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Cornelia-Catrinel Dunca^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: catrinel.dunca@gmail.com

¹ St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad

The Politics of Reorientation in *Summer Will Show*

Cornelia-Catrinel Dunca

Abstract

The essay argues that *Summer Will Show* offers the reader a ‘politics of reorientation’. It suggests that the novel centres on moments of transition, which are for the protagonists moments of reckoning and rebuilding that reconstruct their political priorities and understandings. The narrative shows the protagonist Sophia Willoughby reorienting herself not only to see, but also to address the situation which was for her previously in the background. The essay analyses interrelations between class, gender, sexuality and race in the novel.

Keywords Warner, *Summer Will Show*, reorientation, revolution, class, race, gender, Jewishness

Sylvia Townsend Warner’s works, fictional and autobiographical, poetry and prose, have been read already for the homoerotic possibilities they present (for instance by Gay Wachman and Terry Castle),¹ focusing notably on the lesbian relationality structuring the writing of *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1934) and the narrative of *Summer Will Show* (1936). Links have been drawn as well between the homoerotic and the political, particularly in relation to Warner’s own life and her vocal allegiance to an evolving communism. I will argue that *Summer Will Show* offers the reader something else as well: what I will call a politics of reorientation. By this I mean a continuous process in which the position of specific bodies shifts from background to foreground, making visible the workings of the systems which determine them, while simultaneously determining certain forms of relationality among them.

This politics of reorientation is not a device peculiar to *Summer Will Show*. Similar reorientations take place in *Lolly Willows* (1926) and *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (1927). In the intervening decade a process had taken place that made it possible for Warner to articulate these reorientations affirmatively, as dynamic turnings towards happiness in complex socio-political, economic, psychic and affective moments. This process also enabled a complex and fascinating convergence of the affective, aesthetic and ethical nature of politics. The most telling instances occur in moments of transition, when the narrative turns, the ideological turns, and, quite literally, the turns of phrase interact unstably, while the expectations set up by the preceding narratives shatter. These moments of transition are moments of reckoning, of 're-turn', of tentative building, which reconstruct the political priorities and understandings of central characters. They need to be read forwards and backwards, as projections into the future and into the past, particularly since the narrative voice marks for us ironically the subjects and objects of such reorientation.

The moment of Augusta and Damian's deaths is arguably one such instance. Sophia is reminded of chestnuts past their moment of flowering.

The chestnuts had outgrown their flowers, rather, and now stood up against the full strength of the summer, unbedizened, dark, castellated, brooding, given over to the concern of ripening their burden of fruit. Like me, exactly, she thought. I admire them, and I am glad to resemble them. I am done with blossoming, done with ornament and admiration. I live for my children – a good life, the life my heart would have chosen.²

She is suddenly compelled into an abyss, to which only religion or dissipation may respond. 'If I were a man, she thought, I would plunge into dissipation. What dissipation is to a man, religion is to a woman' (77); her thoughts offer one of many instances of a clear gender binary within which she refuses to neatly fall. But the Sophia of the beginning of the novel was hardly 'just' a mother. She is seen as a perpetually restless body, negotiating agency in a language of relationality with white, landed patriarchy, the consequences of which Sophia questions insofar as they try to restrict her movements, which is at this point of the book the limit of her imagination. In the upbringing of Damian to be a 'proper' man, Sophia lacks and misses the voice of the father, lacks and misses being a man herself, to know with greater clarity what should be done for the upbringing of sons. She

is limited to buying them ponies and making it clear that their masculinity belongs to a particular class, neither the 'queer' one of the kiln man which scares Augusta more than the 'hell' of the kiln, nor the exotic charming one of Caspar, which has to be put in its place – sent to boarding school so he can learn to lower his expectations. As Caspar is about to reach Blandamer for the first time, the narrative tells us,

The minds of Damian and Augusta had also been arranged beforehand. They had been told something of the colour question, and of the rational humanitarianism which forbids that any race should toil as slaves when they would toil more readily as servants; they had been told, more practically, not to stare and not to be shy. They had also been told (though the question of bastardy had been left undiscussed) not to be too familiar. (37–8)

To Sophia at this point, the status quo is convenient, subsumed in the 'colour question', addressed without being properly addressed at all. The world that falls apart with the children's death is not just that of motherhood, though it is partly because of motherhood that Sophia goes to Paris, but also (though she does not yet realise this) the entire continuum of class, race and gender that hinges on the family.

