

RE-IMAGINING THE MIDDLE AGES:  
Sylvia Townsend Warner and  
*The Corner That Held Them*  
Rachel Willcock

In 1208 came the Interdict.

In 1223 lightning set fire to the granary.

In 1257 the old reed and timber cloisters fell to bits in a gale.'

In her novel that purports to tell the history of a medieval convent over two centuries, Sylvia Townsend Warner mimics the medieval chronicler, rather than the modern historian. It is a lack of causal explanation that differentiates the chronicle from its successor, the modern history. Whereas a history would explore the factors contributing to the Black Death, Warner simply states, 'In 1349 the Black Death came to Oby' (12). Similarities can be drawn between this and John Capgrave's 1462 chronicle which lists of 1348, 'This yere was the grete pestilens of puple'<sup>2</sup>. Warner here moves across a period of forty-nine years where the only incident worth noting is a 'fire to the granary'; there is a period of thirty four years where *nothing* of note happens. An indiscrimination over subject matter is another characteristic that differentiates the chronicle from the history. As Abrams defines, 'Unlike the modern historian, most chroniclers tended to take their information as they found it, making little attempt to separate fact from legend.'<sup>3</sup> Thus John Capgrave states at the start of his chronicle 'Anno Mundi I: The first man Adam was mad on a Friday, withoute modir, without fadir.'<sup>4</sup> And Warner, parodying a chronicler, and treating fact and superstition interchangeably states that 'In 1297 the convent's bailiff was taken in the act of carnality with a cow.'<sup>(11)</sup> and the

consequential execution 'was not enough to avert the wrath of heaven. That autumn and for three autumns following there was a murrain among the cattle.'<sup>(11)</sup> Through adopting the narrative voice of a medieval chronicler in these first pages, Warner signals the extent of her fidelity to an authentic account of this fascinating period.

It was not till 1345, when Prioress Isabella choked on a plum-stone, that peace and quiet returned; followed by four ambling years of having no history, save for a plague of caterpillars.

In 1349 the Black Death came to Oby.

When Prioress Isabella first began to gasp and turn blue Dame Alicia de Foley framed a vow to Saint Leonard, patron of the convent and of all prisoners that if their tyrant should die of her plum-stone a spire, beautiful as art and money could make it, should be added to their squat chapel. (12)

Warner mimics the 'ambling' nature of history in her roundabout narrative technique. She skirts over the Black Death and then zooms in on the choking of Isabella in repulsive detail, 'her eyes were lolling on her cheeks'. She intends to report, not the plague but the trigger for the building of the spire which she proceeds to recount intricately. This ironically takes place over the period that she previously dismissed as having 'no history.' This passage is a microcosm for the way she handles history throughout the novel, a distorted vision seen through the marginal filter of the nuns, supposedly cut off from events of the world. Even crucial historical moments like the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, are not foregrounded, but instead 'are seen, as the nuns would see them, through a slit window, or as the nuns might hear them, in snatches repeated from mouth to mouth.'<sup>5</sup> Historical events that we may prioritise are written as an aside: the plague of 1348, perhaps the most monumental occurrence of the fourteenth century, transforming the face of Europe, is treated by Warner in passing, with no precedence over 'the plague of caterpillars' (12).

These passages help us to understand Warner's idiosyncratic approach to the novel she is writing. At first, *The Corner That Held Them*, may seem to be an historical

novel, but in fact Warner was right to deny this label.<sup>6</sup> It is the history of a fourteenth century nunnery; yet it attempts to chronicle the effect of time and worldly events on a community who strive to be timeless and 'have no history'. It is a novel yet 'It has no conversations and no pictures, it has no plot, and the characters are innumerable and insignificant.'<sup>7</sup> It is the story of a religious community yet as we have seen, motivation may be far from holy, and religion is often a mere after-thought. Warner's fiction does not impose modern conceptions of human and metaphysical understanding anachronistically onto the middle ages, instead it genuinely enters the mentalité of the middle ages at all levels of writing.

