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François Gallix Interviews Sylvia Townsend Warner about T.H. White (1974)

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Editor's Note: The transcript of this interview was not corrected or written up for publication so it includes a few slips, repetitions and colloquialisms. These have not been altered or corrected here because of the liveliness with which the transcript evokes the sound of Warner in the act of talking.

Introduction (2017)

When I began my research for my thesis at the Sorbonne on the life and works of Terence Hanbury White ('Tim', as he used to be called), I made a point of meeting and interviewing most of those who had met him, including David Garnett,¹ and also those who had advised him to write fiction, including Mary Potts (whose husband, Leonard James, had been White's tutor and mentor in Cambridge),² the actor Michael Trubshawe and many others. They all advised me to visit and interview Sylvia Townsend Warner, who lived in Maiden Newton, near Dorchester – which I did several times until her death in 1978. She used to welcome me with a meal always including a grapefruit with an olive in the middle in lieu of the usual cherry, thinking it was more original.

She confided that, when asked whether she would agree to write White's biography, she was initially quite reluctant, having never written a biography before. Besides, she had corresponded with White, but had never actually met him. She soon changed her mind, however, when she realised how much they had in common. In fact, White's literary agent, David Higham,³ wrote that her biography was bound to be biased because she was a lesbian and because White was a repressed homosexual with a tendency to fall in love with young girls he knew he

could never marry. Sylvia was even able to read what White had written about a young boy on whom he had a crush – she called him ‘ZED’ in the biography; he was the son of a famous cricket commentator. She alluded to this in the biography and she told me they were just ‘the pathetic confessions about a boy’s fantasies’.

Sylvia was definitively convinced to write Tim’s biography when several delivery vans stopped at the door of her house at Maiden Newton, filled with all of White’s books, manuscripts and letters. White had left no will when he embarked upon his American lecture tour. He died of a sudden heart attack on his way back on board a ship in Piraeus. All his belongings were left at the bank on the island of Alderney where he lived out his final years. Those manuscripts and documents are now kept at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas.

All her life Sylvia was a great lover of cats and, when I visited her, they soon came purring near my legs while I was talking to their mistress. One evening, on my way back (I was then staying near London), I discovered that one of her cats had quietly settled on my back seat. I just had to drive back to Maiden Newton to restore the fugitive feline to its rightful owner!

Through most of her works, particularly in *Lolly Willowes* (1926) and *Mr Fortune’s Maggot* (1927), it is obvious that Sylvia was an atheist, so I was quite surprised when I visited her to find an English Bible in her toilet. One day she told me that when two Jehovah’s Witnesses called at her door, she let them in and pointed a plastic gun at them, shouting ‘How have you been doing? Hand over the takings!’

My first intention when visiting Sylvia Townsend Warner had been to interview her about her biography of T.H. White, but her personality and what she told me about her own works soon convinced me that I had in front of me a first-class feminist writer who was well ahead of her time.

Interview (Maiden Newton, 28 March 1974)

FRANÇOIS GALLIX: How did you come to write this biography as I know that you had never met T.H. White?

SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER: T.H. White was extremely casual: he never gave himself a literary executor and when he died his manuscripts and his copyrights were left to the bank of Alderney which was a very small and provincial affair and had not the least idea of what to do with

them. He had a busy literary agent, industrious and too willing and his friends (David Garnett and Michael Howard and a few others) were extremely concerned about how White's manuscripts and his books should get into the wrong hands, and above all his biography might get into the wrong hands too. They discussed among themselves and they remembered that, although White had never known me, he admired my books and we had occasionally corresponded and they said 'She is the person to do it.' And one day Michael Howard appeared here and asked me to write it and at first I said I did not know the man, I had not read all his books even. 'Surely you can find someone more suitable than me'. But they went on saying, 'No, because you will understand and you will be sympathetic to his character.' I said, 'If it is a sufficiently bad character I should certainly be sympathetic to it' and I would think about it. They took my half-consent for a total consent. The next thing that happened was that Michael Howard came here one morning with his large car entirely filled with White's notebooks, White's manuscripts, White's files. That room we had lunch in was entirely filled with White material and I was left to make my way through it and so I settled down and I just read and I read and I read. For about six months I did nothing but read. Fortunately, he has an exceedingly clear handwriting. At the end of that I began to feel that I might understand him and then I started writing the book. But before I could write the book, I had to find my way about his curious character, to see him and also to see through him.

