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Article

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Jan Montefiore

Abstract

The article surveys, summarises and assesses the critical reception and cultural reputation of Sylvia Townsend Warner. It recalls the very limited role women writers played in Montefiore's own university experience as a student of English and discusses their growing prominence in the 1980s and beyond under the influence of the feminism of that time and in particular of feminist publishing houses.

Keywords Warner, reputation, reception, women writers, canon, 1930s

This paper is based on the Mary Jacobs Memorial Lecture given in February 2014 at Plymouth University, where the late Mary Jacobs (1953–2012) taught English Literature for many years.

It is a bittersweet honour to be giving this first Mary Jacobs Memorial Lecture commemorating the life and work of our much-missed friend and colleague. Mary's scholarly work on Sylvia Townsend Warner is already acclaimed. In 2011, supporting the proposal that Mary, too ill to complete her PhD thesis on Warner, be awarded an *aegrotat* PhD, I wrote that her publications had already achieved 'more substantial scholarship, insight and original criticism than quite a few of the doctoral theses I have examined over the years'.¹ Like everyone in this lecture theatre, I wish it was Mary we were listening to now, and not me. Since that is impossible, I shall try to do credit to Sylvia Townsend Warner, whose writing we both loved and, to use Warner's own term of approval, esteemed, and to Mary's own scholarly and critical work.

Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893–1978) was described by her biographer Claire Harman as a writer who at the time of her death ‘had entirely evaded the canon’,² an unlikely end for a writer whose earliest work was recognised by her publisher as major, whose first novel was a runaway bestseller and who published 153 stories in the *New Yorker* between 1936 and 1977. David Garnett, a highly influential figure in London literary life between the wars (he played a key role in getting the novels of T. F. Powys published in the 1920s, and as literary editor of the *New Statesman* in the 1930s he helped T. H. White as reviewer and mentor),³ launched Warner by showing her poems to Charles Prentice, editor and director of Chatto & Windus. Prentice, immediately impressed by the poems’ ‘eerie obscure force of expression which comes thrusting up from some profound depth’,⁴ successfully urged their publication as *The Espalier* (1925). The company Chatto & Windus became Warner’s lifelong publisher for three more books of poetry, seven novels, eleven books of short stories, including her acclaimed last book *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977), plus a posthumous slim volume of poems. The historian Jenny Uglow, a former director of Chatto, told me that the firm remained ‘hugely proud of her, hence their publication of the Harman biography and STW’s letters and diaries’.⁵

The Espalier got good reviews and was followed by Warner’s immensely successful *Lolly Willowes* (1926), reprinted twice in one week in the month after publication and selected as the first ever Book of the Month in the USA, where it sold over 10,000 copies.⁶ Warner’s second novel *Mr Fortune’s Maggot* (1927) was almost as successful, especially in the USA, but not so her next novel *The True Heart* (1929), or the story collection *The Salutation* (1932), still less the poetry collection *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1934) which she co-authored with her lover Valentine Ackland.⁷ But from 1936 STW began a lifelong association with the *New Yorker* which gave her financial stability, an acknowledged standing in the USA, where her reputation has stood higher than in Britain, and, best of all, her close friendship with the writer William Maxwell, who in 1939 took over from Katherine S. White as Warner’s editor and became her devoted friend, correspondent and one of her literary executors. Her writings had distinguished admirers: Geoffrey Grigson wrote a rave review of *Kingdoms of Elfin*; Peter Pears invited her to the 1977 Aldeburgh Festival where he read a selection of her poems, and later wrote a loving foreword to them in her *Twelve Poems* (1980); Denis Donoghue’s perceptive praise of her poetry in 1985 for ‘turning an experience, real or so fully imagined as to be real, towards the decisiveness of song’ was quoted by the poet-critic Donald Davie in

his admiring essay 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: Posthumous' collected in *Under Briggflatts* (1989). Her correspondence with David Garnett, published in *Sylvia & David*, shows how both friends had a lifelong interest and pleasure in each other's writings. Among her women admirers were Alyse Gregory, the former editor of the *Dial*, Rosemary Manning, the children's writer and memoirist, Nancy Cunard, the poet and editor, and most importantly Norah Smallwood, the managing director of Chatto & Windus, always a strong champion of Warner's work. In the USA, enthusiasts included not only William Maxwell but John Updike ('She has the spiritual digestion of a goat'), Mavis Gallant, Jean Untermyer, Ann Parrish and the historian Marchette Chute.⁸ Yet in 1980 her biographer-to-be Claire Harman had 'never heard of Warner' when she discovered a package of unknown poems under a desk in the publisher's office where she worked. Like Charles Prentice half a century earlier, she was immediately hooked.