The originality of Warner's re-imagining of the fourteenth century is best demonstrated by comparison with a more typical historical novel based in the period. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Black Arrow* (set slightly later than Warner's novel in the 1450s) acts as an illuminating contrast. Unlike Warner, Stevenson apes a pseudo-medieval dialect, "Ay verily" returned Appleyard. "And what will ye leave me to garrison without?"<sup>8</sup> This however, seems to be Stevenson's only engagement with the time of setting. Describing a fifteenth century house, Stevenson writes, 'Appleyard's house was clean and bare. There was a bed, with a blue cover, a cupboard, a great chest, a pair of joint stools, a hinged table in the changing corner, and hung upon the wall the old soldier's armoury of bows and defensive armour.'<sup>(26)</sup> Without the clichéd detail of the 'armoury', this generic room could belong to any era. Warner's concise sketch of Sir Ralph's room on the other hand, powerfully conveys the fabric of the medieval age; 'The priest's lodging was as small as a nutshell. Its walls were hung with faded red canvas that applied as the wind blew through the chinks. A bed took up half the floor-space.'<sup>(191)</sup> Warner conjures the atmosphere of a cramped, claustrophobic medieval room; not the light space of modern buildings. Her seemingly careless mention of the wall hanging instantly reveals the reality of the poorly constructed, draughty walls in an age not only before wall-paper but before insulation. Hilary Spurling praised Warner's 'slow, orderly, painstaking, gradually entrancing

accumulation of medieval detail'<sup>9</sup> and Warner's all-encompassing vision of the age including music, literature, and architecture is quite astonishing. In *The Black Arrow*, the setting of the novel is really dictated by the adventure plot whereas in *The Corner*, history is the plot. The whole action of the book is informed and determined by the passing of the years, specifically the years of the fourteenth century.

Despite this extraordinary and original engagement with the fourteenth century, this element of Warner's writing has been surprisingly neglected. Arnold Rattenbury argues that 'Sylvia is deeply engaged with her *own* times, is only and always political, and *that*, is why whatever the ostensible period, setting and concerns may *seem* to be, however carefully researched the detail, and then however accurately described, the actuality is *now*.'<sup>10</sup> This essay seeks to refute Rattenbury's contention that Warner's work is primarily of interest because of its relationship to the present; that is, the historical moment of production. Much critical attention has been paid to the contemporary concerns of the novel: Warner wrote the novel during the Second World War and the convent can be read as a metaphor for beleaguered war-time Britain. The isolated female community with its economic struggles echoes the struggle of women attempting to achieve self-sufficiency when the male population left to fight abroad. The importance of rationing in the novel is partly explained by Warner's experiences of War: 'She talked on and on, darting from one precept of housewifery to another, the high price of pins, the extravagance of little loaves, the wastage of candles'.(33) Of course all historical interpretation is inflected with contemporary thought and furthermore it is passed to us pre-meditated and developed by previous generations. The medieval age particularly has been re-invented according to the needs of each generation. Warner refuses to conform to any literary tradition of the fourteenth century, neglecting the romantic ideal of the nineteenth century (e.g. Tennyson) but also the more recent trend in adventure and mystery stories.<sup>11</sup> Instead she seeks to tackle the problems that arise from an attempt to write directly in accordance with the mentalité of a previous age, and in so

doing tests the limits of the novel form in dealing with history.

The first problem that arises, most pertinently for the convent setting of Warner's novel, is religion. Barbara W. Tuchman writes, 'The main barrier [for empathy] is, I believe, the Christian religion as it then was; the matrix and law of medieval life, omnipresent, indeed compulsory' and the Christian religion's 'insistent principle that the life of the spirit and of the afterworld was superior to the here and now...'<sup>12</sup> Describing Ursula's (the apostate nun) return to Oby, Jesus is held responsible, 'And then, just as before, Christ her bridegroom had waylaid her, more mastering than any man, and she had gone back, cowed, to woo him with abject repentance.'<sup>(23)</sup> In this sentence Warner adopts the language of medieval advice books to Holy Women such as *Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meidhad*, which regularly figure the relationship of Christ to these women in the language of Romance. For instance, 'And he like a noble lover, having sent many messages and good gifts came to give proof of His love, and showed by knightly deeds that He was worthy of love.'<sup>13</sup> This reveals the extent to which religion is real and quotidian in the fourteenth century; the nuns are married to Christ and he is conceived in such a worldly way that he can be compared to romantic suitors. The time of the novel's setting is one of literal biblical interpretation, the Old Testament forms part of history (evident from Capgrave's chronicle) and the future lies in the Last Judgement. For Warner's characters it is a practical date to be discussed along with other contemporary issues; 'They talked of food, pestilence, women, weather, the likelihood of a papal schism and the date of a Last Judgement' (193). As V.A. Kolve explains,<sup>14</sup> in this sense the medieval mystery plays were watched as historical as well as religious stories. Damnation is certain for the nuns of Oby because their priest, Sir Ralph, is an imposter. In ignorance all the nuns die unshriven. For Sir Ralph, damnation becomes a fact of life; 'He would die. Everyone would die, for it was the end of the world.' Warner handles with bathos the situation of a man for whom damnation is as much a certain and mundane complaint as

