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SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER AND ROMANCE

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When I started to edit Sylvia Townsend Warner's poetry in the early 1980s and began to have dealings with her literary executors, Susanna Pinney and William Maxwell, I found they were keen to locate Warner's first published work, of which no copy remained among the author's papers. No one knew its title or date, but the subject had been Sylvia's experience of working in a munitions factory during the Great War and it was reputed to have been the only piece of Warner's writing which her father, the historian and schoolmaster George Townsend Warner, lived to see in print.

I was curious about this missing item and keen to find it. I was also lucky to have access to a university library, so set myself to search the Periodicals Indexes for August 1914 to September 1916 (the date of George Warner's death). Warner's name didn't appear anywhere, so I looked up all the articles about munitions and women's war-work, and after some weeks of calling things up and making lists and glazing over yet another letter to the *Times* about ballistics, I came across an article from *Blackwood's Magazine* of February 1916, called 'Behind

the Firing Line: Some Experiences in a Munitions Factory, by A Lady Worker', and knew that my search was over. Not only did all the details fit – the subject, the date, the fact that it was in *Blackwood's Magazine*, to which GTW himself was a regular contributor - but the style and voice of the piece seemed so entirely Warner's that I had no hesitation in making the identification. The executors agreed with me, and I'm still sure it's right.

Having settled in my own mind that I had found the munitions article and therefore closed the matter of 'Sylvia's first publication', I was no longer on the look-out for any earlier appearances in print, but a few years later, when I was writing Warner's biography and totally immersed in reading things by and about her, the same feeling of recognition struck me out of the blue when I was looking (not for the first time) at George Townsend Warner's 1915 book *On the Writing of English*. This excellent guide to essay-writing, written with a great deal of inventiveness and humour, contains as appendix a collection of extracts from famous essayists as stylistic examples, at the end of which GTW includes work by two amateurs, presumably to strike an encouraging note to his schoolboy audience. One is a former pupil, N.A. Walton, whose piece on 'A Frosty Morning' (G.T. Warner 1915, pp.152-155) is printed, as the prefatory note makes clear, 'exactly as it was written in the Modern Sixth Form at Harrow. It is a *young* piece of work and bears traces of this.' The final essay, 'Upon the Quality called "Romance"', (G.T. Warner 1915, pp.155-158) also printed in its entirety, is left anonymous, and the gender of the writer is kept obscure.

Reading this short essay again, its authorship seemed to jump out at me, for reasons which I'll set out below. But of course, I couldn't be certain about it: there was no mention of 'Upon the Quality called "Romance"' in any of Warner's letters, diaries or published works, nor in her father's papers, patchy as those were, and no received wisdom about it - unlike the munitions article, which was known to exist and have been written by Warner, and merely required finding. My feelings about the Romance

essay were simply 'feelings', as I made clear when I mentioned the piece in my 1989 biography of Warner: '"Upon the Quality called 'Romance'" could very well be Sylvia Townsend Warner's first appearance in print' (Harman 1989, p.21).

It wouldn't have been appropriate to say much more about the essay there, but I'm glad to have the chance to do so now. *On the Writing of English* isn't easily available any more, so here is the final item in full, with part of George Townsend Warner's editorial note as prefix.

* * *

Upon the Quality called "Romance"

[*Here, finally, is a still younger piece of stuff, the work of a fifteen-year-old. Its writer would now criticize it ferociously on the ground that it is altogether too elaborate and fanciful: might even condemn it as sentimental. No doubt some of this criticism is just. But it serves my purpose to illustrate two or three things. In the first place it has the qualities which a teacher is glad to see. It is full of imagination – perhaps over-full; but then it is so much more easy to prune and train a hedgeling briar than to encourage a cabbage. Again, the words are well chosen and the cadence of the sentences is musical. Lastly, the writer can pass easily from things seen with the eyes to things seen in the mind. For in truth – and doubtless I should have said this before, but better late than never – there is a great commonwealth of Letters where all who read have admission and fellowship. The essay-writer and his reader may never meet in the flesh, may never even have one mortal acquaintance in common. But they can have the whole world of the Immortals. […]*]

It is difficult to define Romance; it is like attempting to describe the air, it is so universal, so all-embracing. In everything done alone, and out-of-doors, there is much

Romance. It lies in walking alone over the broad curving moors, in the tracking of a stream, in the discovery of some narrow rocky hollow, hidden away in the cleft of the hills: in a lesser degree, in the opening of a new book. Romance comes upon one in the tinkle of flowing water heard far off, in the sailing of a cloud's shadow down the opposite slope, across the valley between, and up the hillside to where one stands watching.

