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Book Review: Rebecca Kate Hahn, *Side-Stepping Normativity in Selected Short Stories by Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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Peter Swaab

To Rebecca Hahn must go the palm for the very first literary critical (as against biographical) book on the works of Sylvia Townsend Warner, and she and her German academic publisher both deserve a good deal of credit for the enterprise. Hahn's book focuses on Warner's short stories, a neglected area within a relatively neglected oeuvre; her novels have had much more critical attention than her short fiction. *Side-Stepping Normativity*, then, is a strikingly original and fresh publication. For those who do not know Warner's stories, Hahn's book will be an excellent critical introduction, while existing readers will find fresh and insightful readings into a dozen stories. Taken together, they give a persuasive account of the impressiveness and scope of Warner's achievements in this form. The book opens up many avenues for discussion and will be of considerable value to future study of Warner.

It has five central chapters, each one focused on three stories, together with a final chapter on Warner's late collection of fairy tales, *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977). The chapters are arranged not chronologically but instead by themes: 'Homoerotic Desires', 'Cross-Species Relationships', 'Incestuous Longings', 'Avenues of Escape' and 'Vanishings'. The overarching topic is non-normativity. Hahn's method is to combine close readings of the stories with reference to paradigms drawn largely from cultural and theoretical criticism, especially American queer theory. Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick, Jack Halberstam and Judith Butler feature in several chapters, along with relevant secondary literature about incest and animal studies, and Hahn also has recourse to some earlier French theorists of ideological formation (Althusser, Foucault, Lacan). These theoretical framings do a good job of showing the ambition and depth of Warner's stories, and they make a strong implicit claim for her importance against the condescension sometimes generically visited on women writing short stories. The explications are always lucid and well-evidenced, if occasionally inattentive to the richness of Warner's irony and the complexity of her stylistic effects. For this reader Hahn's discussions of 'Boors Carousing', 'Bruno' and 'At a Monkey's Breast' were especially original and illuminating.

Hahn's central argument is that Warner does not actively oppose norms but has other narrative strategies for diffusing or evading them, making them invisible, for instance, or presuming their irrelevance or unrealism. In one memorable formulation she suggests that Warner is 'demanding her readers not only to think outside the box, but to temporarily leave the box' (p. 114). Her emphasis is on subverting the will to categorise, on refusing to submit to the structures of familiar understanding. This yields some compelling readings, for instance around the possibility of incestuous desire in a father–daughter childhood incident recounted in 'A Spirit Rises'. Hahn comments excellently that 'Although her father is present, it is not him she desires; she gives in to the moment he helped to create' (p. 112). In some readings, however, Hahn's perspective seems to me not to recognise a satirical and moral clarity in Warner's work, and to under-describe ways in which narrative can express opposition. Warner's stories quite often move away from unpleasant figures who seem at first to be centrally important, effectively dumping them. But such a shifting of narrative interest away from an odious character could be seen not as a 'non-oppositional quality' (p. 143) but as in itself an act of judgement and, indeed, as an expression of opposition. In her contemptuous satirical evocation of the selfish bullying husband in 'An Act of Reparation', for instance, Warner does not just sidestep normativity, she opposes it with cheerful energy. There is a further danger, too, in valorising the idea of an avoidance of normativity. The idea of 'normativity' totalises a range of divergent norms, but we generally use the word only to denote norms we don't like. Does Warner sidestep norms around cruelty to children or the murder of innocents? Would we think better of her work if she did? The troubles with normal depend on the norms in question.

In adopting a theoretical rather than historical approach Hahn goes against a tendency in criticism on Warner to discuss her work in

terms of her political commitments. There is little in this book on class or money; the account of 'The Love Match', for instance, is perfunctory on Celia's venture into left-wing politics. Future critics may well give more centrality to Warner's historical materialism. However, Hahn's emphasis on vanishings and the transcendence of worldly structures of value and authority brings out well a side of Warner that you could call religious – a disposition in her writing to set aside the concerns of ordinary life and dwell instead on outcomes that are mysteriously final and hard to accommodate within familiar narrative shapes. Hahn reads some of Warner's eccentrics almost as mystics, occasionally at the cost of romanticising them and missing the author's habits of irony; but she convincingly evokes Warner's fascinated attention to various kinds of radical outsiderliness.

In her introductory chapter Hahn concurs with a critic who suggests that there is 'no evolutionary change' (p. 18) in Warner's stories. But this is surely a misleading claim. In statistical terms alone it is clear that the stories in the two 1940s collections, *A Garland of Straw* and *The Museum of Cheats*, are on average a good deal shorter than those follow in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, entailing different principles around the development of themes and evocation of context. 'The Salutation' (1932), by contrast, was published as the title piece of a collection of stories, but at 96 pages it could be considered as a short novella – as well as implicitly a sequel to *Mr Fortune's Maggot* and one of the darkest and most desolate narratives she ever wrote. And beyond such basic questions of structure other issues of historical and literary context are important. It is significant for an account of Warner's stories that the 1930s were the decade of her most vigorous political activism. She was the leading member of the Wessex division of the British Communist Party, organising local meetings and national events, and she went to Spain in 1937 as part of the International Writers' Congress in support of the Republic. Two of her collections merit particular attention in this context, *The Salutation* (1932) and *More Joy in Heaven* (1935). Each contains short stories that are polemically direct and socio-politically pointed. Some directly confront greed, social inequity and the absence of state provision, partly influenced in their method by T. F. Powys. Even in *The Cat's Cradle-Book* (1940), from which Hahn discusses two elusive stories that suit her theme, there are others that are pungently clear Brechtian fables about capitalism. And this strain continues in the anti-fascist stories collected in *A Garland of Straw* (1943). *Side-Stepping Normativity* has little to say about these collections, and nothing at all on the first two. It would be possible

to argue that Warner's best stories are in a different mode, or again that these stories are weakened by their very directness and transparency, but the argument needs to be made. A wider view would, moreover, shed light on a developing mode in Warner's later post-war collections. She published her final novel in 1954 but continued writing short fiction until her death in 1978. Some of the larger-scale ambitions of the novels are routed into the gathered suggestiveness of her later stories, which tend also to be longer, partly because of changing conventions at *The New Yorker*, in whose pages most of them were first published.[1]

Note

1 This is an extended version of a review first published in *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 259, no. 1 (2022), pp. 199–201.

Bibliography

Swaab, Peter. 'Review of Side-Stepping Normativity in Selected Short Stories by Sylvia Townsend Warner *by Rebecca Kate Hahn', Archiv fuer das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 259, no. 1 (2022).