

LITERATURE COMPASS 11/12 (2014), 725-811

Special Issue: Sylvia Townsend Warner

Ed. *Vike Martina Plock and Alex Murray*

These essays began life as papers given at the ‘Revisiting Sylvia Townsend Warner’ Symposium organised by the editors of this issue, Vike Plock and Alex Murray, and held at Dorchester County Museum in 2012.

It would be no easy task to select five papers from the day’s offerings for publication for each shed light on the work of Sylvia Townsend Warner, but the editors’ final choice gives excellent coverage of Warner’s work: there are essays covering her non-fiction as well as the fiction, and which discuss some of the lesser-known works as well as the old favourites.

In their excellent introduction Plock and Murray approach Warner’s work through the notion of bi-location in space or time (itself not a new notion but a useful one), arguing that her ‘characters, places and historical periods all work in multiple registers and to multiple ends’

(p.726) and suggesting that this creates the complexity which makes Warner's work so satisfying to re-visit.

But just as cartographic certainty must be rejected as a means of reading location in Warner's writing so, too, our 'existing maps of the critical fields she may ostensibly inhabit – modernism, middlebrow, intermodernism' (p.727) are of only limited use, and while this issue of *Literature Compass* doesn't create a new map it does offer signposted pathways through this shifting terrain.

The articles fall into two main categories, with the first focussing upon aspects of Warner's political loyalties. In this category we find Chris Hopkins' article, "'My Mother Won the War': Patriotism and the First World War in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Scenes of Childhood*" which gives a detailed reading of three stories in this collection, from which Hopkins argues that Warner 'drew on social and historical reality of the period, but radically transformed this reality through narrative and stylistic creativity' (p.764) to question the notions of patriotism and conformity that the stories initially seem to uphold.

Also in this category is Howard Booth's 'Colonialism and Time in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Mr Fortune's Maggot*' which begins by questioning Western clock time as the only measure of time before considering the importance of time in *Mr Fortune's Maggot* and, to a lesser extent, 'The Salutation', arguing that time in these texts is used to 'reach a complex sense of how to be (and, especially, how to be a man) somehow beyond colonialism' (p. 751)

Time – but in a different sense – is also the focus of Maroula Joannou's contribution, "'Our Time": Sylvia Townsend Warner, Virginia Woolf and the 1940s' which explores Warner's and Woolf's responses to the Second World War and the convergence of these ideas, while also exploring the difference between this 'late' modernism of the 1940s which 'can be concerned with the old as with the new' (p.732) and the 'high' modernism of the 1920s which saw an absolute break between past and present.

The second category, comprising Peter Swaab's article, 'Sylvia's Similes: A Stylistic Approach to Sylvia

Townsend Warner', and Ailsa Granne's contribution on 'Fantasy, Writing and Relationship in the Texts of Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner', uses style and genre as the organising principles of their analyses.

In his lucid and helpful article Swaab argues that Warner's similes are catachretic not illustrative – a useful distinction that underlines their pivotal role in her writing, for they are often employed at the end of a story to force the reader to rethink the narrative. In fact, Swaab argues, they function 'to complicate the stories and disconcert or shock the reader' (p.767) and in his summary he suggests that similes are where Warner's 'intelligence and imagination are allied' and 'assert a relationship of affinity where we might not have expected one' thereby opening a 'window onto the narrating mind that perceives the relationship'. This narrating mind may be a character in the story or, of course, the narrator herself, suggesting that Warner's similes can tell us *how* she thinks. (p.774)

The final essay in the collection, 'Fantasy, Writing and Relationship in the Texts of Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner' explores the 'role played by the texts of Warner and [her partner] Valentine Ackland in maintaining and developing their intimacy'. (p.776) Granne's starting point is Ackland's autobiography, *For Sylvia: An Honest Account* which she reads against the grain to 'construct a catastrophic reading . . . which suggests that the presence of Warner in Ackland's life and the latter's lack of success as a published poet are linked and constitute Ackland's real tragedy'. (p.779) Her detailed readings of some of Warner's poems and letters suggest that in response Warner was both resisting the negative self-image of the autobiography and creating an 'alternative persona' for her troubled partner to inhabit. (p.776)

Although this is the final essay it is not the final item in the collection which concludes with 'Sylvia Townsend Warner Scholarship 1978-2013: An Annotated Bibliography with Introduction' by Janet Montefiore. This lists all the writings by and on Warner published in

Britain and the USA since her death in 1978, and as such is an extremely valuable resource for all Warner scholars.

The bibliography is admirably structured, being presented in two parts with Part I covering all Warner's writings which have been published or reprinted since 1978 in order of publication. These are ordered under nine headings (bibliography; fiction; poetry; non-fiction; biography; memoirs and diaries; letters and interviews; musicology; translations) making it easy to find what one is looking for.

Part II covers commentary on Warner's writing and this includes biography and memoirs as well as literary and academic criticism. It is ordered under the same nine headings used in Part I so that correlation between the two parts is straightforward.

For many people bibliography is not the most exciting aspect of their literary work and it demands attention to detail and meticulous research, both of which are in full evidence here. We can only be grateful to Janet Montefiore for this contribution to Warner scholarship which will facilitate further research for years to come.

We should also be grateful for this special issue of *Literature Compass* which has drawn together essays on so many aspects of Warner's output, rather than focussing on the fiction alone. The articles all offer insights into Warner's life and writing but they also address each other in interesting ways making the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

The only major criticism I would make is that it is an online publication only, which puts it beyond the reach of many Warner enthusiasts who do not have access to university libraries, but this has much more to do with the economics of publishing than any editorial or critical choice and is indicative of future publishing practices.

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