Walking alone on a winding road, what pageant may not come to one's sight, round the next bend, suddenly, with the abruptness of a kingfisher's flight over a clear pool; what challenge of dimly-heard music, borne on the freakish wind? The white gleam of the bent grass is really the sun-glitter on the lances of the armies, marching down into Roncevalles; in that dark wood lies Medoro, and Angelica comes riding on her white palfrey looking for him; over that hillside, which is the Glistening Heath, rides Siegfried, girt with Gram, and wise with a new wisdom; as for that hawk circling high above me, it is really the wide-winged Hippogrif bearing Astolfo to the moon; and so all the well-known things of the moorland are changed by the subtle alchemy of Romance, as when a dark river-pool is lit by the shoaling bravery of the sun's rays, breaking of a sudden through a cloud.

The idea that runs through all Romance is the quest. It is the gold thread showing through the motley embroideries that the centuries have worked, and left unfinished; it is the search for guessed-at, unknown lands, for strange new beauty, for an ultimate good. It shows so strongly in the story of the Argonauts, the adventuring through strange lands, for a strange prize; in the Norse Sagas it reappears. Later, it becomes the search for the Sangreal; it comes again in the discovery of the New World, instinct with the strange possibilities of the unknown. Thus, shining with the same light amidst so many different surroundings, reflecting them, seemingly altered, yet still the same, as a stream born in the mountains flows down through placid pastures to the sea; thus goes this leit-motif of the quest, that can be traced in all true Romance.

There is a book which contains, for me, all the glamour of Romance, all the simplicity, all the idea of the quest: it is the Pilgrim's Progress. What more romantic than Christian's start? There is no material taking thought for the morrow; it has all the enthusiasm of the First Crusade: it is as if a child had said, "I want to go along that road, and see where it leads to; there will be an enchanted castle at the end, I am sure, waiting for me; let's start", whereupon he promptly starts. The main idea is simple, thereby becoming so romantic – the quest, the struggle for eternal beauty, the perilous journey through dark woods to the sunny green fields beyond.

Romance is one of the few things that hold all alike; every child is born with Romance inbred in it; it may be called by different names, it may even be a term of opprobrium, but it is still as beautiful and as widespread as the red poppy; cultivation may strive to stamp it out, even as red poppies are combated; custom may change its guise, and impose restrictions upon it; but to what end? Romance is eternal, eternal as youth.

* * *

So what about this essay makes one suspect that the young Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote it? Well, firstly, the fact that it appears in her father's book, presented anonymously and quasi-dispassionately. The author must have been a pupil of G.T. Warner, but one over whom the master had some continuing sway; no longer a fifteen-year-old (as the note makes clear), and not altogether happy, but willing, to have this juvenile effort exposed. If the author had been another of the Harrow boys, why did George Warner not give his name, as in the case of N.A.Walton? It would have been an odd discrepancy to withhold it, just as it would have been unseemly to publicise the work of Warner's own child.

Sylvia Townsend Warner turned fifteen on 6 December 1908, and in 1914, when *On the Writing of English* was completed, she was twenty years old, a very likely age at which to 'criticize ferociously' younger

work and condemn it as sentimental. In those five years, Warner had become a serious student of music, a composer and a poet (the earliest poem from her first collection, *The Espalier*, was written in 1914). Her solitary but unconstrained home education at the hands of her parents and other teachers at Harrow school, acting as private tutors, had turned her into a person of extraordinary erudition and mental independence. She was, according to one unnamed colleague of her father, 'the cleverest fellow we had' (qtd. in *T.P's and Cassell's Weekly*, 15 January 1927).

