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Article

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Susanna Pinney¹

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¹Independent writer

Sylvia, a Memoir

Susanna Pinney

Abstract

Susanna Pinney recalls her meetings with Sylvia Townsend Warner, first as a child in the 1950s, and then at greater length in the 1970s, when she was Warner's typist for the *Kingdoms of Elfin* stories as well as her friend and a regular visitor. The memoir also touches on the author's role as one of Warner's literary executors (along with William Maxwell).

Keywords Warner, Valentine Ackland, William Maxwell, *Kingdoms of Elfin*, literary executor, doll's house

From a letter dated 6 September 1956 in William Maxwell's selection of Sylvia's *Letters*:

We went out to tea last week at Bettiscombe, the house of the celebrated Screaming Skull. They did us the honours of the Skull – a remarkably small one, elegant and compact, and patina'd to a beautiful shade of natural mahogany.

After tea, having discovered that one of the people there, it was quite a party, was an astrologer and Tarot specialist, I suggested that he should do a Tarot reading for the skull. So once again it was taken out of its box, and laid on the floor, and the astrologer dealt twelve gaudy cards in a circle around it, pondered, while we sat round in respectful silence (incidentally, the 12 cards taken at random produced some singularly apt comments). One of the party was a French girl, smooth-haired, well-brought up,

on holiday in Dorset. And I thought what a fine story she would be able to tell her grandchildren about how the English amuse themselves on country afternoons.¹

I first met Sylvia Townsend Warner with Valentine Ackland at my parents' house, Bettiscombe Manor, on the occasion of the above letter. The 'French girl' in question was my cousin Sylvie, a few years older than myself; 'the astrologer' was Rupert Gleadow, my uncle-in-law and Sylvie's father. (She was the child of his first wife, and lived in France with her godmother. She spent her summers at Bettiscombe.) Though I was at the time a self-absorbed adolescent I nonetheless remember Sylvia and Valentine as striking figures: Valentine tall, restrained, and serious; Sylvia shorter, bespectacled, and animated. I don't remember them paying attention to us children, but they charmed my aunt and uncle, and my parents, who soon became friends of theirs. (Sylvia preferred my father; Valentine my mother.)

The second time I met them was at Valentine's antique shop in the long extension at one side of their house at Frome Vauchurch. I was fourteen, with a passion for daggers. Valentine had several for sale, and while Sylvia talked to my mother, Valentine gravely showed me their various merits. I remember the pleasure of being taken seriously (not something I was used to at home). She also showed me a miniature dagger, not for sale, which she realised I would appreciate. While I cannot remember a detail about that dagger, I will never forget the moment of shared intensity as we looked at each other: my desire to own it and her equal desire to keep it. That was the last time I met her. I remember two things about the way Valentine ran her shop. She would discover from her regular customers what they were interested in or looking for, and then set out to find it. She found the doll's house which my mother spent the rest of her life restoring, fitting and furnishing. (It is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood at Bethnal Green. In 2015 it was among twelve selected for a special exhibition followed by a world tour.)

Secondly, she used to buy up cheap job lots, in the hope that there would be enough treasures among the dross. She was usually right. I remember my mother and I rummaging through such a box, newly arrived, before I enquired about daggers.

My mother and Valentine would periodically get drunk together and share intimacies. One such revelation, which cannot be included in any biography because it cannot be verified, concerned Valentine's father. Apparently, while Valentine was a child, she would accompany



Figure 1.1 Betty Pinney's doll's house. Image © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 1.2 Susanna Pinney with Betty Pinney's doll's house. Photograph: David Levene for *The Guardian*, 6 December 2014

him to the brothel he used. While he was satisfying himself upstairs, she would be looked after by the Madam downstairs. My mother was not capable of inventing such a confidence, so I have no reason to disbelieve it. (She only told me after Sylvia's death, when she knew that I was a literary executor.)