The extent to which all this forms the 'background' allowing Sophia a foreground, one negotiated through the present absence of a husband who exists as ideological support while being physically removed sufficiently to leave space for the systemic 'other' of the wife, stands out starkly as various people fade out of Sophia's consciousness as soon as their usefulness ends, as soon as they are no longer instrumental.³ The gardener is to Sophia just a forgettable thought about whether she gains from him the required labour:

So that's the excuse you make to leave off working, she thought to herself. If the children had come out with Hannah only, the rogue would have talked for half an hour. She turned to look back. The man was still standing idle; catching her eye he pulled his forelock again, but at the persistence of her look he went back to his work. (11)

The kiln man literally fades into the distance as Sophia, Hannah and the children walk away from the kiln, having done what they came for. What lasts a while longer, however, is the irksome realisation that Sophia is as much background to the kiln man (unnamed) as he

is to her, and it is the thought that she does not 'matter' beyond the interaction that bothers her – until she forgets.

Even as she did so, her mind glancing casually at the lot of the lime-kiln man, she received a sudden and violent impression that, however fixedly he had stared after them, and stared still, he did not really see them, and that their coming was already wiped from his mind like a dream ... A fancy, and she disliked fancies ... (17)

The gendered nature of the situation is in itself telling, especially since the narrative makes clear the class loyalty in Hannah's not revealing to her employer that she thinks the man is drunk. Gender is not allowed to form solidarity across class, and both women see the other as 'other', though differently situated in the emphasis the narrator gives their distancing. It is Sophia's voice we hear, musing to herself about the effect that the cry of the bull in the fields will have on Hannah: 'I wonder how Hannah will like listening to that bull, she thought with amusement, as she climbed the stile, and set out briskly along the grass ridge' (19). Meanwhile, she herself registers its materiality – the call of the body – and claims the silence of the cows instead, the quietened life that does not need the presence of this surrounding embodied masculinity:

The noise, so thick and shrill and dully furious, seemed the very voice of the midday heat. It was as though the sun thrust its voice from the heavens. The cows in the meadow went on feeding, whisking their tails against the flies that pestered them, and snatching at the herbage. The bull blared again and again, and the cows cropped on, uninterested. Sensible cows, thought Sophia. (19)

If this is the point of departure that the moment of the children's deaths marks, the reorientation it heralds seems to broaden from the homely and familiar to the unhomely, unfamiliar and political, revealing these to be a continuum; and to widen from a heteropatriarchy comfortable in its class privileges, where negotiations take place quietly, individually, within, to a revolution revealing the nexus of multiple oppressive systems. Interwoven with political discovery, at this point, is an affective and aesthetic turn that anticipates later developments. Listening to Minna during their first encounter, for instance, Sophia 'forgets' to look at Frederick. Unlike Sophia, whose social positioning always allowed her to claim the legacy of the father in a matter-of-fact, seemingly

non-political way, for Minna the legacy of the father, 'revealed' in candlelight, in the darkness of the night a child wakes into, shot through with the legacy of the mother cutting across fields to a river whose ice blocks overwhelm the child with the intensity of liberty, has to be claimed and reclaimed, so that it is not forgotten.

Afterwards, how long afterwards I cannot remember, I spoke to him of what I had seen. Then he told me how we were of the chosen people, exiles from Jerusalem, captive in this world as the gold is captive in the rock and trodden underfoot by those who go to and fro. And he showed me a book, written in our holy language; and in that book, he said, were the stories of good Jewesses, faithful women: Jael, who slew Sisera, and Judith who slew Holophernes; Deborah, who led an army, and Esther, who saved a people. (119–20)

The story gives to Minna, and by extension to her audience, a space for women's participating in politics, leading armies and their people to freedom – an ideal clearly mocked by the neighbourhood boys when they could afford to do so.

