

## The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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### The Sylvia Townsend Warner Conference, April 2018

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# The Sylvia Townsend Warner Conference, April 2018

*Howard J. Booth and Gemma Moss*

## Abstract

This introduction explains the rationale for the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Modernism conference, at which the essays that follow were presented. The conference sought to place Warner's work in relation to current debates about modernism and to build on existing work – notably by David James – that began to think about Warner's texts with attention to issues of form and style. An overview of the range of papers and topics is also provided.

**Keywords** Sylvia Townsend Warner; conference; modernism; David James; Tyrus Miller; Janet Montefiore

The Sylvia Townsend Warner conference held at the Friends' Meeting House in Manchester, 6–7 April 2018, sought to consider Warner's relationship to modernism, the cultural movement that spanned her formation as a writer and much of her career. That Warner responded to the events of her time is indisputable, but placing her under existing headings in terms of form and style has proved harder. Given that her writing looks different from that of the high modernists (mostly men) who were central to initial definitions of what constituted the modern movement, one response can be to turn back to Warner's large output and discuss it without much reference to the other authors of her time, beyond perhaps the writers with whom she came into close contact, such as T. F. Powys. The aim of the conference was instead to think about Warner's relation to modernism in terms of form and theme.

Perhaps the major article to seek to place Warner in relation to current debates about modernism is David James's 'Realism, Late Modernist Abstraction, and Sylvia Townsend Warner's Fictions of Impersonality', which appeared in a 2005 issue of *Modernism/Modernity*.<sup>1</sup> The novels he chooses are from the second half of the 1930s: *Summer Will Show* and *After the Death of Don Juan*. He relates Warner's fiction to the emphasis placed by Storm Jameson in her essays 'Documents' and 'The Form of the Novel' on an impersonal realism. Women writers in the 1930s are seen as turning from the subjective states in high modernism towards a detached, objective narration that could be used to address social and political themes; this turn from consciousness and the emotions also involved abstraction. In Warner's case irony was to the fore, though, as with other devices she deploys, this results in a relationship with the reader that militates against detachment. The overall result can be compared to the late modernism explored in Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* of 1999.

James uses as an example the short story 'The Apprentice' from Warner's collection *A Garland of Straw and Other Stories*. The detachment of the child torturing the starving victims of Nazism is said by James to implicate her readers; they know as a result that they cannot stand apart. However, as Jan Montefiore pointed out in her plenary paper at the conference (included here), the revelation of evil in the story is carefully staged from the start. How Lili is revealed to the reader can be compared to a number of Browning's most famous interior monologues such as 'My Last Duchess' and 'Porphyria's Lover'. We experience the complexity of feeling that comes when another, disturbing consciousness is revealed to us; we are brought close to what leads us to recoil. Indeed, as James's article progresses he notes more and more instances that play on human emotion and interiority which irony and other devices make possible. Warner's writing certainly feels different from the cool narration of Jameson's wonderful novel *In the Second Year* of 1936.

James comes round to seeing the formal strategies noted by Jameson as part of Warner's 'reflexive method'.<sup>2</sup> However, establishing a detached narrator is perhaps more an initial move she took in her fiction than a method. Also, it is present from the start of her career as a novelist in the 1920s, which troubles the attempt to see her as part of a 1930s turn back to a rigorous form of realism, or indeed in terms of 'late modernism'. James's article discovers as it continues how hard it is to fix Warner's use of literary form and style. His effort to link her to

Storm Jameson on the novel form is valuable, if finally less suggestive than Jan Montefiore's exploration of how women writers of the 1930s used history to articulate pressing social and political concerns.<sup>3</sup> James's article ends up by showing how hard it is to place Warner on existing maps of the period and its art; we perhaps need to think instead about how this major modernist helps us enrich and redraw the existing narratives and structures of modernist studies.

The range of the papers at the conference was particularly notable, with no clustering around just one or two texts. We ranged from her earliest published essay (on working in a First World War munitions factory) to a story in *Kingdoms of Elfin*, the collection that appeared in 1977, the year before Warner died. That said, the size of her output of course prevented full coverage. Themes addressed included the Spanish Civil War, education, love, queer writing and music, as well as Warner's relationship to earlier writers (William Blake among them). Different forms and styles of writing were considered, such as the novel, lyric and short story. There were two plenaries: Claire Harman addressed the impact of Warner's experiences of the First World War in her writing, the poetry in particular; and Jan Montefiore considered Warner's depiction of children.