being bored; 'He was lonely, uncomfortable, bored and damned' (55) The certainty of the next life also changes the perspective on this world. Sir Ralph asks, 'What ails me that I can never have a plan for myself?' (122) He finds the answer in religious determinism, 'can a man who despairs of salvation in the next world frame desires in this?' (122)

The impotence of plans for the world and the apathy for framing desires creates a conflict with Warner's novelistic form which typically depends on human will and agency. The faith that an individual can change for the better and act meaningfully to control the course of their lives, is what according to Tuchman 'created the modern world and ended the middle ages.'<sup>15</sup> The increased importance of worldly achievement marked the start of the Renaissance and the revived (from the Classics) notion of a 'heaven on earth' facilitated political treatises like More's *Utopia*.

Sylvia Townsend Warner thus brings together an anachronistic meeting of form and content. In the fourteenth century, causation was still seen to be controlled by mysterious divine forces and the inevitability of the wheel of fortune which are beyond the control of man, as in Chaucer, 'And whan a wight is from hire whiel y-throwe/ Than laugheth she and maketh hym the mowe'.<sup>16</sup> Warner's curious entry into the medieval attitude towards acceptance and fate contributes to the idiosyncratic nature of the novel. Every character and event is held at a middle distance, forming a chain of events that the narrator doesn't suggest are changeable or the responsibility of any particular character. The detached and matter-of-fact observation that, 'Sooner or later, everyone has his turn.' (163) begins perhaps the most dramatic chapter of the novel, that of 'The Fish Pond' in which Dame Alice murders Widow Figg. There is nothing particular about Dame Alice that makes her a murderer, she was just at a certain place on the wheel or fortune where it had come to be 'her turn'. Individual actions provoke greater consequences than they inherently suggest. It is shown that a number of small and contributory events cause the murder making the incident seem both fated and a stroke of chance; 'Only exceptional characters, or very imprudent ones, murder

for a pure motive.’(168)

Medieval time is inherently opposed to novelistic time. The medieval monastic aimed towards the Augustinian conception of life in the world; ‘For what other thing is our end, but to come to that kingdom of which there is no end?’<sup>17</sup> A novel cannot function on these terms, it exists on an assumption of ‘plans’ (plot) and ‘desires’ (character). This medieval perspective determines the meandering nature of a novel whose form has been described as ‘outwardly as ramshackle as the convent buildings.’<sup>18</sup> It also contributes to its singular narrative style; there is no principle of suspense. The omniscient narrator can announce events such as ‘It was not till 1345, when Prioress Isabella choked on a plum-stone’(12) before the event is told. Religious time and its insistent denial of this life, negates the importance of individual failure or death, negating the possibility of tragedy. It also creates a divine perspective whereby the ending is already guaranteed, thus the story has no tension. Auerbach draws attention to this in the lines he quotes from *Mystere d’Adam*, a 12th century French play: ‘No one will help me now except the Son who will come forth from Mary’,<sup>19</sup> in these lines the effect of Christian thought on literature is highlighted, ‘In the very depth of his despair he already knows of the grace which will be fulfilled.’(ibid)

