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Twice as Natural

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

Warner's article discusses what might be thought of as genuinely lifelike in fiction, as against the conventions of realism and naturalism that she found in the fiction of the 1920s.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; realism; naturalism; 1920s fiction.

The commission to write upon the *Tendencies of Contemporary Literature* was oppressing me. The words, so round, solemn and slippery, were like three balloons made of black mackintosh. I remembered dear friends I once had who could hold forth on such a subject for hours, searchingly, convincingly, unperturbed by the fact that the tendencies they were making such play with happened to be neither contemporary nor literary. But I am a dull creature with a conscience that chains me to the foot of the letter.

'Now if it had been the *Literature of Contemporary Tendencies*,' I thought as I walked about under the dishevelling trees of Kensington Gardens, 'I could manage very nicely. For I have read plenty of that; indeed who can escape it?'

At that moment I noticed a man and a girl who lay side by side asleep with a newspaper spread under them. It was between ten and eleven on a fine October morning, a time at which Kensington Gardens are still the dormitory of many houseless or itinerant folk who have spent the night walking about the streets. I saw a man come up to the sleeping couple – a companion, for he greeted them familiarly. They did not wake. Stooping over the girl he put his arms round her waist, pulled her a little

way from the ground and kissed her several times, rather well. Released, she sat up, yawning and smiling, as pleased to be woken with kisses as one is pleased to be woken with early morning tea, neither more nor less. Then the other man woke up and also started to kiss the girl. The first man then strolled off to a patch of sunlight; and there, putting his fingers in his mouth, he began to whistle like a blackbird.

This passage was so pleasant and easy-going that it could not have aroused even the prurience of a moralist. Yet it was not idyllic; it was too matter of fact for that, having that particular inevitability and life-like quality which one associates with the ballet. Yes, a ballet certainly; perhaps a film, if the man in the orchestra would be coerced into playing his bird-call in the right place – but how about literature? No! Not in these days. Writers for the many and writers for the few, either could have managed the kisses, and about equally well; but when it came to the glory of it, that walking off and whistling like a blackbird (his profession, no doubt; and like a good artist he kept himself in form) neither could have sprung that surprise. From the one, blood-letting and the embattled male; from the other a great deal of consciousness, starved cats i' the adage, perhaps one of those mental regurgitations which are always so arresting[:] ‘... a broken toilet comb, clotted with grease and hair. How clearly it all came back. His tenth birthday, the sun shone, he had said: “I won’t use Bert’s old comb any longer. I want a comb to myself.” But he had gone on using it,’ etc.

Suddenly I found myself brandishing a perfectly good Tendency of Contemporary Literature: The Tendency to Be Duller than Life by being Twice as Natural. The more I considered it the better pleased I was with my discovery. The tendency is contemporary right enough. George Meredith, for instance, or Charlotte Yonge, may be boring, but they are not dull; and of writers continuing into the present day but not of it, such as Kipling, the same distinction holds good. Moreover, the tendency is truly literary, it cannot be shredded off as a tendency of contemporary writers. They indeed show no wish to be Duller than Life. The domestic servant of the day scarcely excels them in their pursuit of new situations, a pursuit so intoxicating that in many cases (like her) even when they’ve found a new situation, they can’t settle down in it. But the tendency to be Duller than Life is too much for them; and at the end of a year’s subscription to the lending library one may look back on a distinguished welter of brilliant writing, insight into character, this, that and the other – with scarcely a surprise in all those well-printed pages.

Of such surprises is it the biographies which offer the greater number: and the position of biography is one of the significant facts in the literary situation. Twenty years ago biographies were considered 'solid reading,' and as such opposed to fiction. Now this is pretty nearly reversed. More and more readers prefer biographies as being 'more entertaining than novels,' and the same conviction seems to be working among writers too. It would seem that worn out by the strain of being Twice as Natural in their fiction they escape to biography exclaiming: 'Here, at any rate, there is no need to be life-like!'

Joseph Smith receiving a pair of spectacles from an angel to enable him to translate the Book of Mormon, the Leigh Hunts embarking for Italy with a goat, Ruskin quitting the house of a friend because it was built in the Palladian style, the member of the Edinburgh police force whose note-book was bound in the skin of Burke the resurrectionist, Lady Dorothy Nevill fastening whistles to birds' tails, the funeral of Rudolf Valentino – these are situations (the first, perhaps, might need a little glossing over), which uplift and fatten the biographer.¹ In fact the stranger the fish the more he welcomes them to his net; and very properly, since it is exactly incidents such as these that by their strangeness impart to his book a quality called liveliness – which is an attribute of life.

One might expect the novelist to welcome such situations also, and for the same reason. But the Tendency of Contemporary Literature will not allow him to welcome them so unceremoniously. Cautious before all things to be convincing, to be probable, he will reject the goat and the angel and scarcely allow Rodelinda Baker to tie a whistle to her guillemot without explaining for seven pages the complication of motives which drove her to this momentous step and describing every eddy in her sensations when the bird flew away. It is as though he said: 'As my characters are not real I cannot allow them the licence allowed to mankind. As they never lived I must make them Twice as Natural!'

It will be interesting to see whether the flippancy of biography will infect fiction, or whether biography too will be forced into adopting the same austere regimen. In any case it will be all the same a hundred years hence. Contemporary tendencies may shape the contours of a masterpiece, but they do not affect its being such, and succeeding generations by accepting the prevalent style of a period discount it. *Werther* is a triumph of sensibility, but none the less a triumph. What's more, the convention of its period may give charm to a book otherwise insignificant. It may be that future readers will say of our period: 'How delightfully dull!' and while carrying about *Ulysses* as a pocket classic find in *An*

American Tragedy (say) the same rather snuffy fragrance which lingers in the pages of *Ivanhoe*.

Time and Tide, 19 November 1926, pp. 1051–2

Note

- 1 Joseph Smith said he found the spectacles along with the golden plates; the Leigh Hunts embarked in November 1821, a party of two parents, five children and a goat; the Ruskin scholar Clive Wilmer suggests there is no foundation for this story about Ruskin and that such behaviour would be uncharacteristic of him; the notebook made from Burke's skin is on display at the Surgeons' Hall Museum in Edinburgh; Lady Dorothy fastened the whistles to pigeons' tails and found the effect 'extremely pretty' (*The Reminiscences of Lady Dorothy Nevill*, edited by her son (London: E. Arnold, 1906), pp. 80–1); over 100,000 people took to the streets to mourn Valentino.

Bibliography

Nevill, Lady Dorothy. *The Reminiscences of Lady Dorothy Nevill*, ed. Ralph Nevill. London: E. Arnold, 1906.