My mother and Sylvia shared an intense rivalry over their sewing skills. Each was convinced she was superior. They were both superbly skilled, but in totally different styles. When my mother told Sylvia she was re-dressing all the dolls in the doll's house, Sylvia, in retaliation, made my mother two larger dolls as a present. (After my mother's death, and with my father's approval, I gave them to the STW/VA room at the Dorset County Museum.)

Sylvia also gave my mother the material used for the dining room carpet in the doll's house.

Shortly after Sylvia's death I went to New York to see William Maxwell and clarify the American side of her literary affairs. I also met Marchette and Joy Chute, who wanted, quite rightly, to disabuse themselves of the fear that Sylvia had made a bad mistake in choosing me as a literary executor. They showed me two enchanting cat dolls, approximately four inches high: one of Puss in Boots; the other of Dick Whittington's cat, made by Sylvia. They said I could take them back with me to be housed in the Museum. I, foolishly, suggested there was no hurry, and they should keep them for the rest of their lives. Alas, when I contacted their surviving sister after their deaths, the contents of their flat, stored in her garage awaiting distribution, had been destroyed by flooding. I cannot forgive myself for this.

When I next met Sylvia, Valentine was newly dead, and I was in my late twenties, recovering from a breakdown. My worried mother had consulted Sylvia, who instantly suggested we should meet. As a result, we agreed I should go one day a week to type for her and she would pay me. (I had taught myself to touch-type while playing Prossy Garnett in *Candida* at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford: I knew the audience there would recognise whether or not I could type correctly.)

So began a regular contact, which soon became a routine. I would arrive in the morning, to be greeted by Sylvia and Pericles, the master cat of the household. In summer, the front door would be open. I would call out, and Pericles would appear on his own to escort me to my chair in the sitting room (a rocking chair which Sylvia later left to me). Soon Sylvia would appear with the obligatory black coffee in an enamelled coffee pot, and two mismatched but beautiful china coffee cups. No milk,



Figure 1.3 Two dolls made for Betty Pinney by Sylvia Townsend Warner. Courtesy of Dorset County Museum.

as Sylvia preferred her coffee strong and unadulterated, but with sugar for me. We would drink our coffee and talk amicably, and then Sylvia would leave me with that day's typing while she went to cook lunch. She was a magnificent cook, and her vegetables and fruit came straight from the garden. She would plant her garlic under the rose trees to keep the greenfly away. She also thought garlic tasted better that way. She grew cocoa beans and French sorrel besides the more usual plants.

I can still, in my imagination, taste some of her masterpieces: her sorrel, her chestnut and her Jerusalem artichoke soups; her fresh young lettuce salad with a sherry and cream dressing, or raw, young peas with a garnish of mint; her braised oxtail or her curries, and, of course, her rum bowl. This consisted of the 'toe taps', as she called them, of all the summer soft fruits gradually added to an earthenware jar with a cork lid which she had half-filled with rum. She would leave it to mature until the winter. It looked the colour of old-fashioned cough mixture, but tasted completely delicious. (We would often talk about cooking and gardening. She had an old, hand-written recipe book, written from both ends, which she left me and which is now in the STW/VA room at the Museum. We both delighted in her descriptions of food in *Kingdoms of Elfin*.)

Lunch was in the dining room, at the opposite end of the house from the kitchen. Consequently Sylvia would often need me to help her bring in the food, because Titus, her other Siamese cat, was a practised thief and very greedy. He would sniff out food from any distance, so it seemed. He always managed to appear just as Sylvia was trying to manoeuvre the tray while opening the door. I would be deputed to work the door and shut it very quickly behind Sylvia at the same time as trying to block Titus with my legs. (It would need some special delicacy for Pericles to bother. The third cat, Moth, a shy, grey farm cat, was rarely to be seen. I assumed that the three of them would be given left-overs after the meal, not to mention 'heel-taps' before.) After lunch, we would have more coffee, outdoors when the weather permitted. Then I would depart. When sometimes I would finish typing before lunch, Sylvia would put me to other work, such as picking the lavender, lilies-of-the-valley or vegetables, or shelling peas.