FG: I wondered how long it took you to write this book because in your foreword you say you met so many people.

STW: Oh I met so many people! I wrote to all the people I could who had known him or even who had met him. Some of them were dead; one or two of the valuable ones were already dead but on the whole I got very willing answers and every single person who talked to me about White had known a different White. I had a thousand incompatible Whites to put together. Because he did lend himself so much to people if he met them – he was very anxious to please, he was very anxious to make a good impression.

FG: But that was not the real White then?

STW: That was. But the real White was a kind of mirror – he mirrored the people he was talking to. He fell in with them.

FG: Yes, that's why he was so easily convinced then?

STW: So easily convinced. He was a slave of his theories and of everybody else's theories – up to a point, and then he would always come back to a sort of *pierre de touche* with him when he said to himself, having got alone: 'Do I believe that? – No.' Then he knew where they had been wrong and where he was right. That was when he was alone and when he was not drunk. Or sometimes when he was drunk, because he had some of his best moments when he was drunk.

FG: Mr Michael Howard said that his private journals were kept under lock and key and that you were the only person to have read them. I wonder what you found in them.

STW: They are touchingly childish really, they are the private journals of a sadist, of a rather artless sadist. Very excited, not much conscience but rather engaged in saying it is all quite harmless and at the same time thinking 'but it is not harmless'. A tragic and childish reading; if you compare them to the writings of other sadists of eminence or experience they are like the work of a child. But there are in them lots of most delightful parodies and pieces of nonsense.

FG: I also would like to know what important unpublished work I should try and get.

STW: I think *Lament for the Grey Geese* you should try and get.

FG: Another question is about his poetry and how much you think it is in keeping with the rest of his work.

STW: It is in keeping with his diaries much more than with his books and I think it represents a deeper level of White, the solitary White, really the White who wrote *The Goshawk*, he is the one nearest to the poetry.

FG: A question I found after reading your biography is what to think of White's view of women in his work and life.

STW: He never trusted them an inch unless they were old; he liked old women and he particularly liked old and ... not uncivilised, but he liked women to be unpretentious and modest. The two women that he really

liked, I think, one was his landlady at Doolistown whom he writes of in *The Elephant and the Kangaroo*, and the other is old Lady Sherwill who lived in Alderney whom he speaks of, I think I quoted somewhere in my book: it was impossible to keep her unmarried, she had had three husbands! He was very fond of her and he felt easy with her, he felt at home with her, and he admired, he respected her opinion. But just ordinary women he did not like, he had two very mistrustful and unsatisfactory love affairs with young girls both of which turned badly and were nothing but misery and dismay to him. He liked two old English women who kept the *pensione* in Florence, he was fond of them, he was fond of Pat Howard too, he trusted and liked her.

FG: And in his work, how did he manage with his female characters?

STW: Very badly and quite unconvincing.

FG: You mention that one of his characters was after his dog, Brownie.

STW: Yes. Now she was a female character that he really loved and esteemed. Brownie was much more to him than any other woman had ever been.

FG: His love life is a problem, it seems he was a sadist...

STW: He was a sadist, yes, and a flagellant – the ordinary English public school things.

FG: What about his visits to the psychiatrist?

STW: He was taken in by the psychiatrist, he thought the psychiatrist would find some interior knob and press it and from that moment everything would be perfect for White. Accordingly he used to go round and woo an innkeeper's daughter on the strength of the psychiatrist. He was fond of Mary Potts too but then she was safely married to his idol Potts whom he adored; he who must have been the most remarkable man.