Minna, who is pointedly not beautiful, narrates herself publicly – a narrative valuable not for its truth content, but for the aesthetics and ethics of its politics – and performs herself before an audience, perfectly conscious of their expectations. She performs herself for Sophia especially, even as they are surrounded by a roomful of people, providing at the right time the expected rubbing of the hands, a seemingly involuntary act prompted by the thought of the power she had wielded over those other, poorer children:

Then, as though in compliance, Minna's large supple hands gently caressed themselves together in the very gesture of her thought. Sophia started slightly. The glance, mournfully numbering, moved on. But answering Sophia's infinitesimal start of surprise there had been a smile – small, meek, and satisfied, the smile of a dutiful child. And again there had been no time to look for Frederick. (127)

Minna gives this account of herself, a marked, self-aware performance, unlike Sophia's later flood of personal narrative which the reader does not get to hear. Minna's narrative turns the gaze; the perspective of a Christian watching a Jew, simultaneously othering, exoticising and foreclosing, gives way to the Jewish perspective on a small Jewish

cluster of houses running from the threat of the Christian ‘wolves’. The background becomes the foreground, perspectives are inverted and Minna’s investment in liberty becomes anchored in a clearly articulated experience of systemic persecution and oppression.

The distance of Sophia’s initial perspective from this position is also narrativised in the story of the child’s encountering of the bloodied river carrying the frozen bodies of people having died in a battle so remote that the news has not reached there at all. There is an echo here of the alienation the British Sophia maintains towards the distant revolution of the French. It conveys also the visceral aesthetics of a political statement: battles we know nothing about have material consequences on our lives; foreign bodies are carried over into our water, tainting the sounds of our freedom with their blood.

All this, of course, cannot take place in a singular narrative moment. A reorientation is also a disorientation, and Warner presents us with this as an embodied process. Sophia is literally shoved into the narrative, dizzy with the storytelling, dizzy with the clash of what she ‘should’ feel and what she doesn’t, and what she shouldn’t feel, yet does. Sophia during the same first encounter tries to expel herself out of Minna’s house, yet stays back, falling asleep, through it all ‘seeing’ Minna with a gaze that ought to reject and yet is drawn to her, fascinated.

For she had raised her head, and now Sophia could see her face. It was ugly, uglier than one could have believed, hearing that voice. A discordant face, Sophia’s mind continued, analysing while it could, before the voice went on again; for the features with their Jewish baroque, the hooked nose, the crescent eyebrows and heavy eyelids, the large full-lipped mouth, are florid, or should be; but the hollow cheeks forbid them, and she is at once a heavy voluptuous cat and a starved one. Meanwhile she had omitted to look for Frederick. But it was too late, for Minna had begun to speak again. (123–4)

In the initial interactions that follow, Minna mainly continues to be the mistress and Sophia the wife, the mediation of Frederick present even as it is relegated to the background. Frederick walks in, the two women look at him with equal, polite interest, and then they equally proceed to ignore him. Once in a while, they even make half-hearted (and immediately regretted) attempts at fuelling some standard animosity:

‘And am I as good as Frederick?’

‘You are much better.’

For an answer to an outrageous, to an unprovoked, insult, it was dexterous. It was more; for the words were spoken with a composure and candour that seemed, in that stroke of speech, to dismiss for ever any need to insult or be insulted, and the smile that accompanied them, a smile of unalloyed pleasure at successful performance, was as absolving as any caper of triumph from a menaced and eluding animal. (161)

While this is happening, it is both possible and convenient for Frederick to not pay any mind to the fraying fabric of the family. Just as not paying any mind to Frederick's absences and happiness 'abroad' had allowed Sophia access to the privileges of being a respectable mother and wife, running her household, so not paying any mind to the relationship between Minna and Sophia allows Frederick the comfort of not being 'disgraced', not being relegated to the background of a narrative (and by extension of an ideology) which had so far seemingly accorded him the foreground. 'Frederick completely despises all women' (162), Minna casually states, pulling from under his feet the carpet of comfort that had been his to take for granted. In a similar playful manner the spectacle of the dogs dancing with 'the village idiot, a woman of fifty with the face of an infant, [who] declared that just so was the minuet danced in the courts of Europe' (231) deprives patriarchal common sense of its witty powers.

