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A Recurrent Modulation: Religious Themes in the Poetry of Sylvia Townsend Warner

*Pauline Matarasso**

Sylvia Townsend Warner is a writer who seems eager to be known. She kept, and left behind, extensive diaries; she wrote a stream of letters to her many friends, material which, gradually edited, has proved attractive to readers old and new, since her brilliance shines out in everything she put her pen to. Her partner, Valentine Ackland, herself a poet, left an account of her own childhood and their years together, and Warner took steps to ensure that this material too would be preserved. Whether the drip-feed of the personal enriches our understanding of a writer's work is a pertinent question to ask, and in this case the answer must be an unqualified 'yes': the diaries, in particular, reflect the whole spectrum of Warner's life and work, her mind as well as her heart, and, most interestingly, the dialogue between the two.

They gain further from being written by a woman of great integrity who habitually spoke the truth as she saw and felt it, and to this extent can be taken at her word. Nonetheless she should never be taken only at her word on the basis of any one assertion, because her mind was peculiarly able to hold and embrace views that appear on the surface to be mutually exclusive. This negative capability applies notably in the domain of her religious belief, or rather, lack of it, where the singling out of a number of seemingly categorical statements has led to a view of her as hostile to religion in all its aspects – an attitude subject to neither shift nor development, rather like her unflinching loyalty to Stalin. The reality, that she wrote some fifty poems that either are religious in theme – if by no means always pious in treatment – or contain a scattering, often a network, of scriptural allusions germane to their meaning, has slipped from sight.

I shall not be attempting to suggest that Warner's attitude to religion was uniform or stable. Belief, even that of declared believers, is variable, labile, subject to outer and inner weather, and often a mystery to the individual in question. I shall strive to use with sensitivity a vocabulary which no longer commands a consensus. To start with, 'religious' should not be equated with 'devotional'. Warner wrote on religious themes a number of poems properly termed parodic, light-hearted or flippant, often with a satirical edge. These are not necessarily anti-religious. The Middle Ages, supposedly pickled in faith, criticised Rome, the clergy and every religious order with wit, venom and scatological enthusiasm: one mocks what one loves when it disappoints, and more ferociously when it falls below the standards that it preaches. It is true, however, that Warner often expressed herself with a flippancy that is sceptical of religion or hostile to it.

We may then be more surprised to come on poems which might properly figure in an anthology of religious verse – the more so because they never get a mention. I refer to six in particular: 'Faithful Cross', 'Early One Morning', 'On the Eve of St Thomas', 'A Ceremony in the Vatican, 1929', 'Changed Fortune', and 'A Journey by Night'.¹ There are others in which the poet's perspective is more elusive but the general Christian context is plain and presented sympathetically. Among these latter, several are focussed on churches, churchyards, or places with physical connections to events described – including Duke Humfrey's library in the Bodleian, where the Church Fathers sit shelved before her eyes and get named and listed as 'All the wise men / Of golden mouth / And faithful pen' (69).² Others again draw on scripture to an extent that readers today may not be aware of. Even the popular 'Woman's Song' (143) carries echoes of the litany, with its repeated 'Pray for me' – *ora pro nobis* – at the end of each verse.

Plainly, 'I do not believe' presents fewer problems to the critic than 'I believe'. No one is in any doubt about the meaning of the first, while the second needs defining, quantifying, qualifying. What is meant by the verb 'believe'? To what extent do we believe in something, and in what manner? For poets, writing may be a way of exploring belief as well as unbelief: poetry moves laterally, walks on water, leaps between analogies. Both poetry and belief are at ease on liminal ground and in the uncharted territory of dream. Warner was a noted dreamer, and the stories and characters of her works often originated in dream or dream-like states. They also ended in them. *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, which began with a dream, was finished 'in a state of semi-hallucination',³ and as late as her seventies she was confessing to being 'in a state of

contained delirium with the last years of the biography [of T. H. White]. Something that isn't me seems to be doing it irrefutably.⁴ In earlier years, poems would flow unchecked from such states of heightened consciousness: she described how 'a frenzy of more poetry' fell on her and she returned to herself hours later to realise that she had a dinner rendezvous in twenty minutes.⁵ Elsewhere, for experiences that were more fleeting and unconnected with composition, she used variants of the word 'rapture'.⁶ Some plane-trees in London, for instance,

had cast away the works of darkness. This enraptured me into a seventh heaven within me; and I lay on my back looking at blue sky, red-gold and pure green leaves, lime-coloured new flesh and purple and tête de nègre old ... There like a bird I sat and sang.

Her account of this moment contains both a phrase from the Book of Common Prayer⁷ and an unmistakable echo of Marvell's poem 'The Garden'. If Warner had written at an earlier time and her writings were being studied in a less secular culture, the term 'mystical' might have been applied to such passages. This word, like 'belief' and 'religion', eludes definition. It would be well to remember that we are in a territory without frontiers and possibly mined: there is a need to be careful.

Warner not infrequently uses the verb 'to see' in a manner characteristic of visionaries. She 'sees' figures, sometimes historical, mostly imagined, that make sudden unauthorised appearances and will resurface – years later – in a novel. She 'saw' Valentine Ackland several times in the years immediately following her death. Other experiences that hover on the borderline between sleeping and waking are intensely visual, and of the two she describes in most detail both are religious. The first comes from an occasion in 1952 in which having woken to the realisation that it is Ash Wednesday she 'thought of Jesus setting out early in the morning' for the desert. She then relates how "This turned into a dream', with vivid, translucent, almost tropical colours and imagery,⁸ reminiscent of her poem 'The Loudest Lay' (119–23). In the second, from 1966, she visualised in narrative detail the 'reality' underlying the Gospel account of Holy Saturday: 'Waking to remember the day... I saw Mary in the house of John lighting the Sabbath candles, and how the flames burned blue under the salt of her tears and then straightened into a steady light... I saw how Jesus in the tomb stretched, subsided, entered into the twenty four [hour] rest that was laid up for him'.⁹

On another level Warner's explicit rejection of traditional forms of belief is matched by her leaning towards what many would call the

outlandish. We see her drawn towards crediting the powers of the holy men who squatted in her grandfather's garden in India,¹⁰ and confessing – tongue-in-cheek? – to being a witch.¹¹ More arresting was her belief in ghosts, founded on experiences going back – as so often – to her childhood, with a family visit to a haunted house in Ireland. The account of a more recent 'seeing' of a lately deceased young woman is closed with the comment: 'That she should appear, neither to the grieving father who stood by wishing us a happy holiday nor to Valentine whose mind had for so long been in pursuit of immortality and the nature of the soul, but to me, made me ashamed of my irresponsible knack for the supernatural.'¹² These ways of 'seeing' and 'knowing', which bore fruit in her work across all genres, are not those of the analytical mind, the mind she wielded like a sword in argument, the mind that oversaw the composition of her clever poems – though not, I would maintain, the creative genesis of the greater ones. There is a passage in the *Diaries* that throws light on Warner's own understanding of the process:

Finished *Practical Criticism*. I think he [I. A. Richards] boggles rather unnecessarily over the business of accepting the poet's doctrine – i.e. the resurrection in the Donne sonnet. He makes the distinction of accepting emotionally, rejecting intellectually. I think the process is more of an identification. The reader must for the space of that sonnet *become* the writer: for this accounts for much subtler digestions, matters of tone, Cowper and Herrick and so forth, cases where no amount of accepting one way and rejecting another will run.¹³

In the half-dozen of Warner's poems in which Gospel stories and personages are the focus, I would like to suggest that the poet is doing just that: she is identifying with the subject, with the characters, in the context in which she meets them, and this 'identification' is primarily intuitive and emotional. Warner once wrote that, among the subjects she was prepared to lecture on, she had 'theology up her sleeve'.¹⁴ Her familiarity with scripture and doctrine was provided by exposure in childhood to the Bible and Book of Common Prayer, and it was so close and detailed that she could and did quote them – the psalms in particular – all her life. This familiarity was extended and deepened in the years spent working on church music. Scripture provided her with a complete world, richly peopled, with a language of stories and a door always open to a country she could slip in and out of at will, or

choose to linger in for a time. It was like another novel – perhaps the most powerful and persuasive of all. Certainly it haunted her in a way no other did.