They had been left to the publisher by the author, but 18 months after Warner's death, no one had yet done anything about them. The only thing that had sent me under the desk in the first place was one of those odd hormonal rushes of late pregnancy that impel women to meet severe cleaning challenges, but when I took the poems home (I had never heard of Warner), I found the material so unusual and puzzling that by the time I went into labour a few weeks later, the book I took with me was *Lolly Willowes*, one of only three Warner novels then in print.⁹ By the middle of the next year I was totally engrossed with the subject, had bought as many first editions as possible, had contacted the estate, her friends, put together a celebration of her work, edited her poems, changed the subject of my PhD.¹⁰

I am forever grateful for Claire Harman's enthusiasm, since I owe my own discovery of Warner to her early 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Celebration', published as a supplement to *PN Review* in late 1981 (when I too was heavily pregnant). Browsing in Dillon's (now Waterstone's) bookshop in Malet Street, I picked up the current *PN Review*, noticed 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Celebration' and was immediately enchanted by the love poem 'Drawing you, heavy with sleep to lie closer' and by the witty letters to David Garnett. When I told this to Mary Jacobs in October 2011, she replied:

Did I ever tell you my own STW reading history? I'd just finished my very last Finals paper at UCL in 1977 after weeks of revision

and exam agony, and I walked through Bloomsbury to the bus stop in a daze. I saw a Women's Press edition of *Lolly Willowes* (the pale green one) on a shelf of second-hand books outside a bookseller's very near to the BM. I bought it to read on the way home to Wandsworth with no idea of what it was except that if it was Women's Press it should be good. Of course I was enraptured before the bus had reached Vauxhall.¹¹

For me, it was Claire Harman and *PN Review*; for Mary, the Women's Press. For others, the green paperback Virago imprint was their first introduction to Warner: feminist women are responsible for nearly all of the revival and republication of Sylvia Townsend Warner's writings, and a great deal of the critical and scholarly work on them. Yet, despite Warner's distinction and her high reputation among literary *cognoscenti*, in 1977 none of us three highly educated young women had heard of her. Why was this?

Speaking for myself – and I think the same would have been true for Mary – my own education in English Language and Literature had not introduced me to *any* major woman writer. Nearly all the literature I studied up to postgraduate level had been written by men, apart from one long prize essay which I chose to write about the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell. Jane Austen, George Eliot and the Brontës were of course acknowledged classics, but our Oxford degree syllabus did not include prose fiction other than Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* and Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. (Our college tutor held a weekly conversation class for second-year students on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels; but as no supervision essays were set on the novels, of course we didn't study them seriously). Outside the curriculum, I read nineteenth-century classic novels, the fiction of Waugh, Greene, Isherwood, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Thomas Mann, and the poetry of Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot, Wallace Stevens and especially Auden; I didn't read Woolf seriously until I had to teach her to undergraduates at Liverpool University in the 1970s. I went to twentieth-century women writers for light entertainment: the historical novels of Mary Renault, the comic novels of Stella Gibbons and Nancy Mitford, the 'Golden Age' detective writers Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh. At home, my mother's shelf of poetry included the twentieth-century English women poets Frances Cornford, Fredogond Shove, Ruth Pitter and Kathleen Raine. Not Sylvia Townsend Warner, whose irony and anti-clerical atheism would not have been to her taste.

This traditional English Literature curriculum matched the then available literary histories, in which women writers other than

nineteenth-century novelists barely appeared at all (though a few lukewarm mentions of Virginia Woolf might appear in accounts of modernism). When love of Auden's poetry and interest in politics and literature led me to start work on the literature of the 1930s, it didn't disturb me (it does now) that all but two of the works in Robin Skelton's landmark 1966 Penguin anthology *Poetry of the 1930s* were by men, and those two exceptions were by the same woman (Anne Ridler) – or that Skelton's introduction dwelt at length on the young male poets' jeers at Edith Sitwell, or that the literary histories of the thirties ignored women writers. I was jerked into awareness when in 1983 I gave a talk to sixth-formers at the Simon Langton Grammar School for Girls, who were 'doing' Skelton's anthology as an A-level set text. I went unwillingly, having hoped to devote a non-teaching day to the project which became *Feminism and Poetry*; but then as now, a university lecturer couldn't refuse to speak at a local school, so I put together a rehash of current critical orthodoxy from Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation* (1976) and Bernard Bergonzi's *Reading the Thirties* (1980). Asked at question time 'Were there any women writing then?', I was thoroughly disconcerted, but managed to come up with Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby (*Testament of Youth* and *South Riding* had both recently been reprinted and dramatised on TV), Stevie Smith (whose poetry I'd been working on) – 'and of course', I finished with relief, 'there's Virginia Woolf'.