Along with the reorientation prompted by Minna comes the revolution itself, a revolution that has been expected for so long and fought for so hard that it is bound to be a disappointment. I have never felt like that, Sophia says, adding to herself that she is equally not likely to. The narrative shows her reorienting herself not only to see but also to address the situation that was for her previously in the background; at the same time it demonstrates that her participation in the revolution is intimately connected to her personal desires – for liberty as much as for Minna.

Another moment in Sophia's reorientation comes during her return to the comfort of well-off heteropatriarchy, as she encounters Minna a second time, in the Gardens of Luxembourg. Sophia, with her twenty-five pounds ensconced in her muff, hands them over to Minna and watches her drop them one by one into the charity box for the Polish Patriots. The moment holds for her a realisation of liberty, simultaneous with a feeling of happiness that becomes worth fighting for:

For she was released, God knows how, and could praise liberty with a free mind. Somehow, by that action, so inexplicable, unreasonable,

and showy, Minna had revealed a new world; and it was as though from the floor of the Luxembourg Palace Sophia had seen a fountain spring up, a moment before unsuspected and now to play for ever, prancing upwards, glittering and incorruptible, with the first splash washing off all her care and careful indifference to joy. (214)

This moment too can be read backwards as well as forwards. It follows on the attempts by Sophia's aunt to stage her reconciliation to Frederick, a spectacle in which all play their parts. Sophia takes refuge in her aunt's home in search of the tidy, logical order of things as they were. She herself notes her participation by sheer virtue of seeming to fit so neatly into the design her old aunt has come up with. For the period of time she lives with her aunt, she participates in the small family drama showing a properly repenting Frederick, a properly (temporarily) unrelenting Sophia and a properly mediating aunt – not to mention a priest properly maintaining the status quo. When they go to the shabby performance of which Minna forms part, for the arts after all need to be supported, they all participate in a sweeping of the material realities of lack under the carpet. The systemic class struggle taking place on the street seems to vanish from their conversation and awareness, to the extent that Guitermann, meeting Minna while looking for buns (ironically, while the people are crying out 'bread or lead'), is shocked to hear that Minna may well starve in more ways than one.

The scene is set here to show the way in which governance, class and heteropatriarchy shield themselves from the unpleasant reality of the streets below, staging marital harmony inside the house, oblivious to the staging of revolution outside. Sophia's outburst, inside, requiring Frederick to properly retire his mistress before attempting to re-settle into his marriage, forces him to articulate not only his dismissal of Minna, but also his prejudices against Minna's Jewishness, and the refusal to acknowledge the material implications of the revolution on differently positioned people.

It is at this second key point of Sophia's reorientation that the house of cards comes tumbling down. Frederick, who can afford to buy expensive flowers while Sophia pawns her diamond ring for food, substitutes perfume-bottle corks that seem to him expensive with worthless ones, and makes it clear that Sophia herself is worth nothing so long as she persists in her foolishness of living with Minna. This is a devaluation of Sophia as wife, one in which the husband's position is asserted as a blatant tool of manipulation and financial control. What Sophia brought to her heteropatriarchal relationship (as wife) cannot be

what she brings to a less normative relationship with Minna. Far from being a question of what she has access to, this turns into a question of who she can be, in these two relationships. Her position in Minna's house shifts from that of a benefactress (in which she maintained what was in fact a continuation of her moral superiority as wife in a mistress's home) to that of a woman who has nothing much to bring.