I typed in the sitting room at the table placed at a right angle to the window. The window overlooked the river, and on sunny days would reflect dancing, distracting ripples on the ceiling. I always read what I was typing, and our lunchtime conversation was usually inspired by that. It wasn't until the Elfin stories that I understood how easily Sylvia could write prose.

I would arrive to find her first draft of a story with, maybe, two corrections, seldom more. If, as I typed, I found a word that didn't seem to fit, I would walk down the passage to the kitchen. As I went, inevitably I would try to think of alternatives. When I read the offending sentence to Sylvia, she, without interrupting her cooking, would immediately come up with the perfect word: something surprising and which I could never have thought of but was ideally suited. Remarkably, she never questioned my judgement.

The first piece of writing Sylvia gave me to type was Valentine's autobiography written for Sylvia in 1949. I felt it was an astonishing piece of writing that deserved to be published, and told Sylvia so. She said she couldn't let it be published while she was still alive as it would be too painful. It formed the basis for our communication with each other, which developed into a mutual trust. She followed this with the letters she and Valentine had written to each other, which took a long time to complete as there were so many. Over lunch we would talk frankly about what I had typed and their relationship. With hindsight, I think this is what led to our mother-daughter type intimacy.

And then, as surprising as a rainbow, came the first Elfin story. I was as enraptured as she was, though unlike her I would be furious when William Maxwell refused to publish one. To be fair, I think it was only a couple, and they might have been too English to suit American readers.

I cannot remember when, exactly, the subject of literary executorship arose, but I vividly remember how it started. Sylvia, instead of sending Christmas cards, would sometimes have a few short stories privately printed to be given instead. I remember the excitement when a booklet turned up in the post, my mother and I almost coming to blows over which of us should be the first to read it. During one of our conversations I told Sylvia how good I thought her 'autobiographical' stories were. This led to reminiscences about her childhood. When I asked how autobiographical they really were, she gave me her standard reply that she could 'improve upon the truth'. But when I told her she should put them into a book, to my disappointment, she appeared uninterested. However, like a dog with a bone, I wouldn't let it go and continued periodically to nag her while she tried to deflect me. Eventually she said, in exasperation, 'You can do it when I'm dead, it will save me the trouble'. I responded with some remark like 'OK, you're on!' and we both laughed. But the seeds had been sown, and *Scenes of Childhood* was the first posthumous publication in 1981. Over time, Sylvia discussed more things she wished me to do after her death. This included re-publication of *Portrait of a Tortoise* as well as getting Valentine's book published.

She did not want her diaries published (they were too sad); nor did she want a 'Virginia Woolf' done on her (by which she meant publication of anything and everything she had ever written). While I tried to honour her feelings for about ten years, I felt eventually that they were too restricting and that in the end posterity should decide.

Every summer, Sylvia's cousin Hilary Machen, his wife and friends in his small madrigal group would perform for her. It was always the occasion for a party. Sylvia would provide wine, soft drinks, nibbles, cakes and sugared almonds (a delight from her childhood which she hoped would prove a similar delight to Hilary's children). Unfortunately I was able to attend only one time and spent the night so that I could help with the preparations and the clearing up. Hilary's sister Janet Pollock, who was living with her second husband and early sweetheart, Martin, at Marsh Farm House a short distance away, would usually be there to help as well. It was an afternoon party. Guests were asked to assemble in the church where Hilary's group would sing early Church music. Hilary was thoughtful and chose pieces in which he felt Sylvia would have a special interest. His introductions would refer to such interests. They sang beautifully. We then strolled back to the garden for refreshments and part two of the concert, which consisted of secular and unexpurgated folk songs. (Sylvia told me that at a previous concert, my ex-headmistress had been so shocked by the full version of 'Oh, no John' that, red of face, she hurried away.) One of the charms of Sylvia's spare bedroom was its choice of books, which ranged from *The Anatomy of Melancholy* to George Borrow to *Enquire Within Upon Everything*. (I remember Sylvia telling me that her favourite extract from the last was: 'It is a false economy to buy cheap calico for gentlemen's nightshirts'.) Her bathroom was equally unexpected as she and Valentine had brought back the taps from Great Eye Folly marked 'Hot' and 'H' to use on their basin.