In certain poems with a religious theme or context she is conscious of being detached. The head is in control. These are the openly or marginally flippant poems, those that play with the subject matter without the poet abandoning herself to it by letting the poem take over.¹⁵ What did take over on occasion was her own facility, something she showed more awareness of in her novels than in her poetry (however, much of the poetry was of course published after her death and it is possible that some of it would not have survived revision). ‘I am pained to find it too skittish in gait’, she wrote of *The Flint Anchor* at an early stage, comparing herself to ‘a stabled bean-fed horse’ that threatened to bolt with the story.¹⁶ There are poems that did just that: ‘Modo and Alciphron’ (248–52) and the ‘requiem’ for Joseph Staines Cope spring to mind,¹⁷ both written in 1929–30 and both broken-backed: wit goes hand in hand with brevity. ‘The Scapegoat’, ‘Hymn for a Child’, ‘A Song about a Lamb’, ‘Grace and Good Works’ and the later satirical ‘Portrait’ (72, 71, 70, 72, 309) are very much shorter and more successful. The parodic ‘Hymn for Holy Deconsecration’ (308) is a straight take-off of that staple of Morning Service, ‘The Church’s One Foundation’. Its opening line ‘The Church’s own detergent’ evokes the post-war years which saw detergents enter the kitchen, and inner city congregations shift to the suburbs. As any comic will corroborate, a skit, to be successful, demands an intimacy with its subject, and this Warner certainly had with the Church of England, however reluctantly. Her wit never failed, it was still sparkling brightly in her very last work, *Kingdoms of Elfin*, but by then she had stopped sharpening it on religion.

Warner’s attitudes towards religion were complex and conflicted from a very young age. Between superstitious and cross-grained nurses,¹⁸ a mother who schooled her on the King James Bible while telling her not to believe what she read, and a much admired father who taught and lived his Enlightenment values, she had a lot to sort out. Yet strangely, given her intelligence, she chose to leave much of her childhood experience unexamined at the rational level, presenting in her eighties her ‘abhorrence of missionaries’ as an inheritance comparable to her skill in cooking curries.¹⁹

Her musical gifts, fostered by her parents though not shared by them, may well have given her an essential opening into the depths of emotion and the subconscious, without which she would not have become the writer she was – perhaps not a writer at all. The cadences of

Taverner and Tallis, the music of her verse, the poetry of the Authorised Version, words and music sharing the same patterning, weaving in and out of each other, worked to resolve at a subconscious level the discordances within her. During the ten years she spent collaborating on the Tudor Church Music project, she established not only her financial independence but a network of friendships, a major source of emotional support throughout her life. Religion was one of the subjects discussed walking home after a concert.²⁰ Percy Buck got teased after saying: 'I should be overjoyed to learn that Christ was God'.²¹ On another occasion he and Sylvia 'argued about how far one can appreciate Isaiah at this remove, and it was all very peaceful and pleasant'.²² At Beth Car with the God-obsessed Theodore Powys such discussions were regular and she clearly enjoyed them. Reading his works, she was convinced of his genius but troubled by the darkness of his God.²³

Her reading was always eclectic, and the *Diaries* occasionally draw back the curtain on something startling. In 1928, impoverished but discerning, she coveted two items in a sale of the Everard Meynell library at the booksellers, Bumpus: *The Saints' Nosegay*, a seventeenth-century anthology of 'spiritual flowers', alongside what would appear to be the manuscript letters of Gerald Manley Hopkins to Coventry Patmore. The book was already sold, but the letters held her attention for some time and she 'longed to buy them'.²⁴ Frugality prevailed and she went off to Woolworths and bought nails and a teapot instead, but the Hopkins letters got two paragraphs' worth of yearning: 'They are the letters of a wild and lonely mind, soliloquies – harping on like his own lark, an angel in a cloud... But an angel with a vial: a ruthless Catholic, a passionate priest. The more I read, the less I liked, the more I loved, the less I esteemed, the more I revered.'²⁵ The seesaw of her reactions and the verbs picked out as though with tweezers are revealing. The impression is of a clash between head and heart, between the analytical mind and her emotional and intuitive side, ultimately the stronger. Three years later Warner tried again to buy the collection for Valentine Ackland, but it had gone north to Aberdeen and hidden itself in a private library.²⁶

Twenty years later another work appears to be offering some kind of resolution: 'Reading Simone Weil's *Attente de Dieu*. A mind of dazzling darkness; some style of *Lettres Provinciales*, but from logic and mildness, not imitation, I think. *Le malheur* is bad for the soul, for it tears up its roots. I can understand all this.'²⁷ No doubt she could, because Weil's was a mind at ease with paradox – indeed, in love with it insofar as paradox is the mind's opening onto the divine. Warner spent her life in a divided state, with very set views on certain subjects,

notably politics and religion, except when poetry or dream or 'rapture' freed her into a dimension where she found the arc of paradox unaccountably permeable and felt the strong pull of a 'beyond'. She was over eighty when she wrote to her oldest friend, Bea Howe, that she would like to come back to earth as an astronomer: 'it would be a form of thinking, with intensity, about nothing',²⁸ something she attempted frequently – as, of course, did Meister Eckhart, whom she also read.

Without a doubt the most surprising of the works we know she read, and indeed recommended to Valentine Ackland, is Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*. At the most painful juncture in their combined lives, when the older woman was on the point of moving out to make way for a rival, and Ackland, in confessional mode, was lamenting that all her actions, past and present, were 'of the nature of the one sin that is unforgivable – the sin against the Holy Ghost', Warner fetched her own copy of Julian of Norwich, searched it briefly and handed it to Ackland at this place: 'But our good Lord, the Holy Ghost, which is endless life dwelling in our soul, full securely keepeth us; and worketh therein a peace and bringeth it to ease by grace, and accordeth it to God and maketh it pliant. And this is the mercy and the way that our Lord continually leadeth us in as long as we be here in this life which is changeable...'²⁹ Whether Sylvia herself believed these words is somehow irrelevant; she knew what was needed, where to find it in a well-thumbed book, and had the love to meet the need. Moreover her theology was a great deal better than Valentine's. Both women went on reading Julian; Valentine quotes her,³⁰ and Sylvia does the same when lecturing to the Royal Society of Arts on 'Women as Writers'.³¹

* * * * *

From the very first, Warner's religious poems were various. 'Hymn for a Child' (71), dated by Harman as perhaps 1914, is an elusively ironic version of the Gospel story of the child Jesus in the Temple; it was taken seriously enough by John Ireland for him to set it to music.³² 'The Virgin and the Scales' (27–31) is an extended narrative; 'Faithful Cross' (74–5) echoes the best-known verse of a sixth-century hymn, 'Crux fidelis, inter omnes arbor una nobilis', while pointing uncannily forward fifty years to 'A Journey by Night'. In a diary entry on 'Building in Stone' – a poem where 'each thrust and stress' of church architecture, 'antiphonally interlocked,' is matched in the woven rigour of the verse – we see Warner making a conscious decision to retain unbroken the Christian framework of a poem which starts: 'God is still glorified –'. She

writes: 'Finished *Building in Stone* as far as Christendom is concerned, but just at the end it turned nasty and threatened to extend to Karnak and Beth-El.'³³ She cut it short to preserve its integrity as a poem, while evidently thinking that this didn't diminish hers. A poem has more than one truth to respect. It must be true both to the poet and to itself, for it has an inner life of its own to defend. Just as the characters in her books, and even the cloth dolls that she made, took on a life of their own,³⁴ so the best of her poems will have been born both through and in spite of her midwifery.

In the treasure hoard published only after her death is a poem written in 1928 which could well have sprung from one of the liminal experiences described in the diaries. The first line has a folk song ancestry that sets the tone:³⁵

Early one morning
In a morning mist
I rose up sorrowful
And went out solitary,
And met with Christ.
(147)

It is unique among Warner's religious poems in being both highly personal and of a limpid simplicity: it recounts a meeting with Christ in which the speaker asks for a particular gift and is told in return that it is not his to give. Its deceptive simplicity draws one into the poem and renders it almost mesmeric. The central image, the winter thorn growing between the two figures, is significant to Warner. Quickthorn in its spring beauty, blackthorn in its winter ferocity figure repeatedly in her poems,³⁶ more than once charged with religious symbolism. This tree has no beauty of its own, it is all thorn; yet, spangled in dewdrops and sheathed in silence, 'more lovely, more innocent / Tree never grew' (147).