It is perhaps in keeping with Warner's own commitments that, being relieved of the burden of her financial security, Sophia finds happiness in political engagement. A less directly articulated background to the reorientation is the role that the relationship with Minna plays in this transition that she makes.

Sophia's relationship with Minna dispossesses Frederick of both a mistress and a wife. He is made redundant, and his sole way of hitting back is a gesture to jeopardise the survival of the two women. The political struggle of Sophia and Minna is exoticised, while at the same time being shot through with multiple ironies. Their intimacy becomes a private claim to happiness paralleled by the political meaning of their shared experience of having no money to fall back on. In later moments politics becomes more and more clearly articulated through the voices of the two young men explaining to Sophia their 'bread or lead' slogan, and through the narrative playfulness of the gesture by which the unknown pamphlet is revealed in the very end to be the Communist Manifesto. But Sophia and Minna's relationship is never put into words, never written or spoken as political. It is not even named.

This reticence works, on the one hand, to shake off the possible feeling of something exceptional taking place. On the other hand, it works to maintain it in the background, in the sphere of the personal and of the aesthetic (through Dury's painting of the two women), showing but not explicitly acknowledging its destabilising effect. While the voice of the revolution is nuanced and takes centre stage, with the patriarchy of its most radical representatives gently indicated,⁴ the voice of physical intimacy becomes a companion voice, the background which makes it possible for the political and ethical reorientation to occur. Sophia's insistence that it is love for Minna that propels her is met with soothing reassurances that more is at stake – perfectly true, indeed – reinforcing the feeling that love, at the individual level, is not enough, even though it may be a strategic trigger of more significant political goals.

The relationship between Sophia and Minna may not be articulated as part of the political reorientation in the book, but it makes its presence felt in the affective and aesthetic reorientations that are intrinsically connected to the politics of the moment. From the initial time of meeting,

until the end, Minna is constantly 'seen', initially as a mistress, spotlighting her absence of conventional beauty, and the Jewishness which turns this seeming lack of beauty exotic; and then as a lover, her vulnerabilities revealed as she is violently sick and collapses in a heap on the cold floor, in reaction to Sophia's expressed discomfort at being a 'benefittee'.

It was as though, shooting off what she knew to be a pop-gun, she had seen the spurting authentic answer of blood. In an instant Minna had become the desolate ghost of the Medici fountain, the resigned outcast she had bullied on that night of February; and the hand, still holding hers, became cold as death in the moment before it loosed its hold.

'You wound me,' she murmured, and fell insensible. (249)

This dialogue also positions Minna and Sophia in care relationships with each other which are peculiar to their connection. There is a conscious evening of the power equations between them, with Sophia losing her financial security in order to reach the point of living with Minna through the revolution; with Minna's inheriting of a piece of property; with Caspar's arrival, which Sophia likens to the intrusion of Minna's 'lame dogs' on the two of them. Sophia, nursed back to strength with hot wine on the first night of the revolution and allowed to sleep wrapped in Minna's shawl, is the one who curls up around Minna when she collapses, in a gesture that mixes eroticism with care.

It was shocking to smell on that deathly body the scent of the living Minna — the smoky perfume of her black hair, the concocted exhalation of irises lingering on the cold neck as though the real flowers were there, trapped in a sudden frost. [...] There, in one direction, was Blandamer, familiar as a bed; and there, in another, was Lithuania, the unknown, where a Jewish child had watched the cranes fly over, had stood beside the breaking river. And here, in Paris, lay Sophia Willoughby, lying on the floor in the draughty passage-way between bedroom and dressing-closet, her body pressed against the body of her husband's mistress. [...]

