English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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2 October 2016

Robert Penn Warren, “Evening Hawk” (1985)

Although I don’t take up Warren’s “Evening Hawk” in lecture, it is an important poem to have considered on your own and in your tutorials, both because by this point in the course you will have gathered some significant strategies to read poetry and because it is a poem that speaks is in a quiet conversation with Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” a poem I take up this week in lecture.

Every text has a context, many contexts, and one significant context for poems is other poems, poems that came before and that powerfully shape the later poet’s imagination. If you take a degree in English literature, part of what you do in that degree is explore in more detail how later poems are in an active dialogue with earlier ones; the later poem draws selectively from the earlier poem, re-writing it for its own time. Poems can have generous relationships with each other, but they can also have very fraught relationships. Sometimes later poems do everything they can to, as it were, *erase* the earlier poem. How strange to think of poems in competitive relationships with each other across time. “Evening Hawk” is not one of those poems. It draws on some of the themes Keats explores in “Ode to a Nightingale.” And its speaker changes and is changed by the creature he observes, just as in Keats’s “Ode.”

Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989) was a double Pulitzer Prize winning American poet, novelist, and literary critic. "Evening Hawk" remembers "Ode to a Nightingale" in several ways, but those resemblances also help us mark its difference from the earlier poem. For example, the "Ode" is written using the strict conventions or parameters of the ode form, but Warren's poem is written in what is called **free verse**. Free verse is poetry written without rhyme or other forms of patterning that we've seen in other poems on this course. It more closely approximates the look and sound of everyday speech. A great deal of poetry over the last two centuries has been written in free verse—although not all. Recall Justice's "The Wall," a relatively recent poem which adopts the strictly organized form of a sonnet.

The time of day of this poem is the same as that of "Ode to a Nightingale," namely the falling dark of the end of day. Twilight is a time of transition, changefulness, and transformation, a shadow-time often associated with altered or renewed perceptions, a magic moment suspended briefly between the worlds of night and day. In French, twilight is *entre chien et loup*, literally "between dog and wolf," i.e., metaphorically speaking, an indeterminate zone between friend and foe, between what affirms and what disturbs. Both Keats's poem and Warren's poems are very much creatures of the twilight—a time open to possibilities, a time when it seems right and good to be in mysteries, doubts, and uncertainties.

And each poem is about a creature, or, to be more precise (and precision is important when reading poetry and writing about it on exams), each is a poem about how the presence of a non-human creature *activates* the poet's imagination. What thoughts, feelings, observations and perceptions does the fleeting presence of the hawk in the sky at dusk prompt in the poet? What does it mean to be mortal in a universe that often feels immutable and indifferent by comparison? What is the role of imagination or poetry in exploring what it means to be mortal?

"Evening Hawk" is written in free verse, as I said, but it does have a strongly legible structure. Look, for example, at how it is divided into five uneven parts. So the poem's speaker shifts gears at least five times and the poem marks that by taking a break between those parts. The key will then be to determine what is happening in each of those five sections, and figuring out how, together, they form the poem as a whole. The poem unfurls in five parts: contrast where the speaker is--in terms of his perceptions and observations—in each part. Does the poem track a journey for the speaker? The speaker watches a hawk wheel about in the sky. Does the speaker wheel about in his own way too? In what ways does the poem turn and turn in a kind of mimicry of the hawk?

In the poem's opening section, the poet focuses intently on the motion of the hawk's wings set against the darkening sky. This section is made up of one long sentence whose parts or clauses are propelled forward, like the beating of wings, by certain words. The hawk's wings *dip;* they emerge *out of* the darkness of the mountains in the background, they are *riding* the remaining light: all words of movement in which Warren's rolling sentence captures the sense of the hawk rising and falling in the sky. The opening section is one sentence, as I say, but it is organized strangely. Note how the subject and

verb, usually the most pertinent part of a sentence in English, come last and form their own stand-alone verse: *The hawk comes*. The poet makes us wait for *The hawk comes* by piling up his clauses and verses in this opening section of the poem. Only after the poem's opening five verses does he tell us what this long sentence is about, namely that *The hawk comes*. That delay means something and is an example of how Warren is using the resources of language and sentence structure to do poetic work. We expect to see the subject and verb (subject: *hawk*; verb: *comes*) early on so as to orient us, give us our bearings, tell us how to read this sentence . . . but that's exactly not what happens. We are caught off balance because the poet has shifted the subject and verb to the end of the sentence. What's initially important to the poet are the worlds that hawk's flight seem to carve out. The hawk is coming, but before he acknowledges its arrival, the poet wants first to affirm the beautiful effects of its beating wings in combination with the evening sky. The bird not only flies in the sky; it seems in communication with it, shaping the poet's perception of it. In some mysterious way, the hawk's loops, its turnings and tunings, do something to the light, or what is left of the light. In some literal sense, it is true, *The hawk comes*, but notice how that phrase is orphaned at the end of the poem's first section. That verse is starkly prosaic or commonplace, a simple declaration in contrast to the preceding five verses, which are rich with strange metaphors: for example, the wings are *dipping through / Geometries*, and they are *riding / The last tumultuous avalanche of / light*. The poem is inviting you to dwell with these metaphors <u>first</u>, and so leaves the ordinary informational statement, *The hawk comes*, to the end of the poem's opening section. By putting the subject and verb at the end, the poet leaves us hanging, suspended in the air, so to speak. Like the hawk he is observing and which he eventually says is coming. The poet wants you to experience disorientation at first, i.e., a new way to think about the creature who wheels about in the falling dark.