FG: Another problem is the contacts he had with the person you name ZED and also this strange attitude with his Italian family in Naples.

STW: He was so happy with that Italian family, they rooked him right and left. They looked after him tenderly, they were among his best

friends really, they had that admirable Italian quality. They never went too far.

FG: And yet they were after his money...

STW: Oh yes! They got a lot of things out of him, marvellous coats and new trousers and gilt watch-chains, lots of dinners and lots of drinks, but they continued to look after him and they protected him in a rather mafia-like way, they were very careful that no other gangs and no other family should get hold of him. He enjoyed that intensely – he felt very free and happy with them.

FG: What about ZED?

STW: ZED was the son of friends of White's (he is dead now). He used to go and stay at Alderney. White fell madly in love with ZED but ZED did not fall in love with White in the least, but he was young and gay and he thought it was great fun walking about with White.

FG: Do you think it was a need for protection or that he wanted to be needed?

STW: It was both. He terribly needed to protect but he also wanted the protection of feeling at last, here sexually he was a success. He was established on his own feet and not pretending. You remember that tragic thing he said to David Garnett in that final confession: whenever he had loved, his sadism had always wrecked it.

FG: I wonder whether we can see this in *The Goshawk*, or am I wrong when I see something unhealthy?

STW: You are certainly not wrong. A kind of unhealthy healthiness.

FG: Between the tamer and the animal?

STW: Between the tamer and the animal. And he was so pleased with all his sufferings, how he sat up all night with the bird. One of the surest indexes is that Brownie was so madly jealous of the goshawk: she knew.

FG: Would you say T.H. White was a happy man?

STW: No. He was a man who had fits of great happiness. One thing he was, he was a very enjoying man, but enjoying is not the same thing as happiness. He wanted *bonheur*. But joy he had, constantly, and he could be pleased with anything; as quick as a mark he had some new pleasure or some new excitement, but residually he was lonely and sad.

FG: Do you think it is possible to classify White and put him in a special literary school?

STW: He is only classifiable if you put him into that enormous bag labelled 'The English Eccentrics', you can put him in there along with George Borrow and a few people of that sort. I think you might even approximate him to Byron in some ways. He looked remarkably like Byron and in some ways he is curiously similar to Byron, in the way he boasted so; you remember how Byron never left off boasting. I think that he and Byron had something in common and they both had bad savage Scotch mothers.

FG: Do you think the reason why T.H. White has never yet been translated is because he is 'typically English'?

STW: Yes, I suppose he is. We have never had any classical authors. It is so easy in France because you can say So and So is a classic and So and So is not and So and So is half-way. But it is very hard with English writers – sometimes they are classics, sometimes they are not; mainly they are all individualists and among the best ones the real individualists are just 'English eccentrics'. But I cannot understand why he should not be translated into French because there must be a great many French people who would enjoy him a great deal and he wrote very good English. His style is *primesautier*, he scarcely blotted a line any more than Shakespeare did; but when he was writing well, he wrote, I think, exceedingly good English, because it is not stylised; it is not imitating anybody in particular, he writes like himself, he writes very nicely. There are not many alterations in his manuscripts, and where he crosses out, he crosses out with decision and will wipe out a whole paragraph.

FG: Why did he start so many things at the same time?

STW: He had so many irons in the fire. He had so many interests and so many hopes. He always hoped he'd strike it lucky. In the first years he wrote so industriously to make money and it became almost a

compulsion to write. He had a very narrow escape of not becoming a hack journalist, because he would have been an extremely successful one and it would have been his ruin; he just managed to avoid it.

FG: Would you say there is a big difference between what he wrote when he was young and his later work?

STW: An enormous difference.

FG: When did the real White start? Is it when he changed his name?