As though she had never noticed them before she found herself absorbed in admiring Minna's eyelashes, the only detail in her face that corroborated the suavity of her voice. From the moment I got wind of your voice, she thought, from the moment that Frederick, standing by Augusta's death-bed, echoed those

melancholy harp-notes, I have been under some extraordinary enchantment; [...] From sheer inattention I have been on the brink of a reconciliation with my husband, and as inattentively I have got myself into a position in which he seems able to cast me off. And now I am lying on the floor beside you, renewing the contact which, whenever I make it, shoots me off into some fresh fit of impassioned wool-gathering. (250–1, 252–3)

The politics of the invisible gestures at work here, politics of passionate bodies, who burn themselves out, and who depend on oppressive systems for survival, chooses the arena of art to compose itself. As Dury paints them on the shabby pink sofa, with Minna occasionally ‘composing’ Sophia, arranging her hair, her arm, ‘placing’ her in the narrative, Sophia listens to Minna’s autobiographical narratives in a way that appears to engage in a perpetual performance of the political within the intimate. It is art that allows this juxtaposition: a room which has lost its embellishments, from which everything has been used to put food on the table, or given to the revolution, surrounding the tableau of the two women on the pink sofa, the storytelling captured by the painting, but not the words. The words, however, mirror other lives – the lives of artists dying of consumption in rented rooms, not romantically, but leaving blood stains on the floor for someone else to scrub at. The constant refrain, from the beginning of the encounters with Minna, is that art, in times of revolution, does not pay. ‘Revolutions have no second flute-players to spare’ (137).

And yet, in the aesthetics of the relationship between Minna and Sophia, in its affective orientation towards a happiness they are convinced that they have found, lies its politics. Dreaming of revolution allowed for a projection of happiness into the future, tinged as it was with fear – for all property-owners, as Minna well knows, must fear the dream of the revolution. And the relationship as it is offers happiness not as a goal but as a precondition of political action, as a trigger to lift one from political passivity.

The revolution has no longer any use for people like Minna, and yet the opportunity to pilfer various objects which can be turned to ammunition breathes life into her. Sophia, settled in her life, had no use for such political shenanigans, and yet there she is at the end of the story, moving towards a form of political self-realisation. The thought that *Summer Will Show* does not and cannot push to its logical conclusion is precisely the fundamental destabilising effect of the resistance that Minna and Sophia, without intending to, offer

through their very relationship, through setting an ethical, aesthetic and political standard by their life together. Their living together as women – refusing the trope of hatred as mistress and wife and building a relationship apart from Frederick, and drawing personal and political strength from their erotic relationship – cannot be separated from their involvement with the motley bunch of rebels, or from their participation in gathering ammunition and staging the final fight. The aesthetics of their presence, in Minna’s drawing room, as well as on the streets of Paris, lends credibility to the business of washing clothes, while at the same time their turning into labouring bodies, whose value lies in the weight they can carry in lead, directs us to the interlinked processes through which Sophia’s gaze is re-trained on what she had earlier missed. Sophia’s test, when asked to lift the basket with iron, the gaze of a working woman on her, and the final approval she is given, function as an inversion of her own earlier assessing gaze, valuing the labour of the gardener and of the kiln man. The tables are turned, the materiality of labour not only a realisation, but an experience in the journeys to make her deliveries.

From that point of view, Minna’s (possible) death at the end of the narrative is Warner’s sacrifice made to the coherence of the structural critique of class and patriarchy, and it is made possible by the intersections heteropatriarchy and class have with race, which once again cannot be articulated by the characters even though the narrator does give us hints. While Minna’s Jewishness has been stereotyped and also reclaimed, making it a significant part of the political struggle, Caspar’s existence as a ‘half-caste’ (44) never quite stands questioned in quite the same way, is never integrated into the reality that Sophia re-orient herself towards. From his initial appearance, the uppermost concern seems to be how to dispose of him most effectively, first by sending him off to a boarding school which would teach him his place. After his arrival in Paris, he is not only disposable, but also cumbersome, with his perpetual focus on Sophia, his eager attempts to please marking him off as the standard figure of the underdog.

All his wits had been bruised out of him, his one idea was to please and he had no ideas as to how it should be done. If she snubbed him he only redoubled his flatteries, and borrowing money from Minna went out to buy propitiating gifts – stale flowers, bad sweets, execrable gimcrack ornaments with their exorbitant price tickets still proudly dangling from them – for he was always cheated. (298)

In a book that offers so much nuance in the critique of various political positions, Caspar reveals the same kind of exoticisation we note in relation to Minna, only pushed to an extreme. Minna's reclaiming of her Jewishness is not paralleled by an equal reclaiming of his roots on Caspar's part. He wishes to please and does so abjectly, projecting Minna into the role of unpaid servant but also as the focus of his jealousy.