I find it strange now that I didn't mention Sylvia Townsend Warner, for by 1983 I had not only read Claire Harman's edition of her *Collected Poems* (1982) and William Maxwell's *Selected Letters* (1982) but had written a long dialogue about her love poem 'Drawing you, heavy with sleep to lie closer', which I published much later in the third edition of *Feminism and Poetry* (2004).¹² But my 'take' on the poem was mainly psychoanalytic, by way of Irigaray, and I hadn't thought of it as a thirties text, even though *Collected Poems* had dated it to 1935. Like the literary historians of the thirties whom I'd been summarising, I'd simply assumed that women didn't belong in thirties history. After the girl's question prompted me to read the women writers of the 1930s seriously, I began to be angry that they had been ignored; this is why the subsection 'Women's Exclusion: A Cautionary Tale', chapter 1 of *Feminism and Poetry* (1987), takes the neglect of thirties women writers as an example of the disappearance of women writers from literary records. My prime example of this airbrushing is Warner.

The most striking of these exclusions is the near-total silence in the literary histories about the poet and novelist Sylvia Townsend

Warner, whose novels *Summer Will Show* (1936) and *After The Death of Don Juan* (1938) are still [1987] out of print. Though the years 1930–40 must be one of the most written-up decades of modern literary poetry, literary analyses have never covered her poems, and her appearance in the standard histories is limited to Stephen Spender's anonymous caricature of 'a Communist lady writer and her friend, a poetess' in his memoir *World Within World* (1953), quoted with approval by Julian Symons.

Yet Sylvia Townsend Warner's life corresponds closely to the standard biography of a progressive intellectual in the Thirties (father a Harrow schoolmaster; homosexual; publishes Marxist poems; goes to Republican Spain during the Civil War; works on the editorial committee of *Left Review*) – but as a woman, these sexual and political commitments leave her invisible or if noticed, ludicrous. Spender's sexual double standard is obvious here: his own relationship with 'Jimmy Younger' is presented in *World Within World* as, however unsatisfactory, a serious matter, whereas a lesbian couple are good for a laugh.¹³

Re-reading this in 2018, my first thought is that it's still much too true. The confidence expressed in my aside to the 2004 edition that 'this account of the gendered reception of 1930s writing is now, happily, untrue',¹⁴ was premature. There has been an improvement, especially in work on individual writers; the studies of Virginia Woolf by Hermione Lee (1996) and Elizabeth Bowen by Maud Ellmann (2000) have been crucial in getting these two accepted as classics. But notwithstanding the investigation of gendered literary history in Nicky Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (2004) and Kristin Bluemel's edited collection *Intermodernism* (2009), women are still very patchily represented in literary histories of the 1930s.¹⁵ The critical anthology *Rewriting the Thirties*, edited by Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (1997), has *one* token chapter on women novelists by Marion Shaw, and mentions no women poets. Rod Mengham's chapter on the 1930s in the 2004 *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* discusses no woman's writing apart from the novella *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding* (1932) by the minor Bloomsburyite Julia Strachey. James Smith's well-received *British Writers and M15 Surveillance 1930–1960* (2013) deals exclusively with male writers, despite the ground-breaking 2008 article by Mary Jacobs and Judith Bond, 'Nefarious Activities: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland and M15 Surveillance, 1935–1955'.¹⁶ Like Smith after them, Jacobs and

Bond consulted the police reports on Warner and Ackland in the Public Record Office, which showed in detail how both women were kept under observation from 1933 to 1945. Though Smith has a great deal to say about Intelligence officers' suspicions of male homosexuals, he fails to mention how the Censor's office intercepted Ackland's 1944 transatlantic cable to her lover Elizabeth Wade White because they suspected the postscript 'Solomon seven verses seven eight' was naval code. In fact, it referred to the notoriously sexy passage in the 'Song of Songs' beginning 'Thy breasts are like clusters of grapes'.¹⁷

Sympathetic mentions of Sylvia Townsend Warner do occur in some accounts of left-wing thirties writing, notably Andy Croft's *Red Letter Days* (1990), my own *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (1996) and more recently Chris Hopkins's *English Fiction in the 1930s* (2006). But the critical literature on Warner's work is still very incomplete. There is still no full bibliography of her work and its reception; Ray Russell's bibliography of STW up to the year of her death remains unpublished, and my own annotated bibliography for the online *Literature Compass* only covers STW's posthumous publications and the post-1978 scholarship and criticism. The sole book-length critical introductions to Warner's writing are biographical studies: Wendy Mulford's *This Narrow Place* (1988) and Claire Harman's *Sylvia Townsend Warner* (1989), plus one book of essays edited by Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simons (2006) which includes Mary Jacobs' excellent essay 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and English Pastoral 1925–1934'. The *Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal*, which began in 2000, also contains much valuable criticism. (Mary's contributions to it include not only 'Nefarious Activities' but 'The Politics of Disclosure and the Fable' (2006) which unpicks the politics underlying *The Cats' Cradle Book* (1939), and her richly suggestive 'Trees and Dreams' (2011) which explores elements of pagan female fantasy becoming politically subversive in *The True Heart* and 'The Salutation'.) But there is as yet no monograph on Warner's writings, at least until Maud Ellmann and Peter Swaab publish their works in progress.