However, Warner carefully balances what we may call ‘religious time’ with the inevitability of ‘human time’: her narrator is at once divine and omniscient whilst at other times assuming a human medieval ignorance about the world. Doomsday may have been accepted and inevitable but renunciation of the present life has almost always been theoretical. No matter how certain the next life is, man’s human needs are impossible to suppress, even in a religious community. ‘In a convent any long-term strategy is at the mercy of the present.’(240). In writing the novel, Warner was keen to show the material and economic struggles of a medieval nunnery that led to the subordination of religious practice; ‘we cannot all be saints. Some of us have to be stewards’ (167). In her preoccupation with the financial difficulties of the nunnery, Warner is illuminating the



historical truth of small fourteenth century religious houses: 'I had to include religion, but then I began that book on the purest Marxist principles because I was convinced that if you were going to give an accurate picture of the monastic life, you'd have to put in all their finances, how they made their money, how they dodged about from one thing to another and how very precarious it all was, how only the very rich orders had any financial security.'<sup>20</sup> Financial considerations had to take precedent over spiritual ones: 'In these days a convent could not afford to turn its back on the world.'<sup>(52)</sup>

Perhaps as a committed Marxist, Warner was anxious to show that economic causation underpins any other causal factor, particularly religious ones, and that it is a monetary force that controls man: 'his decisions made and unmade like the swirl of a mill-race, causation sweeping him forward from act to act while his reason dances on the surface of action like a pattern of foam.'<sup>(63)</sup> However, it also seems to be a comment pertinently aimed at the medieval age for 'There never was a time when more attention was given to money and possessions than in the fourteenth century.'<sup>21</sup> In his General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* Chaucer reveals the way in which nuns were by no means isolated from worldly reflections. Many similarities can be drawn between his prioress, Madame Eglentyne, and the nuns at Oby. She is a courtly woman: 'And peyned hire to countrefete cheere/ Of court, and to been estatlich of manere'<sup>(l.140)</sup> )<sup>22</sup> The nuns come from good families and belonging to an aristocratic lineage such as the 'De-Rettevilles' is as important for the nuns as for the laity. Dame Matilda, the aristocratic prioress is noted for her 'bygone graces of the early century – the upright carriage with the head a little on one side'<sup>(277)</sup> just as Dame Amy is scorned for her bad parentage, 'whose build and breeding would make her clumsy anyhow.'<sup>(278)</sup> Madame Eglentyne possess many small dogs 'Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde' <sup>(l.146)</sup>. Power describes how despite proclamations of ecclesiastical law attempting to restrict this dog-owning practice that 'The feminine fondness for something small and alive to pet was not easily eradicated.'<sup>23</sup> Warner repeatedly draws attention to the



luxurious possession of these pets and a young novice dreams; 'When she, Adela, was a nun she would have fifty dogs.'(132) Oby nuns also have the same access to private property as Chaucer's Prioress who; 'Of small coral aboute hire arm she bar/ A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene./ And thereon heng a brooch of gold ful sheene'.(l.158-60) In Oby's Bishop's report they are reprimanded for these practices, 'Instead of the silence of the tomb...his hearing had been tormented by the yelpings of little dogs...Even more it had been wounded by overhearing such words as: Where is my brooch? Or: Who has taken my spoon?'(183)

The relationship between economics and identity is a complicated one in any age. Though economics serves as a differentiating factor between the nuns, (the class system persists despite entering the convent; heritage and family are important political factors in electing each new prioress), Warner's nuns struggle to retain their individual identity after forsaking worldly possessions: 'In that [cloistered] life there was no place for aberrations of individuality. One monastic must resemble another.'(91) Prioress Isabella contemplates the group of nuns in their uniformity:

They are like a tray of buns, she thought. In some the leaven has worked more than in others, some are a little under-baked, some a little scorched, in others the spice had clotted and shows like a brown stain; but one can see that they all came out of the same oven and that one hand pulled them apart from the same lump of dough.(34)

Later on, she describes how Dame Sibilla 'jumped nimbly to the ground and dived in among the others and disappeared.'(233) Warner refuses to allow any one nun to become central to the novel: once she has played her part in the history of Oby she dives 'in among the others' and disappears again. Warner chooses a group of women who are supposedly indistinguishable. Characters slide into focus and then slip imperceptibly away into the mass of black and white 'bun' nuns. If, Warner seems to suggest, the nuns were all a model of Christian goodness, that is an image of God, they would be identical: 'This amiability made it difficult to tell

them apart.’(49) Difference, it is inferred, comes from sin.