Holding out 'hands forlorn', the speaker begs from Christ a dewdrop:

'Give me,' said I,
And my hands forlorn
Held out, 'be it only
One of these dewdrops
Hanging on the thorn.'
(147)

What exactly did she hope for from this beauty speared on the thorn? This is the mystery at the poem's heart; two more verses follow to unwrap it. Christ's response comes subtly phrased: "Of all these dewdrops... I own not one of them / My own," said he.' The poet's catlike pounce on 'own', with its double sense of confess and possess, will have pleased her greatly. Through one repetition of a three-letter word she opens up a world of meaning, for if the Christ she meets is the Word through whom all things were made, then he does own every dewdrop, yet on the cross he surrendered his hegemony over each and every one. The last verse follows:

Hearing him speak thus,
Each dewdrop shone
Enfranchised diamond;
And with sunrising
All was gone.
(148)

We pick up, as the poet intended, an echo of the last lines of Gerald Manley Hopkins's 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection':

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal
diamond,
Is immortal diamond.

This echo, with its change of adjective from 'immortal' to 'enfranchised', is manifestly significant (the more so in that music, so important to Warner, has been sacrificed here to meaning). To enfranchise is to set free, usually from slavery, often at a price. It is part of the vocabulary of redemption. The poem may imply that we are the dewdrops, bought at a price. Christ has already said that the dewdrops must die at daybreak, and now they do, vanishing in the greater brightness of the sun, in glory, if you will.

This reading seems to me legitimate. It does no violence to the text, it follows rather than forces. Yet by stopping a little sooner, leaving the last slope unclimbed, one finds oneself looking at a different landscape, man-made as opposed to divinely created. On being asked for a dewdrop, Christ replies quite simply that they are not

his to give – he is powerless to command them. Humankind is enfranchised even from the constraint of belief; it knows a moment of glory and is gone.

At this level of interpretation, an appeal to the evidence of diaries and interviews to decide what the poet really meant is surely misdirected. Warner said and wrote different things at different times, in different contexts. More importantly there comes a moment when a poem escapes from the poet, claims its own truth, yields itself to the reader. A good poem should allow, should suffer more than one reading, and a great poem welcomes any number. As for the speaker's request when going out 'sorrowful' and 'solitary', I think she was asking for someone to love and to love her, but not even Christ, whether human or divine, can command love.

* * * *

The year 1931, when Warner and Ackland set up house together in 'Miss Green's cottage' – a partnership which would last until Ackland's death in 1969 – was a climacteric, and not just an emotional one. Within four years, with Ackland initially the prime mover, both had joined the Communist Party, a decision which changed their lives and in Warner's case left a profound imprint on her work: novels first, but also poetry. After *Time Importuned* and the misconceived *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, there were no more collections until the collaboration with Reynolds Stone on *Boxwood* (1957) and the privately printed pamphlet *King Duffus* (1966). Poems at one point ceased to flow and she may have wondered if the wellspring was failing,³⁷ but neither in quantity nor quality were these years to prove fallow. Even if relatively few of the 117 poems grouped by Harman as 'Uncollected Poems (1931–1960)' saw the printed page, nonetheless Warner's syntax and form became more experimental and complex, the folklore element diminished, the spread of subjects widened, and the poet reached her full maturity.

One hesitates – or should – to argue directly from the life to the works, to read off the years of political activism in terms of more of this and less of that. Numbers, however, do speak. Among the 131 poems, collected and uncollected, predating 1931, there are twenty that are informed and, in some way or degree, emotionally moulded by Christianity, along with eight 'skittish' poems treating scriptural themes with levity and wit, and just enough *sérieux* to make the reader think again. In the next thirty years, which produced 176 further poems,³⁸

there are no more than four that are religious in a straightforward sense, along with two or three borderline cases and a marked increase in flippancy and satire.

Of the indubitably religious, one is wholly unexpected: a Petrarchan sonnet written in apparent tribute to the Jesuit poet Robert Southwell, executed in 1596 and beatified in 1929. Although its title, 'A Ceremony in the Vatican, 1929', is not specific, the reference in the last two lines to Southwell's best-known poem, 'The Burning Babe', is clear (219). The subject, a baroque speculation on the faith of martyrs down the ages serving as a possible counterweight to St Peter's betrayal, is a conceit well worked out, and echoes also Southwell's lengthy and much admired 'St Peter's Complaint'. Warner's sonnet is more than an exercise in style; there is a rigour in the argument that ensures its integrity as a poem.

A longer poem, 'Wintry is this April, with endless whine' (202–6) stands in total contrast. Where the sonnet is an unusual visitor in Warner's work, this poem is at home and has spread itself in consequence. Rooted in the real, it is an amalgam of knowledge absorbed over time and the lived experience of a particular moment. On a grey evening in early spring, with the wind set in the north, an old countrywoman,³⁹ armed with a spade, is fighting in her garden to break winter's clods. The surrounding blackthorn hedge, whipped by the wind, has clenched its buds against the cold. The earth and its inhabitants are shown moving to shared rhythms, natural and liturgical.

For come the cuckoo, garden earth must be laid
Under fork and spade,
Turned and trenched and combed of winter weeds,
And with Christ aloft on cross and combed out our sin
Potatoes in.
(202)

This battle with the elements, rendered blow by blow, is fought out on a small patch of Dorset loam but linked by allusion to an earlier garden:

This earth you drag out of its den, these clods
You smite, toss, smite again, as though you'd break
The back of a snake.

Gardener long-lineaged, do you surmise
Man set, beneath the shadow of a tree,

At enmity
With more than snakes?
(204)

The poet watches the old woman toiling, ‘wrathful and resolute’, ‘under duress / Of the mind’s stress’, to ‘fetch birth / Out of the earth’. Then – ‘since I hate digging, fear death’ – the poet turns away, and at once sees the lateral sun surge through a chink in the cloud, ‘O, with peals of light glowing / Like a trumpet blowing’. It doesn’t last: the world, lit briefly by glory, emerges again ‘lank and cold / From the tide of gold’. Nonetheless the glory has been, and was seen:

explosion of splendour, buffet of light,
As though a Pentecost hawked down achieving its prey
Of hodden grey,
And earth’s glum looks and true for an instant changed
To the burning fiery furnace where man’s frail dirt
Might stroll unhurt
And talk with angels.
(205)

This is surely a hymn to hope, borrowing words from the only language Warner knew that dealt in such concepts as eternity – even, if required, salvation.⁴⁰

In *Brideshead Revisited* Evelyn Waugh combined a few banal words and gave them to Sebastian Flyte, in whose mouth they took wing: challenged to defend his belief in the Christmas story, he does so on the grounds that ‘it’s a lovely idea’. ‘But you can’t believe things because they’re a lovely idea’, replies his friend. ‘But I do. That’s how I believe.’⁴¹ There is more here than an appeal to aestheticism. The ‘how’ of belief is different from its ‘what’. The exchange suggests that religion is more than a creed, that the divine cannot be summed up in formulae, that metaphor opens a different sequence of doors. Warner had no time for religious formulae, but one does not outgrow metaphor, one may even grow into it. She certainly depended on the ‘how’ of scripture, a language both known and unknown, to express her deepest feelings, hopes and intuitions. The poem ends:

Scarcely to be received –
Imposed on sight as meaningless and clear
As etched on ear

Some brief and lovely phrase in a language unknown:
A chance-cast net as idly trawled over flesh
As the bright mesh
Of bird-song, woven a seamless garment⁴² that man
May never shape, piece, suit to his wear of word.

So ebbed, so blurred
That light out of my mind as from the place –
A hazard of cloud and wind, a show of air
That could but declare
On bleakness its own brightness and whisk hence.
And now like a dream's survival I behold
Her in that gold
Surprised, standing above her broken ground,
As though at that trump, at that summons shining and fervent,
O faithful servant
*Enter now into the reward of thy labours,*⁴³
Not she, not she, but earth's very spirit
Rose to inherit
Life everlasting, the manifested coronal
Of long darkness, of long-ploughed patience,
Long acquiescence
Of the nourishing breast, of the receiving lap;
As though the *Be fruitful*⁴⁴ since far creation obeyed
Were now repaid
In that fierce dusk, so wild with singing and storm.
(205–6)

It is a fine poem that sustains its momentum over some 180 lines. The quotations, omitting both the descriptive detail and the portrait of the old woman, cannot do it justice. The distance Warner travelled in her first ten years as a poet can be measured by comparing this poem with 'The Virgin and the Scales' (27–31), written in 1924. In this poem of similar length, the poet surprises a nun surreptitiously picking lime blossom in a London park. Priggishly inclined to play the keeper, the poet, after peeling back the onion skins of her own motives, acknowledges that the real thief is herself. The poem has charm and subtlety, the couplets run smoothly and are threaded through with scripture, but it is in a lesser league.