STW: He had one attempt at being a real White and it very nearly came off and that is the early book *Farewell Victoria* about the groom because that was the favourite type for White: the good man in misfortune. He constantly referred to it either in episodes or in his letters or poems; you never know when the good man in misfortune will crop up in White. He had had that from his childhood, it was part of the chivalry of his youth.

FG: How could you explain his interest in the past and the fact that he is ill at ease in his own century?

STW: I think he caught fire very quickly from things that he read. He read the *Morte d'Arthur*, really for his English degree and he was fascinated by it as a narrative; saw how good it was and also how he could improve it.

FG: It is surprising how easily he could be convinced; do you think that he really believed he would become a Catholic priest when he was in Ireland?

STW: He hoped he would. If he was going to be anything he would rather be a priest, because the idea of power enchanted him and also there was that drunken priest; he was always haunted by this idea that his drink would be against him but when he heard the drunken priest howling he thought, 'Hurrah, I can be a priest, I can be a person, I can be a man of great importance and I can still drink!'

FG: Do you think his drinking habit was really bad?

STW: I don't know; he was quite extraordinary. He could leave off drinking, he would drink for six months of the year then he would give

up drink and suffer agonies for about a week and then go on as if he did not drink at all and at the end of his imposed six months he went back to the bottle. He must have had the most extraordinary physical resistance: he was a man of great health and strength.

FG: Don't you think he was also rather frustrated, feeling guilty for his sexual life, his drinks...

STW: Yes. He always went about like a dog that had a tin can tied to his tail and he was afraid. He was, he was driven by fear. He had a very vivid imagination, he had been a very frightened child – he never escaped from fear. But fear is a very good companion to writers: they often do very well. Baudelaire would not have written half as well as he did if he had not been a frightened man.

FG: You spoke about his mother too: he did not seem to be very anxious to see her?

STW: No, anything but see her.

FG: Apparently his father never tried to see him...

STW: No, I think his father felt that having once got away from Mrs White he did not want to meet any more of the family.

FG: Was the fact that he had no father important in his work?

STW: No, I think he was much more influenced by having a mother than by having no father. He soon found other father figures. Potts was his father figure for a long time, then he found David Garnett who was another father figure, then he found old Cockerell who was a father figure and really old enough to be a father. He went from father figure to father figure; he was never quite unsupported. He was much happier after his mother was dead. She only came to see him once when he was at Stowe, she paid him a dreadful visit there. She left some very strange written memoirs in which she only makes three mentions of him as a child. She was not really at all maternal; she was entirely absorbed in herself. In a way, she is a frightful vulgarised weakened version of White because she was an intense egoist, intensely interested in herself, very romantic, self-romanticising, bore the most awful grudges. Which White did not do, he did not bear grudges; she was an amalgam of all

that was worst in White. He may have recognised this frightful likeness because she was everything that he disliked, and yet every now and then he must have seen she was also everything he disliked in himself.

FG: Is there anyone I could contact who knew White?

STW: There is Mary Potts in Cambridge you could contact, she knew him very well, understood him very well and she is a charming person. You ought to go and see David and Michael Howard. [Address omitted.]

FG: I was also thinking of his thesis on Malory.

STW: Lost. He lost a great many things, almost all Potts's letters he lost. He saved them all tenderly, they were all in a trunk and when he left Stowe, he left all his boxes in a leaky shed and when he went to retrieve them, they were all wet, and the thesis went with that. Apparently they don't have a copy at Cambridge but it was probably very flashy.

There is of course his darling secretary, Carole. She lives in London. [Address omitted.] She could do more by way of getting you manuscripts than anyone else could. She knew White extremely well.

Mr John Verney only knew White late in life but he was very fond of him, he had a very affectionate view of him. [Address omitted.]