I am also struck today how limited was the case I made in 1987 for Sylvia Townsend Warner's presence in literary history. I barely mentioned her political novels (then out of print, and unread by me till 1987); yet the realistic and woman-centred narrative of *Summer Will Show* and the political fable of *After the Death of Don Juan* are completely different from anything by the male thirties writers.¹⁸ I mapped STW's life-story onto that of her male juniors, yet her early years have a very different pattern, quite apart from the fact that she

was from 1919 a musicologist working on the editorial board of *Tudor Church Music* well before she began writing and publishing in the mid-1920s. The story of most 'Auden Generation' males up to 1930, which goes, with individual variations, like this: enjoys a privileged Edwardian childhood; experiences loss or absence of a parent; attends prep school and public school during the Great War and (except Orwell) Oxbridge in the 1920s; joins the political Left in the thirties.¹⁹ The outline of Warner's life is much more like that of her contemporaries Rebecca West, Rose Macaulay, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby and her friend Nancy Cunard, which goes like this (with individual variations): enjoys a privileged late Victorian childhood; privately educated (except Jameson); youth disrupted by the Great War; enjoys an unconventional sex life (except Brittain and Holtby); is launched as a writer by 1925 or earlier; politically liberal, drawn Leftwards by the rise of Fascism in Europe and by the miseries of the Depression in Britain. Moreover, Warner's enduring lesbian marriage with the poet Valentine Ackland was very different from the affairs between Christopher Isherwood and his German lover Heinz, or between Stephen Spender and his guardsman Tony Hyndman ('Jimmy Younger' of *World Within World*). And her Communist activism was far more active and whole-hearted than the political dabblings of Auden, Spender or Isherwood. (Edward Upward is another matter.)

In 1987, women writers were not recognised as part of thirties literature. Thus Frank Kermode's otherwise excellent book *History and Value* (1988) about the left-wing literature of the 1930s focuses on the poetry of Auden and Spender and the fiction of Isherwood and Upward, plus a couple of little-known novels, notably Lewis Jones's *Cwmardy* (1937) and *We Live* (1939) and Stephen Haggard's forgotten novel *Nya* (1938). He discusses no women writers at all.²⁰ In the chapter 'Canon and Period', implicitly defending his own selectivity, Kermode defines the 'canon' and the 'historical period' as indispensable constructs, partly authentic and partly invented, which 'enable us to package historical data that would otherwise be hopelessly hard to handle, and ... do so by making them *modern*'. Canonised texts become 'timeless':

Once books are canonised, certain changes come over them. First, they are completely locked into their times, their texts as near frozen as devout scholarship can make them. Secondly, they are paradoxically, by that very fact, set free of time. Thirdly, the separate constituents become not only books in their own right but part of a larger whole – a whole because it is so treated.²¹

Kermode's definition of the literary canon is explicitly modelled on the sacred texts that were chosen to make up the Bible, in which 'the best commentary on a verse is another verse, possibly placed very far away from it'.²² It is also a recognisable description of the old-fashioned 'Beowulf to Virginia Woolf' BA curriculum in English Literature in which Mary Jacobs and I were educated, in which (for example) we read Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as 'set free of time' – that is, as a 'timeless' tragedy, and as part of the range of English Literature, on which we would eventually be examined.

At this point, Frank Kermode's 'canon' shades into the idea of the 'curriculum' of 'valued texts', which in 1988 was beginning to be queried by feminist and African-American revisionary critics and scholars. Kermode distanced himself from such critiques, pointing out that the dissenters still couldn't do without the canon, which 'is what the insurgents mean to occupy as the reward of success ... What we have here is not a plan to abolish the canon but one to capture it'.²³ This is a regrettable lapse by a great critic into anxiety-driven defensiveness. We feminist critics whom Kermode accused in 1988 of plotting a revolutionary take-over of literary history were seeking not, as he argued, to re-write literature according to identity politics, but to enlarge the definition of enduringly valued texts while critiquing the limitations of accepted classics and of canon-formation. To quote my own 1981 essay 'In Her Own Image: Contemporary Women Poets', 'It is perfectly possible for a poem to be biased, insensitive and sexist ... and yet to be written with great power and beauty'. I instanced *Paradise Lost* as a 'misogynist' work which is also a great poem, and Philip Larkin's poem 'High Windows' as a poem which represents an emphatically male view of sexual liberation as what 'everyone [sic] old has dreamt of all their lives'.²⁴