Whether a Dove or Seagull includes a further poem exploring faith and hope, 'What footfalls are these'.⁴⁵ The speaker addresses the risen Jesus through three of its five eight-lined verses, but indirectly, as an

absence. She writes 'out of my winter, out of my dejection'. The poem is at once less dreamlike and more distanced than 'Early one morning', and its syntax is often strained. I quote it at some length because it articulates something close to a profession of faith, and also because it is easy to overlook, being omitted from the *New Collected Poems*. The poet is lying face down on springing grass, 'winter-lean' and dejected, when she hears the dry rustle of last year's leaves:

Then Jesus, Godspeed !
Dayspring and spring of year –
Thou must be risen indeed
When dead leaves and sere –
Though them, they whisper, though them
No arising, no alms of grace,
Fasten up in their former place –
Limp after thee harmless, pattering at thy garment's hem.

What spices are here?
Out of the sepulchre
Sweet, thou art in the air.
O, good Gardener
If these least, if these hapless least
Cast-offs, risen to no end,
Follow thee and are uncondemned...

...Shall not I, shall not I, who've been
Heaped down, hollowed, starved winter-lean –
For their sakes, I say, if not for thine,
Out of my winter, out of my dejection
Arise and follow thee now, put forth good morrow to thee and
shine?⁴⁶

It is hard to envisage anyone writing such a poem without, at the least, a residual, passing, or wished-for belief, of the 'Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief' kind.⁴⁷ Poets and would-be poets occasionally engage, drunk or sober, usually in company, in writing to command on a given subject. I could believe that more easily of 'A Ceremony in the Vatican, 1929' – though I don't – than of this untitled poem, which, in its setting, mood and most of its vocabulary, is typical Warner. Less typically, she uses it to address the risen Christ in terms that many believers would find believable.

'In this Midwinter' offers a good example of a very different use of religious language for an unexpected purpose. It is well summed up by Wendy Mulford: 'The poem savagely dismantles the traditional associations of Christmas, through a combination of knotted diction and contemporary reference that makes for awkward reading:

"... not a saviour possibly.
No godling, God not even in turncoat mufti of doubt.
Man having rationalized destruction inalienably
Needs God no further."⁴⁸

The positioning of adverbs at the end of the first and third lines of two stanzas – 'possibly' (twice), 'accidentally', 'inalienably', 'certainly' – causes the reader a strange insecurity, as though the poet were hoisting half a question-mark. It is a poem I return to, always with interest, always unsettled.

This counter-cultural dissenting use of religious language was not a new departure for Warner. As early as 1924 we find her reinforcing a political message by showing Rosa Luxemburg, the revolutionary, living out in prison the virtues of faith, hope and charity ('I Bring Her a Flower'), while 'Lenten Offering' compares the instruments of Christ's Passion with the inhumanities inflicted in turn by Church, arms manufacturers and politicians (31–2).

An elusive later sonnet written around 1950, the third of four under the title 'Astro-Physics', uses the colour blue, symbolic of Mary's virginity, colour of midsummer or midwinter-moonlit skies, to explore the concept of limitless self-denial: 'Out of all thought the virgin colour flies. / After her, soul! Have, in unhaving, peace, / Let thy lacklight lighten upon thee...' (319–20).

A poem near the end of this section of uncollected poems, written in French, begins 'Belle rivale, qui de mon amour / M'a pris l'amour et la fidélité' (331). Its claim to the term *religious* is strengthened by the bitterness of soul in which it was composed. Addressed to the Virgin Mary, it was written in 1957, in the distress caused by Valentine Ackland's conversion to Catholicism, and stretches a hand prophetically forward to 'Changed Fortune' (357), the last dated poem that Warner wrote.

* * * * *

Scattered through the large section of 'Uncollected Poems (1931–1960)', which also contains some trenchant war poems written from

unexpected angles, are 15 poems that could well be termed ‘vinegared’, the adjective used by Warner to describe ‘Modo and Alciphron’ (248–52),⁴⁹ a tale of the temptation of a ‘holy’ hermit by a devil of the Screwtape variety written in 1929. This, and the faux requiem composed for a former incumbent of Chaldon, one Joseph Staines Cope,⁵⁰ are the longest of her satirical poems and were written several years before she joined the Communist Party. They appear to be the products of a mocking and sardonic mind. Shortly after a weekend spent at King’s College, Cambridge, hobnobbing with musicologists and clerics, both Anglican and Roman Catholic (‘So happy as to be almost unearthly’),⁵¹ she noted in her diary: ‘Wrote Mr Cope all day and frolicked with the holy ghost. The church has lost a great religious poet in me; but I have lost an infinity of fun in the church, so the loss is even.’⁵² There is more of fun than religion in Mr Cope, though the theology is unexceptionable – but that is part of the fun. Had it been the chapter of a novel, she might have excised it a week later as the prancing of the bean-fed horse. The same applies to most of the epigrams, quips and similar short pieces in the Uncollected selection: they are mocking rather than angry, the satire unfocussed, fireworks set off at random. With few exceptions it is hard to take these squibs too seriously, and there is no reason to believe that she did herself.

The couple, in 1945, were well dug in at Frome Vauchurch and would remain there for the rest of their lives. The calm that might have been expected to follow the war was ripped apart first by Ackland’s affair with Elizabeth Wade White, begun before the war and renewed soon after, which left its aftermath of insecurity, and then by her return to the Catholic Church, which felt to Warner like a second betrayal. It opened up a deeper rift than the sexual infidelity, in seeming to throw into question everything she knew of her lover.

Her hostility to Roman Catholicism was much greater than her long-running quarrel with the Church of England. Rubbing shoulders awkwardly with her foundational dislike of all religion was a quiet, undying love for the music, buildings, liturgy and language of Cranmer’s church, which over the years had occupied her subconscious mind, floating up spontaneously, most often as a snatch of scripture, at any strong call of joy or sorrow: ‘I looked out of the window onto such a glory of stars, solitary, unfrequented, secure, & *yet transient*, that I cried out In wisdom hast thou made them all, and slept again, comforted by that enormous transience.’⁵³ One cannot learn any language, speak it as a native, dream in it as she did, without absorbing its culture. Warner internalised Christianity and carried it with her in all she wrote.⁵⁴

For the Catholic Church in its specifically Roman guise she nurtured a post-Reformation animosity that could be summed up in two words: control and superstition. It was general at the time throughout what might be loosely be called Protestant England. This hostility was deeply ingrained and had about it an element of social conditioning, seen in the diaries when it surfaces in conversation. Highly intelligent and cultivated people would suddenly lapse into coded bigotry. Alyse Gregory, the widow of Llewellyn Powys, came to lunch: 'she began again, did Valentine go to mass, to confession to a great fat priest. A small thin one with a stomach ulcer, I said. Curious, here was my opportunity to confide my feelings in a wholly sympathetic and *not* silly bosom. Yet I never said a word.'⁵⁵ Neither did words on this topic come readily between the partners: it was to her cat that Warner, in tears, confided that 'henceforward I would be flippant'.⁵⁶

She didn't altogether keep her word. A lot of bitterness and sarcasm spilled over, but in 1962 she tried another remedy, generously arranging for Valentine and herself to spend Easter week in Orta in northern Italy, in surroundings free of the social and cultural ambience of a narrow English Catholicism. This time there was a shift. Warner's description of the Easter vigil is moving, and it is clear that her own perceptions were turned briefly upside down.⁵⁷ The intensity of such experiences passes, but they are not forgotten: ten years later when she came to write it down, the memory hadn't faded, but it remained unintegrated.