Of course, it was so very tragic that he never got the story of Arthur properly tidied up because the book that was never published had magnificent passages in it and the rest was quite appalling (the fifth volume – *The Book of Merlyn*). It would be very interesting – I think you should – to compare the first *Sword in the Stone* and the version which he did afterwards, when he tamed it down and made it less high-spirited and much improved, because there was still some of his first gay vulgarity clinging to the first version – which was one reason, I think, White was such a success with the public. He altered that, he took out a great deal; he pruned it, he pulled it together because, by that time, he had begun to see that he was not just writing a spirited piece of nonsense but was at the beginning of a story. He began to see that he had got much more to do with Arthur and Merlyn than he supposed.

FG: Out of all his works, which ones do you think will remain?

STW: I think *The Goshawk* will remain and I hope that *The Elephant and the Kangaroo* will remain, because it is a rare thing in White: it

is a completely finished book and it is a *jeu d'esprit* all through, it has got this extraordinary real happiness and he managed to finish it. He finished it with the wildest of fantasy but he did finish it.

FG: You don't think *The Sword in the Stone* will be important?

STW: I think it might be. It is so impossible to tell what people are going to like in twenty years time, but I put my money on *The Goshawk*.

FG: How did White come to have this volume of poems privately printed in 1962?

STW: He could not be bothered to put it into a book and I doubt if he would have wanted to have it in a book, because by that time he was getting old and tired and he had much more the feeling of somebody on a death-bed making a provision for some illegitimate children. So he asked Michael Howard to make this beautiful book.

FG: It was the same with *The Goshawk*; he did not want it to be published because he thought it was too personal...

STW: He thought it was too personal and also he thought it was much too amateurish; he could not bear the idea of it being read by professional falconers because they would think his methods were so childish and antique.

FG: Of course, a professional would not have made the mistakes he made with his bird.

STW: And no professional could have written the book!

David Garnett had a very strange outlook on White: he enjoyed him very much as a friend and as a companion and he loved his letters, and at the same time he found him almost intolerable because he bounced about too much and it was too much like having a very large enthusiastic dog about the house. He admired his work and felt a great tenderness for White, he was one of the few people who saw that White was a person who needed tenderness. But when he had been in the house for one or two days, he could have murdered him!

FG: What did he mean then when he wrote about *The Goshawk* that it was 'strangely like some of the eighteenth-century stories of seduction'?

STW: He was thinking of Clarissa Harlowe and stories of that kind: the immense amount of trouble that poor Lovelace went to in order to get hold of Clarissa, the anxiety and perseverance of the seducer.

Any of White's friends would answer you, I think, because they loved him so much. They all remember him so vividly, each one of them remembering a different White. It is very sad that John Moore who knew him so well when he was young, during the Stowe period, and liked him so much and understood him so well, should have died even before my book was finished – that grieved me a great deal because I was looking forward to his approval.

It was strange going over to Ireland to chase him there, that amazing town, Belmullet, it has got a wide street and every other house in the street is either a public-house or sells liquor!

FG: White seemed to be going from one island to another, was he looking for secluded places or was it just chance?

STW: I think perhaps islands did mean a great deal to him; of course the motive he gave for going to the Channel Islands was because he hated the idea of paying income tax. But I think that was really a false motive, I think really he wanted to be on an island.

FG: What about his attitude towards animals?

STW: To begin with, he bought this dog as an ornament, as a handsome distinguished animal, but she made her way around him; if anybody was seduced in that case, White was seduced by Brownie.

FG: You would agree that he was a lover of animals?

STW: A passionate lover of animals. He would have had thousands of animals if he could – he certainly would have had a badger, probably several badgers; and he would have liked to have had a deer.

FG: What about the toads and snakes he liked to have in his own house?

STW: In a way you might almost quote the end of *The Ancient Mariner* –
‘He prayeth best who loveth best
All creatures great and small’
– because he did have this outgoing towards animals.

FG: You have told me so many things; you know T.H. White so well...

STW: Sometimes I feel I know him very well indeed, but then I remember all I know is my own White, I am just another of the people who have their own White and I am looking forward to your own White.