The struggle to attain an individual identity leads to a peculiar distortion of values in the novel. To be criticized is to be noticed. In the flat landscape of Oby, this becomes positive (‘her faults made her tolerable’(70)). None of Prioress Joanna’s actions can rouse anger; ‘It took a strong character to create an opposition; and there was an inherent mediocrity in all the prioress’s ordinances which made them tolerable and almost welcome.’(135) Contrastingly, Walter Dunford is praised because he ‘became eminent enough to have slanderers’(161). This inversion of commonly held values is symptomatic of the fact that the religious life was insistently monotonous. The monastic offices give a structure but also an interminable repetition to convent life, the ideal ‘timelessness’ of a convent can be translated as ‘eventless’: ‘to Ursula’s Jackie it seemed that nothing new ever happened or ever would.’(48) Nothing can be important enough to break the monastic routine, so life never feels interrupted. Even when the spire collapses, ‘everything shall go on as usual.’(113)

Warner chooses a setting in which our preconceptions about novelistic action need to be reassessed. We begin to regret, like Dame Liliias, that there aren’t more misdemeanors to add excitement to convent life; ‘As she answered these enquiries the triviality of the offences overwhelmed her with boredom and melancholy; and when he asked her if there were no graver offences, no fornications or abortions, her voice was almost apologetic as she replied that no such things had happened within her memory.’(180) Lack of events creates a distorted sense of importance to anything that breaks the mundanity so that ‘routine and its slow mildewing of the mind had so far decayed him that to break with his work for even a week or so seemed like a break in the earth’s surface.’(199) Conversely, boredom also levels any event and reduces its importance; the oppressive power of routine deadens the spirit and makes anything, even a miracle mundane, ‘The little bell rang and Christ was made flesh’. F. Donald Logan explains that boredom was so intense that it drove nuns to leave the religious life. It was ‘not only the

normal tugs of the world drew them away: other less obvious yet equally human motives, such as boredom, led to a return to the world.’<sup>24</sup>

In severe cases the monotony of the religious life led to *accidie*, a type of slothful despair. Dame Liliias shows that boredom can penetrate the deepest recesses of the mind: ‘Day by day, season after season, Dame Liliias walking in the cloisters, looked at the spire, and her mind experienced the same train of thoughts. There was the spire, and here was she.’(152) Warner emphasizes the magnitude of the monotony with her repetitive sentence structure and by the implied similarity between the unchanging deadened spirit and the inanimate stone structure. Warner’s far-reaching temporal span allows her to show the cyclical affect of ‘season after season’ and conveys to the reader the senselessness of the passing time which carries no sense of cumulative life. Liliias suffers from what we may now term depression but with a lack of modern self-consciousness or psychological understanding she has no such way of comprehending her state of mind: ‘Little by little the sensuality which had quilted her wore thin and fell away.’(153) ‘She was cold: cold to pleasure, cold to her own coldness even.’(153) The only explanation she can seek is divine; ‘It was God’s will, she supposed’. (154) Sir Ralph, the convent’s imposter priest diagnoses ‘*acidie*...a malady of the soul that in its final intensification of wanhope is one of the seven deadly sins.’ This section of *The Corner* illuminates the difficulty of Warner’s engagement with a medieval mindset. It is natural territory for a novel to dwell on individual internal motivation but Warner constantly circumvents this analysis in order to remain true to her historical period: An age attempting to come to terms with what is spiritual and hidden inside a person; for the author of *Ancrene Wisse* this may be ‘*luue*’ or ‘*inwit*’ but for a romance author it would be ‘*cortayse*’.