Warner continued in this divided condition along her road, the cerebral processes of her mind often reductive and mocking, its hidden depths unsupervised and open to traffic. The relationship between the women survived, possibly deepened, and her creative powers never flagged. Her novel, *The Flint Anchor*, a work in which religion plays a central part,⁵⁸ the translation of Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and her biography of T. H. White, written in those years, were supplemented by an unfailing output of short stories for the *New Yorker*. A flurry of lyrical poems written in the throes of the Elizabeth Wade White affair were followed by some longer, mainly narrative ones, historical, distanced. The nearest she got to religious poetry was a cry of protest in her diary: 'the house oppresses me, so full of black missals – a dead yet unctuous black – and everywhere some holy artillery pointed at my poor tattered natural levity'.⁵⁹

In 1966, while finishing T. H. White, she discovered E. M. Forster's *Two Cheers For Democracy* and planned a telegram to alert David Garnett to a passage on page 91: 'THIS IS A MUST'. Richard Garnett

suggests that she had in mind Forster's passage beginning 'Just as words have two functions – information and creation – so each human mind has two personalities, one on the surface, one deeper down'.⁶⁰ No doubt it confirmed not only her intuition about White, with whom in many ways she could identify, but what she already knew about herself: she was as divided as her subject, whose life was being written by 'something that isn't me', while he meanwhile was 'raving in my ear'.⁶¹

As Warner struggled with the last pages of the biography, decisions taken at a Council in Rome were stretching their feelers as far as Dorset. The liturgical changes that followed Vatican II left Valentine Ackland feeling she had lost the very things she had sought in going back to the Church – the murmured Latin, the observances, what she called 'the white magic'.⁶² Listening to her 'fret & misery' in February 1968, Warner was moved to write:

Twelve years ago, how my heart would have welcomed this. But now I can only hope she will somehow reconcile herself & stay in. She would be desolate without it; and I no longer feel for my heart.⁶³

Perhaps the experience at Orta had been integrated after all.

Warner never stopped learning; now in 1968 approaching seventy-six and generous to the last, she remained open to the next lesson that life, or death, held in store for her. This one was about loss and grieving, and would include what she had refused or been unable to learn from her partner while she lived. Ten years earlier, Ackland had written her a letter, to be read in the event of her death,⁶⁴ in which she approached fearlessly the two subjects they avoided in conversation: religion and politics. The first she left to the grace of God:

I have *longed* with all my heart, longed to tears and great pain, that you should understand HOW I believe in God, and that by some miracle of grace I could see that we are not separated here.⁶⁵

In their very last months together she may have felt that her prayers had been answered, though God, like the sphinx, can be ambivalent. In the spring of 1969, already seriously ill, Valentine joined the Society of Friends. Sylvia accompanied her to a Quaker Meeting and welcomed 'heavenly healing silence'.⁶⁶ Shortly after, two Friends came to call. Anticipating that they would ask 'whether I professed or called myself Christian I was categorical that I don't'. In fact they never

asked.⁶⁷ A month earlier she had written to her trusted friend Joy Finzi, as part of an exchange on the subject of belief:

When I consider my own faith I can match it to nothing but seaweed with one end in sea & t'other fastened to sea's rock. The sea's moods shape its being. There it floats, twists, swirls, entangles, disentangles, rooted to a sea's rock identity.⁶⁸

This is hardly a categorical position, and one wonders whether she is playing – consciously or not, for memory does its own thing – with images of the sea as chaos and the rock as Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4). If she is playing here, it is as a poet, allowing metaphor to extend her meaning.

Her cerebral self played games all her life, and in old age game-playing provided a sanctuary from emotion, from fears and from horror. 'Bother the human heart', she said in her last interview, 'I'm tired of the human heart. I'm tired of the human race. I want to write something entirely different.' So she wrote *Kingdoms of Elfin*, a cerebral fantasy that amused rather than tired her.⁶⁹ The friend and helper of her last few years, Antonia von Trauttmansdorff, shared this particular facet of Warner's personality and encouraged it: 'The games which Sylvia used to play with me were the games of a disillusioned mind. If one believes in nothing, one can pretend to believe in everything, the whole ragbag.'⁷⁰ Yet of these two women, who professed – at times – to believe in nothing, Antonia was a Quaker,⁷¹ and Sylvia, in her last months, went with her to Meetings, just as nine years earlier she had gone with Valentine to hers. And it was the same Antonia, waiting at a distance, who heard her shout aloud in the churchyard at Chaldon where Valentine's ashes lay: 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning' (Psalm 137:6), a verse from the great mourning psalm of Israel in exile, 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion'.

In her last months and days, Valentine had assured her over and over that she would never leave her. In the first years of her widowhood Sylvia had many intimations of the other's presence: she 'saw' her, sometimes plainly and in detail, as she saw characters in her yet unwritten books. This fostered a strong sense of individual survival, at least in regard to Valentine. Questioned about her belief in another life, she gave as supporting evidence that 'one is at one's most living at its intimations'.⁷² It was in this aftermath of Ackland's death that she came perhaps closest to her lover as she worked through her poems, letters,

and diaries, reading each clutch in the light of the others. Where they had stood apart in hurt silence, she now read eagerly with open mind and loving heart, including the letter written by Ackland in 1959 and left to be read *post mortem*.⁷³ As well as the intense desire to share the 'HOW' of her religion, Ackland had had another truth to communicate:

You must look long and seriously into your own mind before you die, my darling: look with truthfulness at the truth: make yourself SEE the dead people, the imprisoned people, the people under torture, under oppression, under compulsion: of course not only in Russia and China and those countries – but *at those countries too*. At least LOOK: so that you are not *self*-deceived. It may not shake your allegiance to an Idea ... but it still troubles me deeply because I think you have refused to see.⁷⁴

In 1971 Ackland was validated:

In the evening [I] listened frozen with shame to the broadcast on Kurt Geisen, whom no one believed: the Swedish government suppressed the story the believing Swedish consular office had passed on, the Dutch resistance advised him not to exaggerate, the papal Nuncio listened unmoved, then told him to get out; and the French, to whom he escaped in /45, put him in jail as a Nazi genocide official; & in the end he hanged himself. I listened with *shame*, remembering how Valentine had bade me believe against my loyalty to the USSR. Alas! Alas!⁷⁵

Once again it is emotional shock – here the loss of Valentine, the impact of the letter from the past, the spoken witness of the radio – that loosens the stranglehold of long-held convictions or prejudices.

How does one pick, from this parade of likenesses 'the *real* Sylvia'? All are real, the loving, the disillusioned, the flippant, the maternal (she was a great comforter and nurturer of people, particularly the young, and of all animals), the fearful, the courageous – she was many things to very many people, and all these Sylvias were reconciled somewhere deep down in the psyche, or – to borrow from the Greek Fathers (whom she approved of) – at the fine point of the soul.

The poems of Warner's last decade consist of twenty-one uncollected poems and five of the *Twelve Poems* published posthumously in 1980. Compared with the bulk of those written between 1930 and 1960, the change of tenor is striking. Most are short, many are

moving, all are distinctive; among them are half a dozen, perhaps more, that can be termed spiritual, contemplative, or religious. Overall they vary in mood from the personal (the largest group – some sorrowing, a few wry), to the historical ('Gloriana Dying'), the gnomic or unsettling ('Night after night I say', 'If I were that Christ'), the meditative ('Towards the place to which we would or would not come', 'Hither from the horizon'), the light-hearted ('December 31st, St Sylvester'), the spiritual ('I fall with the leaves, I diminish with the daylight', which quotes the ancient Compline hymn *Te lucis ante terminum*) and the straightforwardly religious ('Changed Fortune' and 'A Journey by Night').⁷⁶ She is looking at something, for something, without quite knowing what. Stripping the word of any specific context, one might say that she was walking in faith.

'A Journey by Night' is the substantial, late, undated poem with which Claire Harman has chosen, appropriately, to close the volume of her poetry. Warner herself describes it as 'the long dream poem about following the burial procession of the cross to its grave in the desert, crossing the Mediterranean on air and meeting a shooting star going off on its own errand'.⁷⁷ The detail and complexity of the poem proceed from Warner's conscious interpretation of a largely visual experience. (A comparably vivid example comes in a dream she described in astonishing detail to George Painter, in which she found herself in revolutionary Paris in 1792 witnessing something she had neither known of nor suspected.⁷⁸) The meaning of dreams is rarely obvious, except in scripture or hagiography, but Warner's dream of the Cross prompted her to a fine narrative poem composed of twenty-two rhymed and half-rhymed tercets, together with two single-line verses dividing the poem into three parts. The telling of the story is shared between the poet and an angel, one of a group which has come to bear the Cross from its standing place to its burial. At the close the Cross itself speaks briefly, seemingly to itself.

