

REVIEWS

NEW COLLECTED POEMS

Sylvia Townsend Warner

(Edited with an Introduction by Claire Harman)

Fyfield Books, Carcanet Press, 2008, £18.95, Softback)

Introducing this enlarged edition of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Collected Poems* of 1982, its editor wonders whether or not 'it is *possible* for [her] to be inserted retrospectively into the canon, regardless of however many admirers she has now or in the future' and doubts if she will appear in literary histories, 'except perhaps as a case-study in the history of literary fashions.' One would like to hear Warner's comment on that 'inserted'; but in any case the admission provides a sorry comment on the contemporary state of English literary appreciation, with its anxiety to control and determine, both for commercial and pedagogic reasons, what may be deemed 'acceptable' in the literary and socio-political market place. It is all the more to its publishers' credit, therefore, that this book should make available the entire poetic output of a writer so resistant to categorisation or teachability. Its very existence should give her readers cause for hope.

Certainly Warner was at no time a 'career poet' or a part of the London poetic milieu. Nor was she a programmatic writer: she was perhaps too vitally involved in even the small change of daily life to become one. She was not given to abstractions or to the voicing of long views; her imaginative intensity was held in reserve. What seems to have released the full force of a passionate undertow to her intellectual

precision and mordant humour was her relationship with her fellow poet Valentine Ackland, which forbade emotional defensiveness or role-playing. Her two final major poems, 'A Journey by Night' and 'Gloriana Dying', are the natural outcome of a lifetime's devotion to poetry and a remarkable instance of imaginative power being triumphantly activated in a writer's old age.

The poetic process may be seen at work in the developing nature of Warner's writing. If the very success of her first two novels obscured the achievement of her first two books of verse, it remains true that elements in the latter display a kind of Georgian folksiness and a self-conscious rusticity of subject matter – T. F. Powys may have been a good friend but was distracting as a literary influence. More beneficial was the example of Hardy's particularity of theme and setting, as were the subtle rhythms employed by Walter de la Mare; but what is Warner's own is her blend of unpredictable imaginative flights with a wit as tangy as a quince. She had had a sound mentor in her schoolmaster father, whose teaching, as evident in his little handbook on good writing (addressed to his Harrovian pupils) was, one imagines, a bracing influence on his daughter's style. And her musical training enabled her to experiment with traditional metres in a way aptly described by Peter Scupham as 'the tongue's lilt lightening the head.' The Introduction to the previous *Collected Poems* quotes an earlier comment made by Louis Untermayer concerning 'the poet's marked accent, or her half-modern, half archaic blend of naiveté and erudition, or the low-pitched but tart tone of voice....' Her sensibility is all her own. She delights in the quirks of fate, and in the animating presence of human lives that operate so eccentrically within the natural order. Indeed hers is a poetry of eccentricities, alert, musical, mischievous and frequently surprising.

In this respect her one long poem, *Opus 7*, is typical. The controlling impression is of the luxuriant, not to say luscious, use of imagery and similes, so in keeping with the narrative's collocation of floral husbandry and drunkenness. The rhyming couplets indicate that the poem is unashamed

pastiche, and distance their readers from the author's own involvement with her subject. This allows room for personal statement, as in the scathing references to the Great War no less than for the hilarious account of country women returning home by bus from their weekly marketing – a passage that only this particular author would have written. The poem combines subversive relish with a deadly earnestness, a disconcerting mixture to appear in the heyday of self-conscious literary modernism.

It is a pity that this new *Collected Poems* should leave out the characteristic lecture on 'Women as Writers' that Warner delivered to the Royal Society of Arts in 1959, as it reflects the practicality and enthusiasm of her approach to authorship; but she would have welcomed the paper used for the present book, which is a vast improvement on the wretched material allotted to its predecessor. In addition, the new type-face and lay-out are both excellent. Although Harman's Introduction places Warner's work in relation to the events of her life, to her lesbian nature and her political beliefs, I wish she had incorporated at least some of the earlier Introduction, with its discerning appraisal of the poetry's literary quality. On the other hand she has enlarged the Notes and provided a useful chronology of Warner's life and principal publications. So all in all this is a scholarly edition and a token of the increased recognition afforded to Warner as one of the most original and refreshing writers of her time.

As for the book's contents, these are now arranged chronologically. Whereas the previous collection had begun with uncollected poems, this one places the first three books of verse at the beginning, followed by twenty-four poems out of the fifty-four that Warner contributed to *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, her collaboration with Valentine Ackland. The next section consists of poems written between 1931 and 1960, fifty-four of which have been uncollected until now, though two poems that were published in the *Society Journal* in 2002 have (accidentally?) been left out. *New Collected Poems* concludes with those written in illustration of Reynolds Stone's engravings for *Boxwood*; with the privately printed pamphlet *King Duffus* and with the final *Twelve Poems*,

between which are seventeen short pieces composed following Ackland's death in 1969, only one of which has appeared before. So the tally of Warner's poetry is now more or less complete.

Whether a Dove or Seagull clearly presented the editor with a problem, one which she solved in the previous collection by leaving out Warner's contribution altogether. In the present book the choice of some of these poems for inclusion impairs the objectivity of a *collected* edition: it surely would have been more consistent to print all or to print none – though the reprinting of *Whether a Dove or Seagull* in Carcanet's forthcoming selection of Ackland's poems might render the former course a superfluity. As it was, the two poets' project of an anonymous partnership was ill-conceived and did neither of them any good. Claire Harman's account of the matter is instructive and, where Robert Frost's reaction to its dedication to himself is concerned, almost painfully amusing; but, as she points out, the book does demonstrate Ackland's influence upon her lover's poetic style, by inducing a looser prosodic form and a greater directness and spontaneity of utterance. Warner's superb final group of poems was thus, ironically, the fruit of an error of judgement, albeit an error made on behalf of love by a woman whose friend Pat Howard once described to me as the most completely loving person she had ever known.

Although *Whether a Dove or Seagull* seemed to have ruled out any immediate hopes of publication in book form for either poet, Warner continued to write for periodicals throughout the 1940s. As to the ninety or so poems hitherto uncollected or unpublished, at least half a dozen are significant contributions to her oeuvre, as are the thirty or so written during the temporary separation from Ackland and those following her death: the latter are particularly moving. The poems of social criticism are less successful: sincere the political ones may be, but sincerity, in poetry as in morality, is not enough. In voicing her belief's Warner could on occasion be deaf to her muse. As for the raucous humour essayed in the St Valentine's Day poem for 1935, it reads like a private joke that had better have been left as such. But

failures like this are few in a collection that confirms Sylvia Townsend Warner's place as a writer whose personal integrity and literary endowments resist any officious would-be pigeon-holing. She is sure of a place in the canon for all those who read out of a disinterested delight in originality and who appreciate a debonair intelligence that enhances their own sense of 'the pleasure that there is in life itself.' All Warner's admirers are in Claire Harman's debt for the care and dedicated enthusiasm that she has brought to this very worthwhile project.

Glen Cavaliero