Furthermore, it is in her treatment of Liliias’s suffering that Warner shows most pathetically the conflict between human and divine intervention. When praying for a cure for her *accidie*, Dame Liliias believes she has a divine vision to

become an anchoress; 'Saint Leonard has heard me. He has shown me the way out.'(156) In fact, in an incident recalling the episode in *King Lear*,<sup>25</sup> she is hit in the back by a jealous nun, this action being the climax of Dame Dorothy's existence; 'every nonentity must have a moment when it flashes into something positive, the immortal soul is not housed in flesh for nothing...and very probably Dame Dorothy's soul had had its moment of necessity in striking that blow from behind.'(157) Dame Lilius, even after discovering Dame Dorothy's action fails to realize the devastating implications it has on her medieval belief in religious causation; that it could all just be a mistaken illusion. She still feels that there is no need to act because fate will control destiny, for example when she presumes she will become a pilgrim through no effort of her own, 'it seemed to her that inevitably she would be drawn to go with them as a tuft of dry grass is pulled from the river-bank and carried with the traveling waters to the sea.'(309)

The perception of characters being as insignificant as 'tuft[s] of grass' is overwhelming in the novel. Through Warner's refusal to engage with any one character's consciousness or decision-making there is an over-arching emphasis on everybody's replacability. In this sense *The Corner* adopts an almost existentialist approach to life, posing an unlikely juxtaposition between medieval fate and twentieth century Chekhovian tragedy. In undermining the possibility of a 'Utopia' in her novel, Warner is perhaps revealing her motivation for re-inventing the middle ages. Claire Harman explains that 'Just as her father had used historical precedents to illuminate events of the Great War, Sylvia sought to clarify the issues of the Second World War through the teaching of history.'<sup>26</sup> After World War Two and the use of nuclear warfare the previous values of a generation were eroded and the Marxist possibility of a Communist Utopia was seriously challenged. Man's nature is Fallen and the reality of this situation is that no community, not even a convent can achieve perfection or any significant achievement in this world.

The lives of the women are as short and insignificant as

those of insects, that symbol of a fleeting and unidentifiable chance life, 'a swarm of midges rose and fell, a minute chaff fanned by some mysterious breath of living.'(119) Images of insects are recurrent, they seem to embody the infection of the outside world upon the life of the convent, and of the natural cycle continuing despite attempts to establish an enclosed and unworldly community. 'The flies made everything worse. The smell of blood and sweat brought them in swarms, house flies and blue-bottles and horse-flies.'(66) The insects symbolize fragile mortality, besides which human beings become like deities, an analogy for what is going on in the nunnery. The louse is killed by being 'inattentively' bitten and Ursula's Jackie plays God when 'Sitting up he shook the hair out of his eyes and saw a grasshopper and tore it apart and felt better.'(48). Furthermore, the insects suggest the irrepressibility of life. The ideal of medieval monasticism is contemplating the end, but whenever a character attempts stillness nature finds a way to enter the picture, reminding us of the temporal outside world; Dame Cecily 'waved her branch towards the sound of the flies and tried to direct her thoughts elsewhere'(173). There is something undignified about the presence of insects. Crucially, they provide that minute detail of what it must have been like to live in the squalor and dirt of fourteenth century domestic life; 'Meanwhile her lice, enlivened by the warmth, crawled out over her neck and forehead and at intervals she caught one with a practiced hand and inattentively bit it.'(247) The multitude of insects in the novel are indicative of Warner's all encompassing, indiscriminate, sometimes audacious vision of medieval life.

One consequence of this indiscrimination is that sometimes equal attention is paid to both the seemingly 'insignificant' and the 'significant'. Harman cites for an example the insect image when Ralph Kello leaves his bedchamber and 'As the door closed behind him a brimstone butterfly fluttered in at the open window.'(275) For Harman 'This has no bearing on anything, and beyond a suggestion of ephemerality, no meaning. It is simply a butterfly flying through a window six hundred years ago; doing nothing, seen

by no one.’<sup>27</sup> This statement is both mistaken in its argument and also textually false. The butterfly *does* do something and it is seen by someone. On the same page, Dame Amy enters the room and ‘saw a yellow butterfly struggling in a cobweb’(275). This small and random incident leads to a sequence of thought and action; ‘it struck her that there were a great many cobwebs about the room, and since she was alone in it and no one needed her she might pull some of them away. ‘(276) This leads to her finding Ralph’s books and she leaves the room ‘with the Latin murmuring in her head like a charm of bees’(276), a simile that allows Warner to tie the event to the insect impetus. The butterfly then, far from doing nothing is the first cause in a line of events that contributes to a young girl discovering a love of learning. The cause may be random and inherently insignificant but in her panoramic novel, Warner is able to show the unaccountable and unpredictable importance of such ignored events.

