

JOURNEY FROM WINTER: SELECTED POEMS

Valentine Ackland

(Edited with introductions by Frances Bingham
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I first came across a mention of Valentine Ackland in a review of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Collected Poems*, published in *Gay News* in 1982. The review, by the late Rosemary Manning, gives a few brief details of their relationship. Valentine is described as 'a writer'. Rosemary Manning's informed, perceptive appraisal of Sylvia's poetry stirred my interest; I bought the *Collected Poems* and read them with delight. In Claire Harman's introduction and then in William Maxwell's edition of the *Letters* I found references to another volume of poems, first published in 1933 and out of print for many years: *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, a joint collection by Sylvia and Valentine.

I was thoroughly hooked on Sylvia's writing: her sardonic wit, her streak of eccentric fantasy, her flashes of tenderness. I was also moved and fascinated by glimpses of her long partnership with Valentine, and keen to learn more about Valentine herself, this forgotten poet who for nearly four decades held Sylvia's love and attention. *Whether a Dove or*

Seagull, obtained through an inter-library loan, did not disappoint me. Here were dazzling poems in Sylvia's manner: 'Never again, I thought, hedges so hung with may'; 'Swift at Moor Park'; 'Sunflower, guiltless of time'. Not all the poems in Sylvia's manner were by Sylvia. 'You can come to me if you choose', one of Valentine's poems, is mistakenly attributed to Sylvia by Wendy Mulford in *This Narrow Place*, her study of the first two decades of Sylvia and Valentine's partnership. The error is understandable; in the original printing of *Whether a Dove or Seagull* none of the individual poems have an author's name attached. In the US edition there are no attributions at all; the British edition, published a few months later, added a key at the end, but it is troublesome to consult it and easy for the eye to slip. Some of Valentine's poems show just how thoroughly she had absorbed her older lover's poetic idiom: 'You can come to me if you choose' contains such characteristic marks of Sylvia's poetry as the freshly coined compound adjective ('root-steel'), the marked variation in line length, and the image of cleared ground gone to weeds and thorns.

Yet Valentine also has a distinctive voice of her own, one she was to develop and refine through a lifetime of writing poetry. While Sylvia often writes in the past tense, Valentine is more likely to write in the present, and to end in the present even when she begins in the past. After her death Sylvia edited a selection of her poetry under the title of *The Nature of the Moment*; the title is taken from one of the poems, but it was not chosen at random. Sylvia's poems often contain or imply a narrative, but most of Valentine's best poems focus on a single sharply observed experience, whether of joy or sadness, wonder or insight. In poems like 'Disgraced among its kind' and 'Stolid and secure' Sylvia writes of their mutual passion unmistakably but obliquely: she instructs the smoke from their house to 'Flaunt out with wantonness' and depicts not them but their shadows on the wall sitting 'Embraced'. She is conscious of the eyes of others: 'gossip ... a-stare', the watchers in the night beyond the windows. Valentine is not interested in imagining witnesses, and her impulse is typically towards directness:

'If she came and love's storm should arise –'; 'Let us be lovers, by the bright hedge lying'; 'My hand ... cleaves between your thighs'.

Most of the poems in the book are love poems and no reasonably attentive reader can have failed to appreciate the nature of the relationship between its authors. This is one of their achievements, that in a repressive decade, with little in the way of a tradition to draw on, they developed in their poetic exchanges an idiom within which they could speak of lesbian desire and lovemaking. They paid for this with many years of neglect. In *Journey from Winter* Francis Bingham has included all the poems from *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, arranged in the order in which they appear in the original printing. Each poem is followed by the initials of its author. This is the first complete reprint of this important collection since its publication seventy-five years ago.

In addition to the full contents of *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, *Journey from Winter* contains a generous selection from Valentine's other poetry, altogether about 170 poems, arranged in chronological sections. Francis Bingham explains in her introduction that she has selected these from a corpus of something like two thousand extant poems and drafts. Some have survived only in printed form, while others have never been published. It is plain that the preparation of *Journey from Winter* has involved its editor in an immense labour of sorting and sifting. Each part of the book is introduced by a perceptive, well-researched biographical and critical preface.

Journey from Winter is the third and by far the most substantial posthumous collection of Valentine's poetry. The contents of the two earlier selections, *The Nature of the Moment* (1973) and *Further Poems of Valentine Ackland* (1978), are well represented but many good poems have been left out to make way for poems that have not been previously published or that have only appeared in magazines. Clearly some hard decisions have had to be made on grounds of cost and space. I wish that the editor had not truncated the text of 'A not-poem about love', which was published in full in *Further Poems*; it is the one editorial decision of hers that

strikes me as unjustified. Unfortunately *Further Poems* is an extremely scarce book, but those who want more of Valentine's work after reading *Journey from Winter* may like to know that *The Nature of the Moment* is available in a US edition at a very reasonable price.

About seventy of the poems in *Journey from Winter* are not in either of the other collections. Valentine's Spanish Civil War poems are well represented here for the first time, and there is a fuller selection of the poems she wrote during the Second World War. Frances Bingham has clearly gone to a lot of trouble to establish the chronology of the poems. One good effect of this is that the political poems and the poems on contemporary events can now be put properly into context.

With the publication of *Journey from Winter* it becomes possible for the first time to make an overall assessment of the qualities of Valentine Ackland's poetry. Though some of her successful poems are longer, Valentine's inclination was towards the very short lyric. A great many of her best pieces are less than twelve lines long. Sometimes her work recalls the Imagists; examples include 'Snow' and 'November Night 1940'. Other poems are Romantic fragments, designedly and arrestingly incomplete: 'In that moment alone'; '- But lord! to follow the swallows with one's eye'. Still others are very short complete poems, concise, pointed and highly polished, in the manner of epigrams of the *Greek Anthology*, a text that Valentine knew well and from which she made some translations. (Incidentally, on page 190 'Aschestratus' should read, more euphoniously, 'Archestratus'.) There are vignettes of country scenes and country life, with occasional overtones of John Clare, and there are many lyrical poems of great intensity on the classical themes of love and betrayal and death and time and grief. Valentine's other great theme is war. She wrote a number of fine war poems, from 'Badajos to Chaldon, August 1936' ('Telephone wires cry in the wind'), through a whole series of poems about the stresses and disgusts and despairs and pity of life on the Home Front in the Second World War, to her poem about Hiroshima, 'August 6th'.

In many ways Valentine, who died when I was a teenager, feels to me like a contemporary: a sexual rebel who refused to conform to the rules of womanly behaviour, an angry fighter for social justice, a woman who felt the shadow of the Bomb and feared an ultimate catastrophe, and who loved steadfastly, but not exclusively, and after all her despairs, always returned to some kind of hope. It was in a spirit of hopefulness and trust that she chose her epitaph, 'Non omnis moriar': 'I shall not die completely'. The quotation is from Horace; the ode from which it is taken is one in which he expresses his faith in the lasting renown of his poems: 'I have finished a monument more enduring than bronze ... I shall not die completely ... Constantly fresh, I shall grow in fame among those who are to come.'

Gillian Spraggs