In 1981, you still had to make a case for choosing to read women poets at all, which is one reason why I began an account of contemporary work by Anne Stevenson, Eavan Boland, and especially Adrienne Rich struggling to reclaim alien tradition ('this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you') and to celebrate 'a whole new poetry beginning' from love between women, with combative remarks about male-dominated tradition. The other reason, of course, is the intellectual and political ferment of the women's movement in the seventies and eighties, represented by the feminist anthology *One Foot on the Mountain* (1979), which my essay also discussed.²⁵ The male-dominated canon of literature for which Kermode was arguing has not been destroyed but enlarged by feminist scholars

and critics, and – especially – publishers. As Mary Jacobs’ anecdote about discovering Sylvia Townsend Warner in 1977 by picking up the Women’s Press edition of *Lolly Willowes* implies, feminist publishing houses played a key role in transforming the reading public’s understanding of English-language literature of the twentieth century. Virago Modern Classics with their trademark green covers had by 1990 reprinted all Warner’s seven novels, and the Women’s Press and the smaller Sheba and Onlywomen Press were responsible for bringing a great deal of women’s writing, not just Warner’s, back into circulation. The feminist aspirations of Virago’s Modern Classics were signalled both by the introductions they carried by women critics, and by the epigraph facing each title page:

It is only when women start to organize
in large numbers that we become a
political force, and begin to move towards
the possibility of a truly democratic society
in which every human being can be brave,
responsible and diligent in the struggle
to live at once freely and unselfishly.

SHEILA ROWBOTHAM

*Women, Resistance and Revolution*²⁶

Yet although the existence of women writers in modern and modernist literature is now widely accepted, Sylvia Townsend Warner is not yet famous. True, recent articles published in *Modernism/Modernity* have noticed the subversiveness of Warner’s overt traditionalism, but she is absent from Lawrence Rainey’s otherwise women-friendly large anthology *Modernism* (2010, used as a set undergraduate text at Kent University), with its substantial selection of other women writers including Cunard. Claire Harman’s 1989 biography and her edition of Warner’s *Diaries* (1990), followed by Susanna Pinney’s edition of Warner’s correspondence with Valentine Ackland *I’ll Stand by You* (1998), have made Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland celebrated figures in the history of twentieth-century gay and lesbian writing. Frances Bingham’s edition of Valentine’s poetry includes the whole text of their jointly written *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1934) as a pioneering work of lesbian poetry; Terry Castle’s much-cited essay ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction’ (1989)²⁷ did much to establish *Summer Will Show* as a lesbian classic, and her work is admired by the queer novelists Ali Smith, Sarah Waters

and Philip Hensher.²⁸ Yet Warner still, in her biographer's phrase, 'evades the canon'. What has prevented her from appearing with Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen as a Penguin Modern Classic, used as a set text for undergraduate courses on modern literature?

Part of the answer is political. Warner's record of Communist activism did her reputation no good at all with reviewers and post-war literary historians. She was aware of this herself; asked in 1975 whether her Communist activism had affected her literary standing, Warner replied: 'Oh, it affected it very badly. I usually had two or three amazingly good reviews, but I never had reviews from the sort of reviewers that *sell* books'.²⁹ In 1968, carping obituaries of Nancy Cunard prompted her to write furiously to Edgell Rickword, 'Have you noticed that those who stirred a finger for Spain are left for the kites and crows to deal with? And she was a poet, too. What can we expect?'³⁰ Cold War politics made her *persona non grata* with Columbia University which, having commissioned the opera *The Sea Change* from Paul Nordoff with Warner as librettist, cautiously cancelled the production in 1950, presumably because she was too hot to handle in the McCarthy era. As she wrote in her diary, 'Alas, my poor Paul, my associations have done him no good I fear'.³¹ Years later, she wrote to Maxwell that 'both Paul and I were badged with unsound views – Shelley too for that matter'.³² Warner's loyalty to the Communist Party attracted disapproval from post-war literary historians of the thirties, if they noticed her at all. Hugh D. Ford's *A Poet's War* (1965) mentions Warner only in a hostile account of *Left Review* and its writers, as an example of blinkered Communist writing: 'Sylvia Townsend Warner assured readers that anarchists, not Communists, had set fire to Barcelona churches'.³³ He ignored Warner's Spanish poems, although he ought to have known her 'Waiting at Cerbère' and 'Benicasim' from the anthology *Poems for Spain* (1939).³⁴ Julian Symons in his (formerly) influential history-memoir *The Thirties: A Dream Revolved* (1975) unfavourably compared the Communist-orientated *Left Review*, to which Warner was a contributor, with the 'sharply intelligent' *New Verse*, citing three quotations from the former, followed by the sneer 'It would be difficult to find anything much worse ... than these extracts from *Left Review*'. Symons's anti-Communism was compounded by his gender politics; his chapter on 'Spain' approvingly cites Stephen Spender's anonymous but unmistakable caricature of Warner as a 'graciously forbidding Communist lady writer who began her remarks to Spender with "Wouldn't it be less selfish, comrade?" and went on to some course of action convenient to herself'.³⁵ For Symons, as

for Spender, who obviously couldn't stand Warner's self-confidence, literature was Men Only. The phrase 'lady writer' was therefore a comic contradiction in terms, and a *Communist* lady writer was truly hilarious. (A Communist gentleman writer like Spender himself was of course perfectly OK.) To make matters worse, Sylvia Townsend Warner was a lesbian. Her cousin Janet Pollock later affirmed that 'Sylvia had been kept off both radio and [BBC] television for two reasons: her membership of the Communist Party and her lesbianism'.³⁶ No wonder she was marginalised for so many years.

