

LABOURS OF LOVE
Valentine Ackland on her Centenary
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Valentine Ackland, born on 20th May 1906, was haunted by the First World War, like so many others of that generation. Too young to fight, yet old enough to witness the carnage, these guilty survivors had a sense of missed opportunity. Valentine's gender, as well as her age, denied her the chance of participation, and heroism always held a complex fascination for her, as did its companion, death. There were no Ackland sons; Valentine was christened Mary Kathleen, but called Molly by her family. She soon observed the patterns of male privilege and female submission, and began early on to subvert these gender expectations by usurping male prerogatives whenever she could. When her father allowed her to drive, shoot, and even box, her sister Joan – older by eight years – was insanely jealous, and believed that Molly was his favourite. Her revenge on the interloper was to abuse Molly, both with psychological torment and physical punishment. Their wealthy parents – who left the children's care to servants – failed to notice. Brought up in a troubled atmosphere of religious hysteria, exaggerated patriotism and psychological violence, Molly became intensely self-conscious, with a heightened awareness of role-playing, whether as crack shot or child saint. She took refuge in the world of books, especially poetry. When her father discovered that she had fallen in love with another schoolgirl, and threatened to disown her, she wrote of her refusal to submit: 'He did not know I had the poets to protect me'.

Although this young love was forcibly prevented by parental intervention, Molly embarked on a real love-affair when she was seventeen. Bo Foster was older, and able to give Molly the cultural education she lacked. The imaginative, death-obsessed child became a sensitive young woman whose ecstatic delight in the sensual world was heightened by a continual awareness of its transience. Her intense feelings were disguised by an elaborately courteous, controlled manner; as a debutante she was outwardly only interested in dancing, drinking and driving fast cars. Although Bo was the centre of her life, she could offer Molly no escape from her unforgiving family. At nineteen, Molly married Richard Turpin, a handsome homosexual youth who hoped to overcome his sexuality. This was, predictably, a disaster; he failed to establish heterosexual credentials, she felt trapped. Less than six months later, with the marriage still unconsummated, Molly was persuaded to undergo an operation to remove her hymen for her husband's convenience. This medicalised rape concentrated her mind wonderfully, and she never went back to him again.

Instead, she reinvented herself; Molly Turpin became Valentine Ackland. The process took several years of experimentation, but she declared her independence immediately by putting on trousers. This symbolic act stated that she was more potent than her husband, the gentleman he was not, an independent person, and her father's true heir. She was 'freed into reality' by this sartorial gesture, and the choice of a new name to celebrate her new identity was a similarly profound piece of self-invention. 'Valentine Ackland' was euphonious, androgynous, it sounded like the name of a poet, and invoked the saint of love for patron. It erased sad Molly and unhappy Mrs Turpin, replacing them with a powerful new identity.

Cross-dressing was a subject of contemporary fascination, and it suited Valentine; she modelled for Eric Gill, Augustus John and Fraulein Reiss (photographer of Deitrich) and had affairs with Dorothy Warren, Nancy Cunard, Anna May Wong, and the long-suffering Bo. In bohemian company, Valentine discovered the village of Chaldon in Dorset, where

an artists' colony had gathered under the eccentric patronage of T.F. Powys. Here, she began to write poems – often about the place – which sounded with her own individual voice: English, elegaic, strongly-felt but elegantly controlled. Her Chaldon poems resonate with the sound of the sea, the waves of the downs, and the rhythms of the landscape in which the poet is always present. 'Space is invisible waves. In leaves of trees/ Space-water rustles, and the sway of these/ Is only movement of seawater under tide./ And the wind is no wind but a fast-flowing current of tide./ And the spirits are blown and driven and cannot abide.'

It was in Chaldon that she met Sylvia Townsend Warner, who was currently enjoying great celebrity as the best-selling author of *Lolly Willowses*. Sylvia was twelve years older, immensely erudite and talented, with an entirely original cast of mind, and an enormous capacity for love. She admired Valentine's poems, and recognised her as an equal in mind and heart. They fell in love and in 1930 began a passionate affair, which lasted, despite rough weather, until Valentine's death nearly forty years later.

Before she met Sylvia, Valentine's poetry had been published in literary magazines, and her reputation as a young poet of promise was growing. Her love for Sylvia gave her a new subject of great power, and her work matured. In 1934, they jointly published *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, the core of which is an exchange of love poems.

The eyes of body, being blindfold by night
 Refer to the eyes of mind – at brain's command
 Study imagination's map, then order out a hand
 To journey forth as deputy for sight.

For many years the fact that the poems are erotic and celebratory, and between women, ensured that the book was undiscussed, despite its quality; it is still relatively little known for such a ground breaking cycle.

In the same year, they joined the Communist Party. Valentine experimented with writing in a simpler, more muscular style, to suit the coming revolution. This honed her skills further, and she was widely published in the leftwing

press. With Sylvia, Valentine volunteered for the British Red Cross in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, and as delegates to an anti-Fascist writers' conference they visited besieged Madrid, and the front lines at Guadalajara.