By any standards, 'Upon the Quality called "Romance"' is an exceptional piece of work for a fifteen-year old, and George Warner's admiration of it is evident, as is his pleasure in the qualities 'which a teacher is glad to see'. He doesn't need to press its claims too far: the teenaged writer has imbibed fully the lessons of *On the Writing of English*, especially the least explicit one, which is that common sense and naturalness are more useful to the novice than any formal mastery or rhetorical flourishes[1]. This also makes one think of Sylvia Townsend Warner, whose most sophisticated thoughts are always expressed in the clearest prose, and who has a marked preference for plain words in complex cadences (the 'musical' qualities George Warner remarks). What is notable about the essay is the young writer's confidence in his or her own imagination, and pleasure in expressing it.

However, given the fact that George Warner explicitly praised N.A.Walton's skill in 'A Frosty Morning' ('Trace in it that the boy was by nature an artist' [...] 'he did it subconsciously; he had the happy touch' [G.T. Warner 1915, p.152]), his restraint about 'On the Quality called "Romance"' is all the more noticeable. He admits that the essay is full of imagination, but qualifies that with 'perhaps over-full; but then it is so much more easy to prune and train a hedgeling briar than to encourage a cabbage'. Is it fanciful to detect an undercurrent of parental rather than professional pride in these carefully balanced public judgements and deflecting humour?

There's plenty in the substance of the essay that seems predictive of Sylvia Townsend Warner's later work and characteristic turn of mind. The subject must have been assigned, but once the preamble is done, the writer fires up around it. The Romance literature referred to – Norse myths, Greek myths, the Song of Roland, Orlando Furioso – are all works Warner knew and loved and returned to (in 'The Green Valley' for instance: 'O now I remember it well, now all is plain,/Why twitched my memory like a dowser's rod/At waters hidden under sod./When I was a child they told me of Charlemagne,/ Of Gan the traitor, and Roland outmarched and slain.' [Warner 2008, p.36]) She admired Bunyan, and admired especially the pared-down intensity of his story-telling (the quality she praised in Defoe too: 'Defoe is such a master, because he's *really* interested in the story' [Warner 2002, p.50]). And the way in which the writer of 'On the Quality called "Romance"' dramatises this, simply, with a child saying 'I want to go along that road, [...] let's start' is recognisable in Warner's later essay-writing, which is full of qualities one more readily associates with fiction-writing.

But it's the evocation of a romantic, solitary young person, day-dreaming in a wild moorland landscape, that most strongly conjures up a person if not Sylvia, then *just like her*. Solitary walking, which in 'Upon the Quality called "Romance"' is the release into reverie, romance and ecstatic flights of imagination, was Warner's favourite outdoor pastime as a young woman; wild hills and streams her haunts. The Warners spent every summer from 1904 until 1914 at the Tushielaw Inn in the Ettrick valley, where Sylvia would spend whole days out on the hills alone (later she did the same on Dartmoor). 'It was the first hill-landscape I knew' she once wrote to her friend Bea Howe, 'and although I have loved other, grander landscapes since, [...] it is still the authentic country of my mind' (Harman 1989, p.19). Tushielaw remained an ideal for her, often mentioned in her diaries and letters and rapturously recalled in her short story

'Oxenhope' where a man returns to Ettrick after forty seven years and is plunged back into the past:

> The past was in the present – the narrowed valley, the steeper hills crowding into it, the river running with a childish voice. [...] The plunge of the water into the pool, the stone, mottled like a trout, which it incessantly broke its sleek neck on, the renewed surface, fanning out and smoothly hastening away – he recognised everything. Other recognitions were everywhere around him, tingling in rocks, in soggy patches at the rocks' foot, in the shadow of a hill moving across another hill, in tufts of sheep's wool caught on wire fencing, in the wind's hoo-hooing in the crannies of stone walls, in the seething hiss of dried heather bells.
>
> (Warner 1971 pp.189-190)

The astonishing vividness of this, with every sense open, is a fine example of Warner's almost hallucinatory powers of recall. As she was finishing the story, in January 1960, she wrote in her diary 'what I see is not the story but the Ettrick valley'.