However, the poet hardly lets us pause there with the verse, *The hawk comes*. Before the verse is done, we are pushed on to the next verse that starts with *His wing.* The poet could have begun a new verse on the left margin but instead he starts it half a breath after the phrase *The hawk comes*, but one line down.

So, Warren writes:

The hawk comes.

His wing…

When he might have written:

The hawk comes.

His wing…

The difference is that in the first instance, *His wing* is made <u>immediately</u> to follow *The hawk comes.* It is as if the poet can't abide by that prosaic claim, *The hawk comes.* He doesn't want it to stand entirely alone, as if there is too little in it. Although strictly speaking, *The hawk comes* is a true statement, since the hawk *has* arrived, it is only a statement, a bit bare or denuded compared to all the extraordinary

thoughts and feels that flows from the mere fact that *The hawk comes*. That plain little phrase hardly begins to capture what seeing those beating wings in the twilight activates in the poet. So understandably he is anxious to push on to what the coming of the hawk means to him poetically, as if swept along by those very wings. As this next section of the poem tells us, the beating wings seem metaphorically to mark the implacable passage of time. His loops in the sky seem like a *scythe*, a tool that a farmer uses to mow a field, a tool is of course associated metaphorically with death, who is often pictured as a hooded creature carrying a scythe over his shoulder. Time passes, one second following another, utterly oblivious to you or I or the speaker, just as the wings of the hawk appear to carve alien patterns in the sky without regard for us and without having any interest in us. Neither time nor the hawk ask anything of us, whereas we human beings seem always to be asking things of them. Something about seeing that hawk turn in the falling dark ignites that insight in the poet's imagination, the result of which is this poem. The poet observes the hawk but the hawk could care less about the poet. What if time were like that, profoundly shaping the world, shaping our lives, but completely indifferent to its effects on us?

Time *scythes down another day*, the poet says, and we are like stalks in a field that fall beneath its unsparing and oblivious cutting force. Whatever errors we have made, whatever mess we have made of our lives and the lives of others, well, those errors are our own. Time doesn't care. The hawk doesn't care.

And so the poet starts the poem again, marking that transition with an exclamation, much as Keats does in his *Odes*. *Look! Look!*, he says, marking the <u>forced</u> transition to the poem's third section. *Look!* functions like *Away!* in Keats. We are suddenly no longer there on the ground among the *gold[en]* stalks of our errors, but back with the hawk in the sky, a motion that we've seen before in "Ode to a Nightingale." Now the poet zeroes in on why the hawk fascinates him so and that he could only express in metaphors at the start of the poem. The hawk *knows neither Time nor error*. It marks the passage of time but itself doesn't contemplate the passage of time. Only human beings make errors and endure errors, whereas the hawk, it seems to the poet, is oblivious; it lives in a world where the distinction between truth and error don't mean a thing. Note thought how our errors or faults are not just faults; there is something *golden* in them too, as if to say that they are not entirely reprehensible but rather productive or generative in their own way. We are *heavy with the gold of our error*: such a vivid metaphor that suggests that we are weighed down by the gravity of our mistakes (unlike the hawk, who appears to fly so effortlessly high above us). But those errors are said metaphorically to be *gold*, i.e., weighty but also valuable, burdensome but also treasured. By contrast, the hawk appears simply to exist, whereas we humans struggle through trial and error.