On the other hand, some historians of radicalism and queer literature have been put off by Warner's relatively privileged class origins, her cultured 'gentry' voice and her social ease with Establishment people, much as she might dislike them.³⁷ And Warner's relationship to feminism could be edgy. Her implicitly feminist fable of the spinster who becomes a witch in *Lolly Willowes* (1926) avoids militancy, and, unlike Virginia Woolf, she does not seem to have felt disadvantaged by her lack of a college degree. (She might perhaps have felt differently if, instead of being the only child of a brilliant schoolmaster and 'the apple of her father's eye',³⁸ she too had had brothers educated at public schools and Cambridge while she stayed at home.) The difference between the two writers' responses to Cambridge University in the late 1920s is striking. Warner's diary entry about visiting King's College in 1928 records her delight in her lover Percy Buck playing the organ in the chapel at night, 'beyond all my dreams, to be listening to music so, in the dark of that ancient and bare building', and her pleasure in attending the college feast 'glittering with silver, and grapes, and cherries, and all the thousands of admirable young men' followed by an evening with Eric Milner-White, Dean of King's College and an old pupil of her father at Harrow, during which she half-heartedly defended 'female undergraduates' from Buck's charge of 'dowdiness'.³⁹ This enjoyment of being a (temporary) insider is the direct opposite of Virginia Woolf's frustration and anger at being barred as a female from entering the library of Trinity College. And Warner had even less time than Woolf for female rage. Charlotte Brontë is famously criticised in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) for letting her resentment at the constrictions of her life affect the narrative of *Jane Eyre* – 'The woman who wrote those pages will write in a rage when she should write calmly. She will write foolishly when she should write wisely'⁴⁰ – but Woolf's reproaches are mild compared with Warner's 1927 essay 'Horrid Females'. In this review of a new biographical series 'Representative Women', commemorating 'female achievement' for the

feminist weekly *Time & Tide*, Warner expresses revulsion at these lives of notable women whom (except for Aphra Behn) she calls 'rampant monsters of egotism ... united in one common and appalling passion: to get what they want; and in one common and appalling conviction: that they are right'.⁴¹ Warner hated angry self-assertion, especially by great ladies; as Maud Ellmann says of one of her thirties novels, 'In Warner's scale of values, class trumps gender'.⁴² She will never be a feminist icon like Virginia Woolf.

Yet against the dismissiveness of 'Horrid Females' (1927) must be set Warner's 1959 essay 'Women as Writers', praising the directness, independence and integrity of women writers from Dorothy Osborne in the seventeenth century to her own near-contemporaries Colette and Frances Cornford. The essay argues, in implicit (but probably conscious) opposition to Woolf's fable of the thwarted life and tragic death of Shakespeare's sister, that women come to literature 'through the pantry window ... on the same footing as William Shakespeare'.⁴³ Her letters to friends, especially after 1940, put a strong case for women's autonomy. In 1944, she wrote to Nancy Cunard, 'The great civil war, Nancy, that will come and must come before the world can begin to grow up, will be fought out on this terrain of man and woman, and we must storm and hold Cape Turk before we talk of social justice'. Her letter five years later congratulating Paul Nordoff on the birth of his daughter is a classic of feminist wisdom:

I hope she will be very, very happy; and I hope she will be without fear. I am quite sure that to be fearless is the first requisite for a woman; everything else that is good will grow naturally out of that, as a tree has leaves and fruit and grows tall and full provided that its roots have a good hold of the ground. Bring her up to be fearless and unintimidated by frowns, hints, and conventions, and then she will be full of mercy and grace and generosity. It is fear that turns women sour, sly, and harsh to their neighbours. It was Shakespeare's Constance who said she was a 'a woman, naturally born to fear'. Not naturally, I think, but hereditarily; and so to be guarded against fear before all else.⁴⁴

That letter puts me in mind of Mary Jacobs' own qualities of grace and generosity. It also says much about Sylvia Townsend Warner herself – a woman who, protesting in her sixties against environmental destruction and asked 'how I would feel about such vain strivings when

I come to die', responded 'When I die, I hope to think I have annoyed a great many people'.⁴⁵ Too fearlessly left-wing for Cold War literary historians, too fearlessly literary for some of her queer readers,⁴⁶ Sylvia Townsend Warner did annoy quite a few people. But she continues to delight an increasing number of readers with the wit, grace, freedom and generosity of her writings.

