole "a good way off" (114).

Over a year after that, the narrator eavesdrops on Luke's conversation with some construction workers "while sitting on the front porch of my sister's house. ...Although it was getting along in the season, there were still enough leaves on the vine of my sister's porch to hide me from the street, but I could hear every word they said" (114). The narrator makes no effort to speak out to Luke, instead preferring to spy on him. The narrator's continued display of baseball ignorance surfaces again when the notes how Luke admits to the workmen that "Millville had a tough club to beat all right" (115). In apparent consternation, the narrator immediately observes, "I noticed on that trip home that the boys talked about their ball club, and not their ball team. It must have been Luke's influence" (115). Doubtless, Luke did provide the distinction between "club" and "team"—one of the intricacies of baseball beyond the narrator's ken. To most baseball aficionados of the 1930s, "club" baseball would connote local games played on an un-sponsored, amateur basis, whereas "team" baseball is the usual reference players employed to refer to the more elevated status of semi-professional or professional baseball.⁴

In any event, the narrator subsequently reveals that, "a couple of days later when I was sitting in my sister's yard trying to cool off," Luke makes it a point to stop and talk to him in a distinctly one-sided conversation. The narrator says, "I was a little bit embarrassed at first, I reckon, and maybe he was, too, for we hadn't sort of sat down together like that for near fifteen years, and he had

⁴ A vestige of the distinction remains in today's sports where, for example, a "club" sport in college athletics is unofficial and run on a trial basis. Only if the sport becomes a permanent fixture in a school's athletic program is it accorded "team" status.

been away and been a big league pitcher at the top of his profession almost, and here he was back.” After a while, Luke says, “Well, we sure did have some pretty good times when we were kids...” The narrator concedes, “[W]e sure did” (115). Then Luke launches into a reminiscence of “the places he had been and the things he had seen,” and reveals his dreams for the future. The narrator says that, when Luke leaves, they “shook hands in a formal way,” and Luke’s last words to the narrator are not just those of a “friend, you might say,” but “So long, buddy” (118). That’s the kind of affection and honesty and soul-baring that the narrator seems incapable of. It is revealing, too, that it is Luke who seeks the narrator out, and never vice versa.

Warren’s brilliant poetic metaphor in this story is developed through the narrator’s innocuous observations about Goodwood’s physical mannerisms that, subliminally or otherwise, mirror Luke’s mental preoccupation with pitching. He describes Luke as being “long and rangy” and as appearing “to be setting his big feet always carefully on the ground,” coming “up on his toes a little, like a man testing his footing. He walked that way even on a concrete walk, probably from being in the woods so much.” The narrator condescendingly adds, “It was no wonder with all his hunting he never did study or make any good use and profit of his mind, which was better than most people’s, however” (110). Despite what the narrator says, the physical motions of the lanky Goodwood surely derive from his constant preoccupation with his pitching delivery technique. Specifically, a young pitcher learns to practice what in baseball terms is known as “toeing the rubber.” The rectangular pitching rubber sits atop the pitcher’s mound, and every would-be hurler toes the frontal area of it with the toes of his sneakers or baseball cleats in order to create a hole. In the usual right-handed pitching delivery, the right foot is placed parallel against the rubber, in the area crested by the broad hole, to insure added throwing leverage. That may not be making “good use and profit of his mind” in an academic sense, but it surely suggests that Goodwood is concentrating on what to him is more important.

But the metaphor doesn’t stop there. Immediately following his mistaken assumption about the origin of Goodwood’s toeing

technique, the narrator launches into an aside on Luke's splendid "Spencerian" penmanship. Indeed, Spencerian script is elegant, even artistic, and resembles—with its elliptical letter shapes—what today might be mistaken as calligraphy. The narrator adds that Luke "could draw a bird with one line without taking the pencil off the paper once" and that he would do so "all afternoon" without let-up. To the narrator, "The birds all looked alike, all fine and rounded off like his Spencerian writing" (110). In their continuity and rounding off, both the penmanship and the drawing represent in miniature the fluid artistry of a pitcher's continual wind-up to hurl a baseball. Pitchers are taught the swinging arm movement, the twists and turns of hips and legs, all in a continual non-stop rhythm. They practice it over and over again, day after day. Even the final cocking of the left leg and follow-through kick of the right leg resemble, in a macrocosmic way, the beaks Goodwood adds to the circular-shaped birds he draws so carefully. Doubtless, the reason Luke never finishes school is the fact that school never challenges him. He is preoccupied, again, with how to make the picture-perfect baseball delivery.