The angel's role is to explain, the poet's to bear witness. Both speak insistently of the last evening, the last dews, the final dusk, setting the action at the end of history. The angel turns for the poet the pages of the past, and they become present again: this is the hour when the first couple hid in the garden, when the dove returned with empty beak to the ark, when the holy women mourned at the sepulchre. These are the recorded moments when God failed man or man failed God – perhaps both. Yet failure provided man, dove and women with if not a role then at least a posture. After the deposition of Christ's body the Cross found itself left with none:

'Scarecrow of the reaped world, it remained uncarried and unwon;
With no companion
But its warping shadow it endured on,

'Till in this final dusk even that shadow,
Stealthy and slow, stealthy and slow
Faded and withdrew.

'So was the last desolation accomplished
And the Cross gave up the ghost.
(lines 17–24)

The bleakness of these verses would be hard to match. A scarecrow, made of two crossed poles and dressed in outworn clothing, is the ultimate reject.⁷⁹ The scarecrow of the reaped world does not even fulfil its normal function – the angel with the sickle⁸⁰ has already passed and the harvest is in: thieving birds will find nothing to steal. As for the Cross, 'Look on it now', says the angel, 'look your last; // See how harmless it lies, now it is down' (lines 25–6). The poet looks and sees it lying there

naked on the bier. It was black
With tears, blood, martyrdoms, with jewels decked,
And rubbed smooth with wearing on a child's neck.
(lines 29–30)

These lines are surely an echo of the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood*, where the dream is a poetic device used to invest a theme with life and emotion. That Warner was familiar with *The Dream* would be unsurprising: the first book she recommended to Valentine Ackland by way of 'serious reading' was *Piers Plowman*, that 'extremely difficult and unimportant masterpiece'.⁸¹ The poet of the *Rood* stages not only a burial of the Cross by 'enemies', immediately following the crucifixion, but also its rediscovery by the 'friends' of the Crucified, presumably in the year 326 at the instigation of the emperor Constantine's mother, Helena. In his dream the *Rood* author sees the Cross alternately decked with gold and jewels (five along the cross-bar) and drenched with gore, blood and moisture. 'Martyrdoms', as well as the moving image 'rubbed smooth with wearing on a child's neck', belong to later periods in history.

'See how harmless it lies' (line 26): the word 'harmless' lies across the ninth tercet like a two-edged sword. It is placed there by the angel,

suggesting that when the Cross was standing, down the course of the centuries, it was not harmless. Standing it threw a warping shadow, having been used both as an existential threat and as a weapon in war. It had hoisted the guiltless one aloft, but had been misused since by the guilty. By contrast, her early poem, 'Faithful Cross' (73–4), is free of this ambivalence: politicisation came with the Thirties and got dug in.⁸² Yet harmless is also naked and vulnerable, and now the Cross lies 'naked on the bier', like the offerings in the Dorchester meat market in a later untitled poem:

Shall I buy a dead bird?
Shall I buy a dead fish?
Shall I buy a curly brown calf's head
John-Baptised in a dish?

When all have been skinned in lines as sharp as a butcher's knife, only man is left to be buried 'in battle-dress' and 'without plea of nakedness'.⁸³

So the angels of 'A Journey by Night' are sent, by whom is never said, to carry the cross away. The poet follows behind 'like a mourner', crossing land and sea dry-shod, and in lines of rare beauty conjures up a time beyond time:

Time was no barrier to us, for time was no more;
The tideless sea lay muted along the shore,
The city clocks registered no hour,

The last echo had ebbed from the church bells;
Silent were the barracks, silent the brothels
And the water slept in the wells.
(lines 35–40)

Only a shooting star passes, 'on an errand elsewhere'; it too, we assume, has been sent. In the final lines of the poem they arrive at last in a wilderness of sand, bones and bleached tree roots, where

Suddenly the Cross scrambled off the bier.

Shouting like a bridegroom it bounded
On its one foot towards a pit dug in the sand –
A dark hole like a wound.

Poised on the edge of the pit it began to sing:
'Lulla-lulla-lullaby' it sang. 'I am home again.'
And leaped in.

I saw the sand close over the pit and the suspended grey
Dusk convert to darkness in the twinkling of an eye.
'Now wake,' said the angel, 'and go your way.'
(lines 59–69)

At first reading, this is a very strange ending to a stranger poem, inviting many readings. Is this, as it appears, a place of desolation and death? Or might it be Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, with its promise of new life (Ezekiel 37:1–14)? No answer is given: as the dusk turns to night, the poet is simply told to wake up and go her way. But Warner never chose the easy path; she had the advantage over the weather-vane of being able to point in two or three directions simultaneously. We can only follow the pointers: in this case the pit, the wound, the shouting bridegroom, the song of the Cross, its 'home-coming' and the phrase 'in the twinkling of an eye'.

The pit in the Old Testament is the word for Sheol, the underworld, the place the psalmist is constantly asking to be saved from and from which there is no return. The Cross in *The Dream of the Rood* is buried 'in a deep pit'.⁸⁴ In 'A Journey by Night' this has become 'a dark hole like a wound'. Given the number of words in the poem that are multi-layered, one cannot rule out an allusion to the spear wound in Christ's side, nor should the image astonish in an admirer of Donne and Robert Southwell.

In a poem about the end-time the presence of the word bridegroom must allude to the Bridegroom of the eternal wedding feast.⁸⁵ The feasting, which was much dwelt on in the hungry ages, left a twelfth-century hymn which Warner will have known and sung in J. M. Neale's translation:⁸⁶

There is the throne of David,
And there, from care released,
The song of them that triumph,
The shout of them that feast.

Warner probably sang these words time and again, at Harrow and on the many occasions thereafter when we find her 'at church'. Now, its shouting done, it is on the edge of the pit that the Cross starts to sing,

and it is not a song of triumph, but of home-coming, a lullaby it sings softly to itself. In our end is our beginning; this Eliotic thread, spun in muted colours, runs through a number of Warner's late poems:

Towards the place to which we would or would not come
We travel, and on reaching it know home;
Look a long moment, finding each aspect here,
Familiar or forgotten, now passionately dear.
(358)⁸⁷

Here is the childhood return to Eden, to lost innocence, and Warner knew it well: looking back in 1970 and questioning decisions taken long before, she said to herself: 'We all want to be guiltless'; and added: 'For we do: we all crave back to Paradise.'⁸⁸ In the present context it perhaps lacks the conviction and depth in 'Good Enthroned', a poem by her contemporary, Ruth Pitter:

Then broken and healed, created and overthrown,
We fall at the feet of the New we have always known.⁸⁹

Pitter too brings a certain thrill to the word 'passionate':

Our final bliss, perfectly passionate, perfectly kind,
It is our first love, long since left behind.

But the Cross too has a surprise in reserve. 'I am home again', it sang. And stopped. 'And leaped in.' With full stops and capitals and a new line, the shortest in the poem, abrupt. It too is thrilled; in three syllables; Warner is the most economical of poets. Finally scripture, in the person of St Paul, leads the poet and reader yet further by providing in the final tercet the near-cliché to which she would not have given space did it not serve as a signpost to meaning. That twinkling of an eye, in which definitive darkness falls, points to 1 Corinthians 15:51–52: 'we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump'.

Warner is not blowing a trumpet in this poem, it was not her way. When she shouted out at the top of her voice in Chaldon churchyard: 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning', it was for herself alone, and she alone knew what she meant by it. It is the same here. Is this the darkness before dawn, Vaughan's deep but dazzling darkness, or the darkness of everlasting night? She does not say, probably because she does not know. But clearly when she

wrote a poem, she intended the signposts she had planted in the text to be read and to contribute to its meaning. Readers will marry their own understanding to her directions and walk where this leads them – preferably leaving all gates open.