Notes

- 1 Janet Montefiore, letter to Dr Angela Smith, Plymouth University, 2 March 2011. See also my obituary 'Mary Jacobs', *Sylvia Townsend Warner Newsletter* no. 25, 2011.
Mary Jacobs' publications are, in chronological order: 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral 1925–1934' in Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simon (eds.), *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, English Novelist 1893–1978* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), pp. 34–42; 'The Politics of Disclosure and the Fable', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2006, pp. 17–35; co-authored with Judith Bond, "'Nefarious Activities'": Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland and MI5 Surveillance, 1935–1955', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2008, pp. 40–58; 'Trees and Dreams: Sylvia Townsend Warner, the Pastoral, and Fantastic Ruralism', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2011, pp. 1–16; 'Gender, Genre and Politics: The Literary Work of Sylvia Townsend Warner in the 1930s', University of Plymouth 2011 (e-publication).
- 2 Harman, 'Who is Sylvia?', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2005, p. 3.
- 3 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *T. H. White: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, Chatto & Windus, 1967), pp. 32–4. T. F. Powys was 'discovered' when STW's friend Stephen Tomlin introduced her to his work, which she in turn showed to David Garnett, then working at the Nonesuch Press. Garnett, impressed, passed it to Charles Prentice at Chatto & Windus, which thereafter published Powys's fiction. See Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), pp. 50–51.
- 4 Charles Prentice, report to Chatto & Windus on STW's MS poems, 1924, quoted in Richard Garnett (ed.), *Sylvia & David: The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), p. 11.
- 5 Jenny Uglow, former director of Chatto & Windus, email to JM, 6 September 2011.
- 6 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 66.
- 7 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Salutation and Other Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), *Time Importuned* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927), *Opus 7* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1934).
- 8 See Geoffrey Grigson, 'Elfins and Densmen', *Country Life*, 6 January 1977; Peter Pears, foreword to Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Twelve Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1980), pp. 7–9. Warner wrote to William Maxwell of her pleasure in the Aldeburgh event; see William Maxwell (ed.), *Selected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), pp. 277–8. Her letter is also reprinted in Michael Steinman (ed.), *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell 1938–1978* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint Press, 2007), p. 324. For Donoghue and Davie, see Denis Donoghue, 'Ten Poets', *London Review of Books*, 7 November 1985, quoted by Donald Davie in 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: Posthumous', in *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain 1960–1988* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989), pp. 229–33. For John Updike's review of *A Stranger With A Bag* in the *New Yorker* 1966, see Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 287; see also Updike's 1973 remark

- that Warner 'gets better and better as she approaches one hundred years of age', quoted by Maxwell (*Element of Lavishness*, p. 269). For her writerly friendship with David Garnett, see *Sylvia & David*.
- 9 The three novels by Sylvia Townsend Warner in print in 1980 were: *Lolly Willowes* (London: Women's Press reprint, 1977), *The Corner That Held Them* (London: Chatto & Windus, hardback reprint, 1977) and *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (London: Virago reprint, 1978).
 - 10 'Who is Sylvia?', p. 3.
 - 11 Mary Jacobs, email to J. M., 11 October 2011.
 - 12 Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (1987), revised 3rd edition (London: Pandora Rivers Oram, 2004), p. 20.
 - 13 Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, pp. 23–5.
 - 14 Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, p. 20. See also notes 49 and 58 to chapter 1, pp. 245 and 248.
 - 15 Marion Shaw, 'Alien Experience: Virginia Woolf, Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain in the Thirties', in Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (eds.), *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London: Longman, 1997); Rod Mengham, 'The Thirties: Politics, Authority, Perspective', in Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 359–78; James Smith, *British Writers and M15 Surveillance 1930–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
Jane Dowson's landmark anthology *Women Poets of the 1930s* (London: Routledge, 1996) is still in print, but has never achieved the same 'mainstream' status as Robin Skelton (ed.), *Poetry of the Thirties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).
 - 16 See note 1 for details of the essay by Mary Jacobs and Judith Bond.
 - 17 In June 1943 Valentine Ackland sent the following cable to Elizabeth Wade White: 'DARK STORM IS MY PROPERTY LETTER EXPLAINS ALL STOP SOLOMON SEVEN VERSES SEVEN EIGHT'. 'Dark Storm' was a painting by the fisherman artist John Craske; Wade White was acting as US broker for several Craske paintings. The verses to which Ackland refers are from the Song of Solomon 7: 7–8: 'Thy stature is like to a palm tree and thy breasts to clusters of grapes. I said, I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs thereof: now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples'. The British intelligence officers eventually decided that Ackland's cable was 'rather unpleasant, but harmless', and after two weeks allowed its delivery. See Mary Jacobs and Judith Bond, "Nefarious Activities", pp. 10–14.
 - 18 While I was writing *Feminism and Poetry*, I knew *Summer Will Show* and *After The Death of Don Juan* only by their titles. In 1986, while I was living in Moscow, I read *After The Death of Don Juan* in the Lenin Library (which might have pleased STW). I read *Summer Will Show* a little later, in the 1987 Virago reprint.
 - 19 Janet Montefiore, 'Case-Studies of the Auden Generation', in *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 44–54.
 - 20 Frank Kermode, *History and Value: The Clarendon Lectures and the Northcliffe Lectures 1987* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). For Kermode's discussions of *Cwmardy* and *Nya*, see pp. 87–8 and 7–16. There are also brief mentions of Elizabeth Bowen's novel *The Death of the Heart* for its portrayal of Goronwy Rees as 'Eddie' (pp. 65–6), and of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* for its 'unity in dispersity' (p. 143).
 - 21 Kermode, *History and Value*, pp. 109, 115.
 - 22 Kermode, *History and Value*, p. 116.
 - 23 Kermode, *History and Value*, p. 114.
 - 24 Janet Montefiore, 'In Her Own Image: Feminism and Poetry', *South East Arts Review* (Winter 1981–2), pp. 35–47. A revised version of this article appeared in *Feminist Review* 13, Autumn 1982.
 - 25 Montefiore, 'In Her Own Image', pp. 37–40. The quotations are from Adrienne Rich's poems 'The Burning of Paper Instead of Children' and 'Transcendental Etude'. See also *One Foot on the Mountain: An Anthology of Feminist Poetry 1969–1979*, ed. Lilian Mohin (London: Onlywomen Press, 1979).
 - 26 Quotation facing title page of *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (London: Virago