Warner thus adds an element of hope to her sardonic and almost existentialist novel. Though every life may be infinitely replaceable, each plays a part in a larger scheme of causation that may hold a meaning beyond our understanding. Warner marries determinism and chance, and at the end of the novel places an emphasis on the importance of human action. Whereas Dame Lilius, resigned to her fate, stagnates at Oby, that ‘epitome of humdrum’(124), Dame Sibilla joins the crowd of pilgrims. Though she says that ‘it is all God’s will’ it is actually she who has decided her destiny, ‘You will find everything arranged when you get back.’(310). The pilgrims are journeying to Jerusalem and the final image of the novel is one of optimism and movement towards that holy city, ‘Their singing swelled out like a banner on the wind as they fell into step and marched southward’(310), a movement out of the middle ages, towards a Utopian future, the era of the modern age: Blake’s Utopia rather than God’s paradise. Furthermore, Warner shows us the possibility for action even out of the most stagnating routine; time is forever cyclical but it is a cycle of renewal: ‘Now it was Spring. Everything was new, was remade...Rain had washed the face of the earth like the waters of baptism.’(201) In an analogous and original

way, Warner has, in her re-imagining of the fourteenth century, demonstrated that though history may come to us ready interpreted, there is also the possibility of 'a reading which became a first reading.' (274)

- 1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Corner That Held Them*, Virago, 1988, p.11. Henceforth references to this novel are given as page numbers in the text.
- 2 John Capgrave, *Abbreuacacion of Cronicles 1462-3* ed. Peter J.Lucas, (London: 1983), p.166
- 3 M.H. Abrahms, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston, 1999)
- 4 Capgrave, p.1
- 5 Wendy Mulford, *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, Letters and Politics 1935-1951* (London: 1988), p.203
- 6 Mulford, p.155, 'it wasn't she claimed, a historical novel, although most people would read it as such.'
- 7 Claire Harman, Introduction to *The Corner That Held Them* (Virago, 1988)
- 8 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Black Arrow* (London, 1924), p.20
- 9 Mulford, p.199
- 10 Arnold Rattenbury, 'Literature, Lying and Sober Truth: attitudes to the work of Patrick Hamilton and Sylvia Townsend Warner' pp.201-44 from John Lucas, *Writing and Radicalism* (London, 1996)
- 11 For instance, Umberto Eco's *The Name of The Rose*
- 12 Foreword, xiv, Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (London, 1979)
- 13 *Ancrene Riwe*, translated by M.B. Salu, with introduction by Gerard Sitwell and preface by J.R.R.Tolkein (London, 1955), p.173
- 14 V.A.Kolve. *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, (Stanford, 1966)
- 15 Tuchman, *ibid*
- 16 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Barry Windeatt (London, 2003), Book IV, lines 5-7
- 17 Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Trans. John Healey, 2 vols (London, 1962)
- 18 TLS Dec 18th 1948, Anon Review of *The Corner That Held Them*.
- 19 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by William Ropes, Trask (Princeton, 1953)
- 20 PN Review 23 8:3, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Celebration', Sylvia Townsend Warner in conversation with Val Warner and Michael Schmidt, 1975, p.55
- 21 Tuchman, Foreword xvi
- 22 *The Riverside Chaucer*, Ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987)
- 23 Eileen Power, *Medieval Nunneries c.1275 to 1535*, (Cambridge, 1922),



p. 307

24 F. Donald Logan. *Runaway Religious in Medieval England 1240-1540*, (Cambridge, 1996), p.1

25 The incident recalls Edgar and Gloucester on the cliff top when Edgar convinces his father that 'the clearest gods, who make them honours/ Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.' (4.5.73-4)

26 Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A biography*, (Chatto & Windus, 1989), p.193

27 Claire Harman, Foreword to *The Corner That Held Them*, p.viii



Copyrighted image removed

Ruth Scott, pencil drawing by Joy Finzi, 1958.