A hundred men who came the road with me
homeward to England out of fighting Spain
came in mind only; few of them will see
as I the autumn and the winter rain.

Comrades who stayed behind will know
a different rain from heaven,
across the mountains weighed with snow
deadly the storms are driven.

Although she had originally intended to be a combatant in Spain, Valentine was deeply depressed by the actuality of war. Her disappointment with the reception of their book, and an increasing intake of alcohol, led her to be unfaithful to Sylvia. Sylvia initially tolerated this with wry indulgence, but she was worried when an affair with an American fellow-traveller became serious. Elizabeth Wade White, a wealthy admirer of Sylvia's work, had every intention of supplanting Sylvia; she persuaded them to visit her in America with the hope of detaining Valentine permanently. The outbreak of war interrupted this unhappy situation and Valentine hastily returned to Britain and life with Sylvia.

They moved to Frome Vauchurch, inland from Chaldon, to the house beside the river where they lived for the rest of their lives. Its situation had a strong influence on Valentine's poetry. 'Everywhere is the pattern of water;/ Even in tears the pattern of water./ Water lies ready to hand, ready to cleanse, ready to bless;/ Water weeps for us when we cannot weep./ In the youth of the year and towards a year's end, the skies/ Pour out their sorrows for us and our days:/ And steadily, steadily, down flow the rivers/ Bearing our trouble away to the mothering sea.'

During the war Valentine was effectively imprisoned in Dorset, conscripted for meaningless 'war work' in an army office, but she continued to write poetry about her experience.

'Teaching to Shoot', describes the disturbing proximity of love and death, as she teaches her beloved Sylvia how to kill, in expectation of the Nazi invasion. Valentine too assuaged her wartime depression with alcohol and casual affairs, but at the same time she was exploring philosophy and alternative religions, in an attempt to discover a spiritual path. Perhaps as a result of this, in 1947 her alcoholism vanished, and never returned. Elizabeth did, however, and after the enforced interval of the war the affair was resumed, much to Sylvia's distress. Part of Valentine's self-justification was that she needed inspiration for her work, but there was no great outpouring of poetry. Instead, after an unhappy ending to the episode, she wrote 'I feel myself destroyed'. Her poetry did return, and her partnership with Sylvia survived, but she found writing slow and difficult thereafter.

During the 1950s, she wrote poems about the destruction of the natural world which now seem prophetic, while still celebrating the human relationship to nature with tender lyricism.

While I slept we crossed the line between May and June:
The morning came, gently walking down from the hill,
And by the time I stirred it was full day
And she had brought summer with her into my room.

The spiritual dimension in her nature poetry, reflected Valentine's own quest. In 1956, to Sylvia's dismay, she became a Catholic, though it was a poet's romantic gesture which was not intended as a denial of her leftwing principles. Valentine loved the ritual of the Mass, which she perceived as a portal into the spiritual world; she also saw religion as a possible source of creative power. (Once, sexual and poetic potency had seemed synonymous, now the role of priest-poet might be an alternative kind of power and inspiration.) But Catholicism, like other infidelities, did not bring poetic renewal, but intellectual estrangement from Sylvia. In 1968 Valentine finally quit over the modernisation of the church, in particular the use of a vernacular liturgy which she found 'hopelessly unpoetic'. The Quakers provided a sanctuary which Sylvia could also accept.

Poetry of witness, speaking for the dispossessed, bearing witness to political injustice and protesting against war and nuclear weapons was Valentine's other lifelong theme. She wrote about Vietnam, the Chinese invasion of Tibet, Soviet dissidents: the human rights issues of her era. Her poem about Hiroshima, August 6th 1946, is still powerful sixty years on.

When out of a clear sky, the bright
Sky over Japan, they tumbled the death of light,
For a moment, it's said, there was brilliance sword-sharp,
A dazzle of white, and then dark.

Into the cavernous blackness, as home to hell,
Agonies crowded; and high above in the swell
Of the gentle tide of the sky, lucid and fair,
Men floated serenely as angels disporting there.

Her last poems of the 1960s were written in terminal illness: meditations on life, death and the survival of love.

When she died of cancer in 1969, Valentine was sixty-three, her bereaved partner seventy-five. Sylvia survived her by almost nine years, and employed her grief editing a posthumous collection of Valentine's poetry, *The Nature of the Moment*, and preparing their letters for publication. Much of her writing was dedicated to commemorating their life together, and arranging that Valentine's papers, as well as her own, should be preserved. Valentine Ackland left a remarkable lifetime's worth of poetry, covering the experience of a singular woman in the mid-twentieth century. Her poetic voice, lyrical, powerful, melancholy yet life-affirming, surprises by speaking of lesbian love, the socialist struggle, natural beauty, the spiritual world and the evil of war. She achieved heroism of a quiet kind by writing what she believed in, as though it mattered, and as a result her poetry is still vital one hundred years after her birth.