- Press, 1978). This epigraph from Sheila Rowbotham's *Women, Resistance, Revolution* appeared on the title page of every Virago Modern Classic until 1990.
- 27 Terry Castle, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction', in *Textual Practice* (1989), reprinted in *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- 28 Sylvia Townsend Warner is a central figure in Gay Wachman's *Lesbian Empire: Radical Cross-writing in the Twenties* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001). However, Wachman's decision to situate her account of Warner and Virginia Woolf among lengthy discussions of the little-read British women writers Clemence Dane, Rose Allatini and Evadne Price limits her book's appeal to non-specialist readers.
- 29 Sylvia Townsend Warner in conversation with Val Warner and Michael Schmidt, 1975, in Peter Tolhurst (ed.), *With the Hunted: Selected Writings of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), p. 398. This conversation first appeared in 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Celebration', *PN Review* 23 (1982).
- 30 Sylvia Townsend Warner, letter to Edgell Rickword, 1968. Quoted in Wendy Mulford, *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, Letters, Politics 1930–1951* (London: Pandora Press, 1988), p. 3.
- 31 *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 171; entry for 30 November 1950.
- 32 *The Element of Lavishness*, p. 319; letter to William Maxwell, 31 March 1977.
- 33 Hugh D. Ford, *A Poet's War: British Poets and the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), p. 80.
- 34 'Waiting at Cerbere' and 'Benicasim' in Stephen Spender and John Lehmann (eds.), *Poems for Spain* (London: Hogarth Press, 1939), pp. 86–8.
- 35 Julian Symons, *The Thirties: A Dream Revolved* (1960), updated as *The Thirties and the Nineties* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1990), chapter 12, 'Spain', p. 101.
- 36 Janet Pollock, quoted by Tinch Minter in 'Sylvia's Gifts: Meetings with Sylvia Townsend Warner in the 1970s', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2015, p. 52.
- 37 See, for example, Gay Wachman in *Lesbian Empire* and Jane Garrity in *Stepdaughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
- 38 Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 13.
- 39 Harman, *Diaries*, pp. 64–5.
- 40 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) (Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics, 1978), pp. 8–9, 48–51, 70.
- 41 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Horrid Females', *Time & Tide*, 23 December 1927, reprinted in *Newsletter of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* no. 25, 2012.
- 42 Maud Ellmann, 'After the Death of Don Juan: Sylvia Townsend Warner's Spanish Novel', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2017, pp. 1–26. The remark I quote here comes from Ellmann's discussion of the novel's 'indifference to the plight of women, except for those oppressed by the class structure', p. 11.
- 43 'Women as Writers' (1959), in *With the Hunted*, p. 238. This essay originated as a paper to the Royal Society of Arts on 11 February 1959, chaired at Sylvia Townsend Warner's request by Leonard Woolf (*Selected Letters*, p. 168). Thanking him afterwards, she wrote: 'I wanted to say at the beginning of the lecture that all women writers owe you a debt of gratitude for what you did for one particular woman writer. But I don't think these things should be said in public; so let me say it now. I have long wanted to'; *Letters*, p. 172. Since Warner clearly had Virginia Woolf in mind when she gave the lecture, her suggestion that women entered literature on the same footing as Shakespeare looks like a discreet *riposte* to Woolf's own fable of 'Judith Shakespeare' in *A Room of One's Own*.
- 44 *Selected Letters*, p. 84 (to Nancy Cunard, 28 April 1944) and p. 108 (to Paul Nordoff, 4 February 1949).
- 45 Harman, *Diaries*, p. 235; entry for 15 March 1957.
- 46 See Jane Garrity's attack on Warner's erotic allusion to Donne in her love-letters to Valentine, *Stepdaughters of England*, p. 9.

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