Minna spoke truly. All Caspar's love, all his solicitous adulation, was for Sophia. Taking it for granted that Minna should wait on him hand and foot, feed him, groom him, tune the guitar for him, he would leap out of his cushions to pick up Sophia's handkerchief or fold her shawl. In her presence, he wheedled, postured, strutted, charmed – and all the while his black eyes watched her with humble desperate anxiety. (297–8)

And yet it is Minna whose intuition hints that nothing good will come of the decision to send Caspar away, an intuition not articulated in the context of the fight around. And it is this lack of articulation, the relegation of Caspar to a background in which no agency is conferred to him, that turns him into an instrument of systemic revenge. He becomes a body in the Guard, moved not by Frederick's investment in maintaining the status quo, from which incidentally he will not benefit, but by the hatred of 'the Jewess' distilled into him through repeated rejections, through the power of systems to turn the oppressed against each other, conveniently.

Caspar is subjected to a colonising civilisation which cows him and robs him of his ease – robs him of the fluidity of his body, the narrative suggests, in ways that raise quite as many alarm bells as the treatment of Lueli in *Mr Fortune's Maggot*. He is turned into a Caliban figure who never develops his voice. The reorientation of the narrative, which attempted to give voice to the class struggle, albeit from the convenient position of people who have until very recently inhabited privilege and who still reap some benefits from it, continues to leave race in the background. Its intersections with heteropatriarchy are only hinted at in the clear role that Frederick finally plays in Caspar's life.

Sophia's failed death as a revolutionary hints at the reach of privilege, which cannot be relinquished at will. It provides her with one final moment, in reckoning with the fact that Minna may have been alive as she was carried away:

She was alive, right enough! She was alive, for I heard her scream as they hauled her up from the ground where she lay. But whether she's alive now, that's another matter. For maybe they grew tired of pulling her along, and knocked her over the head like a dog. Or threw her into the river. Or sabred her, as they did that good Ingelbrecht. But dead or alive, they took her and they've got her. And if she's still alive, then God help her, I say, for then she's herded into some barracks, or some prison, or some cellar, yes, with hundreds of others, mad with thirst, mad with pain, suffocating in this heat, or else down in the vaults below the river level, with the water rising, the filthy stagnant water, and the rats galloping overhead, and ... (397)

It is a moment that triggers a collapse of her body that re-enacts the healing sleep that Minna herself practised, before the final reorientation of the Communist Manifesto, the open invitation to demolish and reconstruct one's ideology.

As these final turns in the narrative are enacted, the actual physical background that Sophia visualizes changes shape and aesthetics. From the gaze turned to the comfort of the familiar in Blandamer, surveying what Sophia knew was hers, and registering it only as something that was there to provide a backdrop to her and the children, Sophia's gaze comes to take in the streets of Paris, not alone but guided by Minna's past and her 'mongrel-like' knowledge of all the nooks and crannies, which now have to be negotiated. These are no longer backdrop to personal drama, but have become characters in the staging of the political drama the characters are involved in, rendered visible in the resistances they offer, the rejections, the helpfulness.

Notes

- 1 Terry Castle, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 532–54; Gay Wachman, 'Lady into Fox, Fox into Lady: Rewriting Lesbian Stereotypes in *Summer Will Show*', *Critical Survey* 10, no. 3 (1998), pp. 105–13.
- 2 *Summer Will Show* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), p. 9. Further passages from *Summer Will Show* will be cited in the text of the essay by page number from this edition.
- 3 My use of ideas of foregrounding and relegating to the background draws on Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 4 "Which do you consider the most essential quality in a husband — firmness, or sensibility?" "Firmness, Madame. Woman demands it. Without it, she pines." (244)

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