The author of 'On the Quality called "Romance"' is similarly transported. As George Townsend Warner remarks, we 'pass easily from things seen with the eyes to things seen in the mind' and back again, following the stream of a moorland landscape to the romance figures who seem naturally to belong in it, then (mindful of the theme and shape of the piece) introducing the idea of the quest as the leit-motif of Romance 'seemingly altered, yet still the same, as a stream born in the mountains flows down through placid pastures to the sea'.

Passing from 'things seen with the eyes to things seen with the mind' is a move so characteristic of Sylvia Townsend Warner that it would be hard to quantify instances of it in her work, though there's one particularly relevant example that comes to mind here, the poem

'Saturday Evening' from *Time Importuned*, published in 1928. It's a very unusual lyric about a motorcyclist tearing up a country road, which becomes a paean to the timeless romance of youth (chiming interestingly with Thom Gunn's much later biker poems). One speaker asks who it was speeding by and is told it's a local boy on his weekend quest 'to buy some fags, and pick up a girl, and go to the pictures.' The first speaker corrects him:

> Well-informed Sir, you are wrong.
> I do not impeach your knowledge of local
> Gothic, but let me tell you how that same yokel
> Was the heart of song;
> And at his passage a throng
> Of warriors blown from Troy to an English shire
> Rose up to whirl after him, to hang on the air and
> admire.
>
> (Warner 2008 p.115)

Of course, from my viewpoint of thinking that 'Upon the Quality called "Romance"' was probably written by Sylvia Townsend Warner, I could go on convincing myself ad infinitum. We will never know for sure who wrote that high-class piece of homework, and whether or not it represents Warner's first appearance in print, unsolicited, irrefusable because sponsored by her father, and therefore possibly overlooked by the author in later years.

But more securely, we can see in George Townsend Warner's book *On the Writing of English* the advice, and the character of mind, that most influenced Warner's taste, style and ideals of composition. Dive in, he says; be natural. Organise your ideas, and keep your head. Eschew abstractions, contortions, inflations, and instead of worrying about whether or not you have anything to say, 'give your mind a chance'. 'It will wish to be lazy, to run along in some one else's groove, to repeat what it has heard other people say that they see, instead of looking for itself' (G.T. Warner 1915, p.114), he writes in his brilliant final chapter. 'You must use *your eyes* and *your*

brain. [...] For originality is, after all, only the reflection from your mind of common notions – notions, that is to say, which are the common property of anyone who likes to use them' (p.113).

How impressive this is, how perfectly well-judged and understanding of a child's mind, its vitality, anxieties, and most of all, its potential. George Townsend Warner was as much a romantic as a man of sense and learning: you can see that from his relations with his pupils, his ambitions for them, his treatment of them as equals – and from the fervent testimonies that were left to his skills as a teacher. How much more he must have relished watching the play of imagination and feeling in the emergence of his brilliant only child's sensibility, the extended and happy process of 'pruning and training a hedgeling briar' of great vigour and beauty. 'Use *your eyes* and *your brain*' he urged his pupils; to his beloved daughter he didn't need to add 'and also use *your heart*'.

NOTES

1. It is striking how assiduously GTW tries to put his imagined schoolchild reader at ease about the task in hand, from the epigraph ('Scholar: But you break all your own rules. Dominie: Not all, surely.') through to the pages left blank at the end of the main text where 'The Model Essay' can be written (greeted by Warner's imagined scholar with an 'O-oh!'), and his comic verse Envoi: 'Prince – when you write/Be careful, do;/Pray keep in sight/A Beast or two;/Calm and sedate/Your point refine,/Don't emulate/The Porcupine.//Be sure you know,/Ere you set out,/Whither you'd go/Nor lengthen out/Parenthesis/In cumbrous style - /Don't be as is/The Crocodile.' The poem goes on to warn against stylistic wallowing (like a hippopotamus) and repetition (buzzing around like a bee), a memorable précis of the whole book, and remarkably 'boy'-friendly.

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