The full schedule ran:

*Friday 6 April 2018*

1.30–2.45 Welcome and *Plenary 1*

Professor Jan Montefiore (University of Kent), 'Innocence *versus* Directness: Children in the Fictions of Sylvia Townsend Warner'

2.45–4.15 *Papers 1* (Chair: Daniela Caselli, University of Manchester)

Clara Jones (King's College, London), 'Experiences of a Lady Worker: Class and Labour in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Early Writing'

Emma Shaw (University of Manchester), 'Walking at the Margins in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and *Summer Will Show*'

Alex Murray (Queen's University Belfast), 'Sylvia Townsend Warner's Blake and Modernist Literary History'

4.25–5.55 *Papers 2* (Chair: Alex Murray, Queen's University Belfast)

Paul Robichaud (Albertus Magnus College), 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and Modern English Pastoral'

Rose McMahon, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Literary Feast for the Senses'

Gemma Moss (Birmingham City University), "The Value of Art to Society is that by it an Emotional Adaptation is Possible" (Christopher Caudwell, *Studies in a Dying Culture*): Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Corner That Held Them*, Christopher Caudwell and Marxist Aesthetics'

*Saturday 7 April*

9.45–11.15 *Papers 3* (Chair: Clara Jones, King's College London)

Karen Schaller (University of East Anglia), '*The True Heart: Sylvia Townsend Warner's Impolitics of Love*'

Teresa Sanders (University of Exeter), "He would Teach Him the Elements of Plane Geometry": Euclidean Geometry and the Colonial Educational Imperative in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Mr Fortune's Maggot*'

Harry Daniels, 'Holy and Profane Love in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Mr Fortune Fictions*'

11.30–1.00 *Plenary 2*

Professor Claire Harman (University of Durham), 'Behind the Firing Line: Sylvia Townsend Warner in the Great War'

2.00–3.00 *Papers 4* (Chair Karen Schaller, University of East Anglia)

Jennifer P. Nesbitt (Penn State York), 'Triangulating: Geometries of Sexuality: Sylvia Townsend Warner's "The Blameless Triangle" in an Era of Gay and Lesbian Rights'

Rebecca Kate Hahn (University of Tübingen), 'Drifting Away from Normativity: The Short Stories of Sylvia Townsend Warner'

3.15–4.45 *Papers 5* (Chair: Zoe Gosling, University of Manchester)

Mercedes Aguirre (British Library), '*After the Death of Don Juan and the Spanish Civil War Novel*'

Jake O'Leary (University of Bristol), 'Propaganda, Pacifism and Periodicals: Conflicted Antifascism in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Spanish Civil War Writing'

Howard J. Booth (University of Manchester), 'Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Flint Anchor*, Subjectivity and Modernism'

We are delighted that the *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* is publishing a number of the papers from the event. They in large

measure retain their original, spoken form, though references have been added.

We would like to thank English Literature, American Studies and Creative Writing at the University of Manchester, who provided much financial support for the event through the modernist research group; The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society, who kindly provided two bursaries to help graduate students attend and participate; Claire Harman and Jan Montefiore, the plenaries; our speakers and those who chaired the sessions; and the 40-plus people who attended over the convivial and productive two days. The last such Warner conference had been in Dorchester in 2012, organised by Alex Murray and Vike Martina Plock.<sup>4</sup> We hope there will not be an extended period before the next Warner conference, so that discussion can resume.

## Notes

- 1 David James, 'Realism, Late Modernist Abstraction, and Sylvia Townsend Warner's Fictions of Impersonality', *Modernism/Modernity* 12.1 (2005), pp. 111–31.
- 2 James, 'Realism', p. 129.
- 3 Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 4 Many of the papers delivered in Dorchester later appeared in a special issue of *Literature Compass* 11.12 (2014), pp. 725–811.

## Note on contributors

Howard J. Booth is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Manchester. He is the co-editor of *Modernism and Empire* (2000), and the editor of *New D. H. Lawrence* (2009) and *The Cambridge Companion to Rudyard Kipling* (2011). He is the general editor of *The Cambridge Edition of the Fiction of E. M. Forster*.

Gemma Moss is Lecturer at Birmingham City University. She studied at the University of Manchester, where she completed an MA in Postcolonial Literature and a PhD on music in the novels of Joyce and Warner and the poetry of Pound. She has previously taught at the Universities of Salford and Manchester.