As we have said, the narrator is no baseball aficionado. It is no wonder that in their last conversation together, the narrator comments, "I was getting embarrassed when he started to talk about baseball, like you will when somebody who has just had a death in the family starts talking natural, like nothing had happened, about the departed one" (116). It seems to be the narrator who, in Luke's personal life, has been the "death in the family." That may explain why his other sandlot baseball acquaintance, Joe Lancaster, treats the narrator with indifference when he encounters him years later working as a counterman in a local restaurant: "I'm bigger than he is now, for he never did grow much. He says hello exactly like a stranger that never saw you before and asks what you want" (109). The narrator may gloat that he has grown physically "bigger" than Joe, but he is now, spiritually, a "stranger" not only to Luke but to all of his old fellow ballplayers.

Speaking of Joe Lancaster, the narrator is filled with envy. He puts him down because he was "knotty and old-looking," yet the narrator admits that his scrawny playmate was an accomplished

hitter “who could give that ball a good solid crack” (108). In baseball lingo, Lancaster is able to “put good wood on the ball,” thus driving it a long way. To be sure, Luke would not want to live up to his last name because a pitcher strives to prevent the batter from doing just that.⁵ However, this latent irony is completely lost on the narrator. The failure to make a connection between Goodwood’s name and its obvious baseball implications is yet another instance of the narrator’s meager knowledge of the game.

It is interesting, finally, to note the narrator’s callous dismissal of Goodwood’s death. After passing stereotypical judgment about how isolated rural people can run amuck and commit acts of savagery, the narrator launches into a reconstruction of what he has heard about Luke’s murder. His sister writes him about the “bad blood” that developed between Luke and Martha Sheppard’s brother “because Luke and his wife didn’t get along so well together. I reckon she got to riding him about the way he spent his time, off hunting and all.” Pure conjecture, that. In any event, the brother murders Luke with three blasts from a .12-gauge pump gun, “and you know what even one charge of a .12 gauge will do at close range.” That’s pretty graphic; nor does the narrator display the least bit of sentiment. Moreover, the weapon of choice is “Luke’s own shotgun” (119). Maybe that’s a subtlety, lost on the narrator, that Luke dies as he has lived, his way.

In a 1968 interview, Warren discusses at some length the difference between “history” and “fiction” as art forms. History, Warren proclaims, is knowledge *about* an era, an event, or a person regarded from the outside and *behind*. Fiction, by contrast, is knowledge *of* an era, an event, or a person depicted from *inside* a character.⁶ As such, fiction depends on the shaping power of the imagination and not on the exactitude demanded by the historian. Just such a distinction is apropos to Warren’s baseball story. His friendship with Kent Greenfield and his own baseball acumen have supplied Warren with the historical wherewithal to create his Luke

⁵ Joseph R. Millichap rightly points out the same thing in his discussion of the story in “Robert Penn Warren: A Study of the Short Fiction” (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 37.

⁶ See “Conversations with Robert Penn Warren,” ed. Gloria L. Cronin and Ben Siegel (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 65.

Goodwood persona. However, the inside fictional view Warren provides the reader of Luke Goodwood is intentionally nonexistent, so that Warren can accentuate the limitations of his unnamed and emotionally myopic narrator. Warren's "Goodwood Comes Back" title, then, is not ironic, but literal. The irony is in the narrator's inability to see Goodwood for who he really is. And that myopia, Warren would say, is a metaphor of the human condition: as difficult as it is to know ourselves, it is far more difficult for us to "know" others.

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