The hawk looks on us, insofar as he looks at all, with an indifferent eye, *unforgiving*. For this poet, time does not forgive our world; it just paces it and provides the blank space in which our history unfurls. We live out our lives beneath the hawk, *under / Whose eye, unforgiving, the world, unforgiven, swings / Into shadow*. The repetition of the word, "unforgiving/unforgiven" should cause us to pause and to consider what the poet is saying here. The hawk's eye is unforgiving not because he is cruel but because he and the passage of time he embodies are at such a remove from our human world that neither forgiveness nor the lack of forgiveness matter. *Unforgiving* doesn't mean that the hawk meanly or cruelly withholds

giving us forgiveness; it means that the both offering *and* withholding forgiveness are not part what it is or does. Perhaps then there is a way to think of *the world, unforgiven* in similar terms. Perhaps we live in a world in which we don't need to ask for forgiveness because there is nothing that can grant such a thing to us . . . other than *us*. The world may be *unforgiven* not in the sense that it has done something awful and has yet to be judged for that awfulness. The world may be *unforgiven* in the sense that whatever *error* we make is, as the poet says, *our error*, to be rectified or ignored or endured by us and us alone. The hawk circling far overhead at night triggers that strangely moving possibility in the mind of the poet, i.e., that we live out our lives unobserved, un-watched over. We are the watchers, the writers, the thinkers; the poem is proof of that. We are the ones who forgive or who do not forgive. Time passes but remains indifferent to us. It just passes, just as the hawk flies about and the world turns on its axis. We are left to our own devices, including the power to create poems like "Evening Hawk."

In the second to last section of the poem, the poet's gaze widens. He now notices other creatures and features of this twilight world in which we all live and die: a thrush, a bat, and a star. His widening gaze suggests a more expansive frame of mind, something we also see develop step by step in Keats's *Ode.* These things—thrush and bat and star-- too live out their lives unconcerned with our concerns, not out of cruelty, far from it. They just live out their lives. The speaker labours to find the courage to think that thought, *really to think it*. They *remain*, as the poet says, they are *steady*. But notice a curious turn, one not available to the poet earlier in the poem. This steadiness is not reserved solely for the bats and the birds and the stars. Notice the curious comparison that the poet makes in the last verse of this section: *The star / Is steady, like Plato, over the mountain*. What does this comparison mean? To compare something using the word "like" is called a ***simile*.** When something is said to be like something else in a poem, that's a simile. Here the steadiness of the star is said to be *like Plato*. What an odd comparison. A star is like a philosopher? But then similes, like metaphors, are meant to surprise us; they are meant to refresh the language and activate our minds by bringing together disparate things and forging new and unexpected connections. The idea is to generate new thoughts. Plato was a famous ancient Greek philosopher and is sometimes said to be the founder of Western philosophy. The poet suggests that his immense and ancient wisdom has lasted through time, just like the *star* that stands *over the mountain*. The stars and bats and birds seem immortal; a million years ago, stars and bats and birds were a part of the world. It can sometimes seem like whatever human beings make is insubstantial when placed next to those seemingly timeless things. And yet the speaker insists that *Plato* too is not unlike a *star* insofar as he too remains. We too deserve a place in the falling dark, erroneous creatures that we are, mowed down by the scythe of time, left to stand there and look up into the evening sky and watch a hawk who hardly looks at us. We too deserve a place.

The last section of the poem is one sentence in three verses. It is a kind of query: if we listen carefully enough, if we had the ears to hear of such things, we might *hear / The earth grind on its axis, or history / Drip in darkness like a leaking pipe in the cellar*. What would it take to feel the utter indifference of the world as it rotates; it turns on its axis completely oblivious to the lives and deaths of those of us who live in this world. To hear that sound would be glimpse what we look like from the point of view of the earth itself, which is to say, as nothing. We are nothing to the world's turning, just as we are nothing to the hawk's turning in the night sky; yet those things matter to *us*. *History* can also be characterized in this

way. History of course matters to us; it is the complicated universe in which we are immersed; it is what shapes us and it is what we are inventing moment by moment. But whatever particular history we create or endure, it keeps happening. It unfolds like the ticking of a clock or the dripping of *a leaking pipe in the cellar*. Warren concludes the poem with another simile, this time comparing the incessant ticking of time in history *to* the dripping of a leaking pipe in a cellar. Time passes regardless of what we say or do; but that doesn't mean for one moment that we don't try to *make* something of the passage of time. Its indifference to us is met with an intense fascination in us, beginning with a poem like this one. To say that the passing of time is *like a leaking pipe in the cellar* is to give it a vivid poetic shape that is important to us even and especially if it is irrelevant to time. To speak poetically of time as the *grinding* of *the earth of its axis* is to give to the passing of time a certain gritty mechanical quality. The axis of the earth could care less about what we make of it; but it matters to us, the surest sign of which is that we reimagine that axis in poetic language, making comparisons, drawing on the immense resources of language to explore what the axis means to us, what it feels like to be turned and turned by time. The hawk *knows neither Time nor error* just as Time knows nothing and cares nothing for us; *but we care for it*, we care for Time and error and hawks and Plato . . . and never more obviously so than in the act of writing poetry. The poem too carves something out of the evening light. It is part of that light, "a particle of light in a great darkness," as John Keats once said.