FG: I wonder where the real White is though...

STW: Sometimes I think that I shall turn a corner or open a box and find a whole new layer of evidence about White. I never felt I had come to the end of him. Another person who loved White and knew him very well is Harry Griffith. [Address omitted.]

When I went to Alderney, I was still rather half-hearted, because the friends I had met were almost all tipsy and they were all genial and I did not feel that, except for Carole, I was getting very much out of them. I was still on the track of White and I did not think I had picked him up, and then my second evening there, I said 'Let me stay in this house: I want to look at White's books and I want to think about him.' While I was there I suddenly had an extraordinary impression that White's ghost, with anxiety and suspicion, was watching me, trying to make up his mind whether he wanted me to write the book or not. Having had that curious sense of contact, I felt 'if I do not write the book, nobody else will write it as sympathetically as I shall. I will write the life of White.' I decided this after spending a long, rather sad summer's evening with the rain outside in this house where he had been so lonely.

He was always trying to help people or wanting to look after people.

FG: Like Puck, this was a strange episode.

STW: Puck was a most deplorably sad ending. She was one of the few people I wrote to who turned round and hated White. I think it was simply because she could not get him; she was jealous. Puck really believed that White would marry her and they would live happily together ever afterwards. Cockerell warned him and said their relationship was becoming very dangerous. He did not leave her anything in his will and she felt slighted – she had that awful kind of bourgeois slightedness. It was very sad, because Puck could have told me a great deal but she just could not unclench herself, she was still in such a state of hatred and spite. People can talk out of their hatred and be very reliable, but you never get a reliable verdict from spite.

FG: I wonder why he showed so much interest for the blind, deaf and dumb; was it because he was afraid he would be blind one day?

STW: That may have occurred to him and it was part of a general missionising spirit towards the unfortunate or the people who needed help. He would have made a very happy missionary – one of the old-fashioned kind, who would go and live in deepest darkest Africa and immediately adopt all the native customs.

FG: What about *Burke's Steerage*?

STW: After writing about manly sports – shooting and fishing and fox-hunting – and snobbing rather about that, it was one of the things he snobbed about, *Burke's Steerage* is a mere *mea culpa*, I am sick of the whole business. It is very entertaining indeed.

FG: Is it the reverse of *England Have My Bones*?

STW: Yes, that is exactly what it is.

FG: I wonder why this title: *Burke's Steerage*?

STW: *Burke's Peerage*, and steerage is the third class on any boat, what the down-trodden and the penniless travel by. You may be able to borrow the book from Carole, I will write to her about it.

FG: She was only with White during his tour in the United States, wasn't she?

STW: Only during his tour. And when he sailed from New York, she had relations and friends that she wanted to go and see, but she very nearly went back to Europe with him because she could not bear seeing him go off alone. Of course the moment she was gone, he went 'on the bottle' again. He had nothing else to do; but while he had Carole, there she was – and she was young and she was brave and he felt he had an obligation, a sense of duty towards her and so he made up his vow that while they were touring America together, he would not drink – and he did not, in spite of immense provocation.

Notes

- 1 See *The White / Garnett Letters*, edited with a preface by David Garnett (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968).
- 2 See François Gallix, *Letters to a Friend: The Correspondence between T. H. White and L. J. Potts* (New York: Putnam, 1982).
- 3 See David Higham, *Literary Gent* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978), pp. 212–19. Higham says he gave Warner the address of a ‘girl’ with whom White had an affair but Warner never got in touch with her. ‘So she was able to present Tim in such a light that a reviewer could call him a raging homosexual. Perhaps a heterosexual affair would have made her blush ... Tim was no homosexual ...’ (p. 213).

Note on contributor

François Gallix is Emeritus Professor of twentieth-century British Literature at the Sorbonne where he has presented many contemporary British authors and published several books and articles about them. His research concentrates mainly on the works of Graham Greene.