* * * * *

Warner's biography of T. H. White received many plaudits. George Painter, the biographer of Proust, praised it for 'its unerring moral sense': 'It is the most difficult thing of all to weigh every action & feeling of a writer's soul, imperceptibly & accurately, & it is the most important. You have accomplished it.'⁹⁰ I would go further and suggest that she applied this gift, this rare discipline, this ultra-fine discrimination widely across her life and work. As early as 1924 in 'The Virgin and the Scales' it is on view, as later in the psychology of her novels and in her self-analysis during the two crises of her shared life with Ackland.⁹¹ Kinder to her characters than to herself, she is an unforgiving judge of any perceived lack of integrity on her own part.⁹²

Janet Montefiore, who has written with great discernment about Warner, takes the argument further: 'The paradox of the book is that although it is, as George Painter saw, a profoundly moral work, the basis for its judgements is peculiarly hard to define.'⁹³ This is undeniably true, not just of the book on White, but of everything she wrote. Because no consciously accepted creed supplied a basis, and because logical analysis was not her preferred mode of thought, the ground of her moral judgments resists definition just as the interpretation of her works remains open-ended and ambivalent. And yet there is true gold there, something incorruptible, and I will defy the difficulty by saying: love was her integrity.

To back the claim I call first on Warner herself in her statement: 'I was better at loving and being loved':⁹⁴ she was comparing herself there to a rival in a triangular situation, but I believe the claim holds true over a wide sweep of her relationships. Of her forty-year partnership with Valentine Ackland both have left ample testimony, much of it consisting of mutual tributes, and to add outsider comment would be fatuous. Warner loved and nurtured a huge circle of friends with care, food, joy and endless time. She was an unsentimental lover of all created things, wild and domestic, flora and fauna; her embrace is wide and she is rarely less than generous in her response to life. One recent sentence by Tinch Minter, who knew Sylvia in her last decade, puts it in a polished nutshell: 'Whatever the task, whether mundane or simple, whether

gardening, cooking, sewing or writing, Sylvia completed it with love, and thereby made magic by turning it into an art form.⁹⁵

From this magnanimity of approach I would except only politics and religion. True, it was love of her fellows that first took her down the path of social justice to the Communist Party. But love is a burning torch that can be used as a flame thrower when not held in check by truth, and Warner was lucky not to have her integrity tested in territory under Soviet control. It was loyalty – an ambivalent trait – and lack of truth (*la trahison des clercs*) that kept her in the Party so long, and she waited longer to repent of it. Even in the interview of 1975 she was still playing with words, affirming that she only became a Communist because she was ‘agin the government’ and suggesting anarchism was her true homeland.⁹⁶ The word ‘agin’ is on a par with the ‘nurse’ story she trots out once again to explain her irreligion. Both are a form of flippancy, of fencing with words, and neither is honest. Perhaps an interview is not an honest medium; certainly at eighty-two she knew how to flick tiresome questions aside.

That the focus of this exploration of religious themes in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s work has been on her poetic output in no way implies that these themes are absent from her prose works, simply that they are more conveniently garnered and sifted in the poetry, written without interruption over her long creative life. There is a case to be made that religious themes, in every shade of ambiguity, pervade Warner’s novels and stories and come to a strange epiphany in *The Flint Anchor*. Perhaps by her seventies, when she turned abruptly to the elfin kingdom, she was bored with religion as well as with the human heart, or most probably with the difficulty in keeping the two apart.

Warner was a highly complex woman in whom the relationship between reason, intuition and imagination as pathways to understanding remain mysterious. On the question of religion I have tried to let her speak for herself, in both her voices. Listening in to this conversation of irreconcilables, conducted principally in her diaries and lifted onto another plane by a range of poems, some of great beauty, persuades me that her mental processes and hence her judgments were more intuitive than analytic. And there is more, I feel sure, to be teased out of her writings and her diaries, in part still unpublished. Reading these in the light of work done on the divided mind⁹⁷ might give insights which would deepen our understanding. In the meantime if we read her, not as the ‘great religious poet’ she once flippantly envisaged being, but as the writer of some fine religious poems, we shall be entirely justified, and she, if she knew, would laugh, half mocking, half delighted.

Notes

- 1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester: Carcanet Press. Fyfield Books, 2008), p. 73, p.147, p. 154, p. 219, p. 357, p. 368 respectively. Further references to Warner's poems are all from this edition unless noted otherwise; they are cited within the text by page number only, and within the notes as *NCP* and page number.
- 2 'Bodley's Library', p. 69. 'Of golden mouth' is the epithet attached to St John Chrysostom, the fourth-century patriarch of Constantinople, famed for his eloquence. I refer here to the titles 'Sexton and Parson', p. 92, 'Queen Eleanor', p. 144, 'Building in Stone', p. 155, 'Graveyard in Norfolk', p. 364, as well as to two on saints in their contexts: 'St Antony on the Hillside', p. 91, and 'St Sylvester', p. 365.
- 3 *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 11; see also *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), pp. 52–3; 26 January 1930.
- 4 *Sylvia & David, The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters*, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 106; letter of 3 August 1966.
- 5 *Diaries*, p. 43; 10 September 1929.
- 6 *Diaries*, p. 43, p. 44, p. 249; entries for 9 September 1929, 21 September 1929, 30 August 1964; see also the related description of becoming 'suddenly aware that I was in Heaven', p. 249, entry for 25 August 1958.
- 7 'They had cast away the works of darkness', from Cranmer's Collect for the First Sunday of Advent, itself a more melodious variant on A.V. Romans 13:12. It is interesting to catch the musician in Warner at work: 'My soul into the boughs does glide; / There like a bird it sits and sings, / Then whets, and combs its silver wings;' (Marvell, 'The Garden', lines 52–4).
- 8 *Diaries*, p. 187; 27 February 1952.
- 9 *Diaries*, p. 302; 9 April 1966.
- 10 *Letters*, p. 282.
- 11 Tinch Minter, 'Sylvia's Gifts: Meetings with Sylvia Townsend Warner in the 1970s', *The Journal of The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2015*, p. 46. The witch theme harked back to the publication of *Lolly Willowes*: see Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 65.
- 12 *I'll Stand By You, The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland*, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp. 296–7.
- 13 *Diaries*, p. 42. The Cambridge critic I. A. Richards was the author of *Practical Criticism* (1929). The Donne sonnet is probably 'At the round earth's imagined corners', Holy Sonnet VII.
- 14 *Letters*, p. 81; 14 November 1942.
- 15 The list of poems taking mild digs at religion, less mild at the clergy, includes: 'Evensong in Winter', p. 130, 'Pay What Thou Owest', p. 136, *Rainbow*, p. 195, 'February the Fourteenth Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-Five', p. 242, 'An Acrostical Almanach, 1940' [ii], p. 273, 'Aubade', p. 279.
- 16 *Diaries*, p. 183; 2 December 1951.
- 17 From *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, included in Valentine Ackland, *Journey from Winter: Selected Poems*, ed. Frances Bingham (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), p. 60.
- 18 There appear to have been two of these, one her own, another employed by family friends. See *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p. 12, and 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in Conversation', *PN Review* 23 (1982), p. 36.
- 19 *Letters*, p. 282; to Ben Huesch, 15 July 1975.
- 20 *Diaries*, p. 18; 12 May 1928.
- 21 *Diaries*, p. 34; 17 April 1929.
- 22 *Diaries*, p. 83; 18 June 1931.
- 23 *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p. 49, quoting *Powys Review* 5 (Summer 1979), p. 14.
- 24 *Diaries*, pp. 27–8; 29 November 1928.
- 25 *Diaries*, p. 28; 29 November 1928.
- 26 *Diaries*, p. 78; 10, 11, 12 February 1931.
- 27 *Diaries*, p. 181; 6 October 1951. *Diaries* prints 'meheur', but Warner is almost certainly alluding to Weil's section on 'L'Amour de Dieu et le malheur'. The words 'dazzling darkness' come from Henry Vaughan's 'The Night', and probably echo Psalm 139:12; Blaise Pascal, *Les Lettres Provinciales* (1657).
- 28 *Letters*, ed. Maxwell, p. 281; to Bea Howe, 18 April 1975.
- 29 Cited in Valentine Ackland, *For Sylvia*:

- An Honest Account* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), p. 135.
- 30 *For Sylvia*, p. 121.
- 31 *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (May 1959), p. 381.
- 32 See Ireland's cycle of *Songs Sacred and Profane*, 1929–31. Three of the six songs in the cycle were settings of poems by Warner.
- 33 *Diaries*, p. 43; 3 September 1929; *NCP*, p. 155.
- 34 *Diaries*, p. 229; 9 June 1956.
- 35 *NCP*, p. 147; 'Early one morning, Just as the sun was rising, I heard a maiden sing In the valley below...'
- 36 For instances of quickthorn and blackthorn see 'The Lenten Offering', p. 32, 'As I was a-Walking', p. 61, 'Wintry is this April', pp. 202, 203, 'Now in this long-deferred spring', p. 271, 'It is April nineteen-forty-one', p. 286, 'Through all the meadows they are flowing', p. 328, 'For Samuel Menashe', p. 356. The thorn, in another form, appears again in 'Changed Fortune', where the Virgin, 'rose without a thorn', carries, after the death of her son, 'between her breasts the thorn', p. 357.
- 37 *Diaries*, p. 78, entry for 10, 11, 12 March 1931, and p. 88, entry for 24 March 1931.
- 38 *Opus 7, The Rainbow*, her 54 poems in *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, and the 120 in 'Uncollected Poems (1931–1960)'.
- 39 She is based on their neighbour in West Chaldon whom they knew as Granny Moxon. She died in 1933, within a year or two of the poem's being written.
- 40 'Fiery furnace': Daniel 3:15; 'talk with angels': Daniel 3:25.
- 41 *Brideshead Revisited* (London: Dent. Everyman's Library, 1993 (1945)), p. 76.
- 42 John 19:23.
- 43 Based on Matthew 25:21, but to avoid the words 'the joy of thy Lord', inappropriate here, the poet has drawn on Luke 23:41 and Revelations 14:13, using italics to suggest a literal quotation.
- 44 Genesis 1:28.
- 45 *Journey from Winter*, p. 59.
- 46 *Journey from Winter*, pp. 59–60.
- 47 Mark 9: 24.
- 48 Wendy Mulford, *This Narrow Place* (London: Pandora, 1988), p. 72; citing the poem reprinted in *NCP*, p. 242.
- 49 Percy Buck, on reading the poem, commented that it was 'entirely different to anything I had written before except perhaps Peeping Tom, "better-oiled", were his words. I should have thought "more-vinegared" myself.' *Diaries*, p. 47; 1 November 1929. The poem was first published in 1936 in *Modern British Poetry*, edited by Louis Untermeyer.
- 50 *Journey from Winter*, p. 60.
- 51 *Diaries*, p. 65; 30 July 1930.
- 52 *Diaries*, p. 65; 17 August 1930.
- 53 *Diaries*, pp. 241–2; 22 September 1957. See also the delightful comment on Furtwängler conducting a Brahms symphony: 'And somehow he made the opening of the allegretto *approach*, like cheerful saints coming to meet a new one'; *Diaries*, p. 202, entry for 11 September 1953. Or again: 'a train snorted and chafed in the station, as though it were Elijah's chariot with steam up to carry Mrs L. to London'; *Diaries*, p. 244, entry for 31 January 1958. Such examples are frequent in the diaries.
- 54 Shortly before Ackland's death Warner tells Marchette and Joy Chute that she has 'always prayed' not to die first, knowing her partner too sensitive and vulnerable to live alone, and is 'unswervingly thankful to believe that prayer has been heard'. *Letters*, p. 241; 25 October 1969.
- 55 The subject that outraged her was 'a religion that is centred on sacraments and makes all its position and authority on a claim of being their sole dispenser'; *Diaries*, p. 230, 4 August 1956. On social conditioning see also the mocking account of the visit to Bindon Abbey with her aunt and uncle, the High Church Machens; *Diaries*, p. 87, August 1931.
- 56 *Diaries*, p. 230; 27 August 1956.
- 57 *I'll Stand By You*, pp. 330–1.
- 58 Warner once described it as 'my novel about hypocrisy'; Arnold Rattenbury, 'Plain Heart, Light Tether', *Poetry Nation Review* 23, Vol. 8, No. 3, (1982), p. 47. This, if taken too literally, risks putting the reader in blinkers; it is so much more.
- 59 *Diaries*, p. 232; 13 October 1957.
- 60 *Sylvia & David*, pp. 106 and 107 n.
- 61 *Sylvia & David*, pp. 106 and 107 n.
- 62 *I'll Stand By You*, pp. 332–3.
- 63 *Diaries*, p. 317; 7 February 1968. 'To feel for' is not the same thing as 'to feel'.
- 64 Ackland was faced at the time with a potentially dangerous operation.
- 65 *I'll Stand By You*, p. 351; letter 145, 14 August 1959.
- 66 *Diaries*, p. 323; 2 March 1969.

- 67 *Diaries*, p. 323; 2 March 1969.
- 68 *Letters*, p. 238; 5 February 1969.
- 69 *Poetry Nation Review* 23 (1982), p. 36.
- 70 *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p. 311.
- 71 *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p. 317.
- 72 *Diaries*, p. 341; 28 March 1970.
- 73 *I'll Stand By You*, pp. 349–52.
- 74 *I'll Stand By You*, pp. 351–2.
- 75 *Diaries*, p. 359; 26 October 1971. It was not her only climb-down in her last years. After telling William Maxwell a cautionary tale of two seventeenth-century philosophers who fell out over a matter of religion, she adds: 'I beat my breast when I remember that when I was young I was as narrow-minded as he. Different stumbling-block, but the same idioy. Oh dear!' *Letters*, p. 294; 7 February 1977.
- 76 These poems are all to be found in *New Collected Poems* within pp. 352–70.
- 77 *Letters*, p. 295; to William Maxwell, 20 May 1977.
- 78 *Letters*, p. 231; to George Painter, 19 December 1967.
- 79 In 1924 Warner wrote the cynical narrative poem, 'Farmer Maw' (53–4), designed to send a shiver down the spine. It turns on the concept of the scarecrow and the fouling of a strong man's cast-off clothing once his power is gone: the vengeance of the humiliated.
- 80 See Revelations 14:15.
- 81 *Diaries*, p. 86; 21 July 1931.
- 82 For instance see *Diaries*, p. 166, the entry for 19 July 1950: 'realised with horrible clearness what Europe would be like when there is no more Europe. The Vatican, the industrialists, Monte Carlo and Spitzbuhel – and the Americans remaking everything so as to have more of what they want.'
- 83 'Shall I buy a dead bird?' in *NCP*, pp. 347–8.
- 84 See www.dreamofrood.co.uk for an informative and scholarly electronic edition created by Mary Rambaran-Olm.
- 85 See Matthew 25:10 and Revelations 19:7–10. It is also the subject of numberless commentaries by the Fathers and throughout the Middle Ages on the Song of Songs.
- 86 'Jerusalem the Golden', included for instance in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and *The English Hymnal*.
- 87 See also, 'I fall with the leaves, I diminish with the daylight'; *NCP*, p. 352.
- 88 *Diaries*, p. 347; 13 August 1970. Compare *Diaries*, p. 249, entry for 25 August 1958: 'A small thing, & very brief. So might heaven be – no longer than the surprise of finding oneself happy & unblamed.'
- 89 Ruth Pitter, *Collected Poems* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1996), p. 290.
- 90 *Letters*, p. 230, n.1; for Warner's reply to Painter on 19 December 1967 see pp. 230–1.
- 91 As recorded both in her *Diaries* and in *I'll Stand By You*.
- 92 Finding herself in heaven one day while walking to the bank in Dorchester, the reality behind the rapture – blue sky, rainwashed air, a fall of light on stone – struck her as 'a small thing, & very brief. So might heaven be – no longer than the surprise of finding oneself happy & unblamed': self-blame, one suspects. *Diaries*, p. 249; 25 August 1958.
- 93 Janet Montefiore, *Arguments of Heart and Mind, Selected Essays 1977–2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 147.
- 94 *Letters*, p. 130; 11 May 1951.
- 95 'Sylvia's Gifts: Meetings with Sylvia Townsend Warner in the 1970s', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2015, p. 49.
- 96 She made the same claim in a slightly earlier interview; see 'An Interview with Sylvia Townsend Warner' (1971), *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2015, p. 42.
- 97 Notably Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale University Press, 2009).

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