It was around that time that Sylvia was considering what to do with the house after her death. She first offered it to Janet, and then to me. But unfortunately she wanted us to live there permanently as our main home and, by then, our lives were based elsewhere. We both, regretfully, had to decline her offer. She finally let Antonia von Trauttmansdorff live there during her life, but then wanted it to be sold and the proceeds given to the five charities named in her will. (We never used Antonia's full title to each other, so I am maintaining our habit here.)

I had to give up typing for Sylvia when I went to Italy and later started my Speech Therapy training in 1974. By then Antonia was a frequent visitor, which pleased me, as she could give Sylvia a new and stimulating relationship and reduce my feelings of guilt. She was also

able to share a lesbian culture with Sylvia, of which I was ignorant. I would visit Sylvia during my holidays and we corresponded or phoned. She always supported and encouraged me, even though it meant that she would see less of me. She never, unlike Mr Fortune, tried to change me or anyone she loved.

I was working as a speech therapist when the process of her death started. I arrived one weekend morning to be horrified by finding Antonia drunk in the kitchen, and Sylvia upstairs, bed-ridden, swollen, in pain and frightened. To my shocked involuntary comment about Antonia's lack of care, Sylvia quietly and sadly responded, 'She is not reliable'. This made me refrain from further criticism. (Antonia could not cope with tending to Sylvia and had not been supervising her intake of pills. As soon as this was regulated, swelling, pain and fear disappeared.)

I phoned Janet Pollock, who immediately came over and took control, for which I was relieved and grateful. Her experience as a social worker and her innate tact defrosted the situation and gave comfort to Sylvia. We discussed the practicalities of the situation, got the doctor to come, cleaned and made Sylvia as physically comfortable as possible and tried to reassure her that as soon as she took her pills she would feel better. But Janet's inspiration was to set Antonia, who was a good cook, to make delicious small meals and entertain Sylvia, but to have no part in the physical caring. I don't remember whom else Janet got in to help besides herself and Mrs Cleall (Sylvia's charwoman) but at weekends when I visited, Sylvia let me do this for her. I remember, on one occasion, Sylvia telling me she used to have beautiful legs. They still were shapely, but at the time I was too young to understand the wistful acknowledgement that while physical decay was not beautiful, appreciation of beauty endured.

Once Sylvia was out of pain, she planned and carried out her death carefully and gracefully. (I remember her saying, when I was typing their letters, that since Valentine's death she was ready to die.) She dictated to me her farewell letters in the order she felt appropriate to that person. (When I told her about the concert I had gone to with Peter Pears singing 'Die Schöne Müllerin', she used my description in her farewell letter to him.) If her friends suggested remedies to ease dying, she received them with love. When I was sceptical about use of 'the black box' (some device supposedly for transferring faith healing), she replied that if it gave solace to her friend, what was the harm? She knew that William Maxwell was due to arrive at the beginning of May. He would not want to see her decrepit, she told me, but would want to attend her funeral, so she managed to die on 1 May. (He arrived

on 2 May.) She also said that it would provide an opportunity for me to meet him. She told me that Colin House, a local one-time protégé, wanted to be there for her death, which of course, he was.

I can still miss being able to talk to her, particularly when I come across a situation which she would have turned into a humorous story. I shall always be glad that I had the pleasure of knowing her. Her writings, which continue that pleasure, I am sure will survive to delight future generations of readers.

Note

- 1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 159.