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Paul Robichaud

Abstract

Sylvia Townsend Warner's early poetry maps her vision of England through a sustained engagement with the pastoral mode in its many variations. Warner's revisions of pastoral more typically involve complex ironies of character, situation and social observation. Such ironies are what make her poems modern, if not straightforwardly modernist. Because of its capacity for social criticism and its power to accommodate ironies, the pastoral mode offers a suggestive way of reading Sylvia Townsend Warner's poetry. Her pastoral modernism is deeply ironic, employing traditional modes and forms to question gender roles and social injustice.

Keywords pastoral; Sylvia Townsend Warner; modernist poetry; William Empson

Sylvia Townsend Warner's early poetry and fiction maps her vision of England through a sustained engagement with the pastoral mode in its many variations. Most of the poems in *The Espalier* (1925) are pastoral in the basic literary sense given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2.a) as 'portraying rural life or characters', though not usually 'in an idealized or romantic manner'.¹ Warner's revisions of pastoral more typically involve complex ironies of character, situation and social observation. Such ironies are what make her poems modern, while not straightforwardly modernist. The rural characters who appear in Warner's poems, with their solitary or wandering lives, often possess an inner power much greater than their constrained circumstances would suggest.

William Empson argues that ‘in pastoral you take a limited life and pretend it is a full and normal one’, but Warner is often less interested in making the limited life seem normal than in challenging our sense of normalcy as a standard of judgement.² More helpful for reading her is Empson’s immediately prior observation: ‘The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home in most versions of pastoral.’³ By drawing attention to the constraints imposed by social expectations and economic conditions, Warner pointedly shows the inadequacy of life ‘to the human spirit’. This is also true of her first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), whose protagonist herself recognises the constraints about her and moves to the country to find a more adequate life than the one provided by her relations. The country is here a place of freedom, if not a more authentic England than at least one in which authenticity is possible.

Reflecting on the politically ambiguous nature of pastoral, Mary Jacobs notes that ‘the pastoral has been claimed by both conservative and radical traditions; while having the power to reassure or at least to promote an acceptance of the “inevitability” of inequality, the pastoral has been equally able to facilitate social criticism as far back as Virgil’.⁴ Between the wars, writing about the English countryside reflected this traditional divide, with those on the right viewing it ‘as a settled and productive landscape, imbued with patriotism, spirituality and authenticity, attributes sharing a conservative sense of the importance of origins, continuity and tradition’, and those on the left drawing attention to the harsh conditions actually endured by the rural poor.⁵ Jacobs argues that for Warner, as for many of her contemporaries, ‘while “the country” could be a site for social criticism on behalf of the poor and the dispossessed, it could also suggest positive ascriptions for the fleeting, the feral and the marginal, along with the more familiar comforts of a rural community celebrating harvest home’.⁶ What she calls ‘fantastic ruralism’ is Warner’s way of imaginatively combining the different strands of pastoral that characterised writing about the English countryside during the interwar period.

Jacobs’s claims about Warner’s fiction are equally relevant to a reading of her poetry, particularly its relationship to a folk culture shaped and shared by women. She cites a 1959 lecture by Warner, ‘Women as Writers’, which celebrates those woman writers who have ‘a willing ear for the native tongue, for turns of phrase used by carpenters, gardeners, sailors, milliners, tinkers, old nurses, and that oldest nurse of all, ballad and folklore’.⁷ That ‘oldest nurse of all’ is a gendered body

of wisdom and tradition transmitted by women, a reality sometimes obscured by the male collectors of the Romantic era: 'Warner's explorations of the relationships between the countryside, the pantry window and the ballad form are particularly concerned with gendered aspects, emphasising (older) women's work and women's lore.'⁸ This living English folk tradition, which Warner encountered first-hand from countrywomen such as Mrs May in Essex, is both an important context and a source for her poetry.

Warner's poem 'The Image' (from *The Espalier*) provides an exceptionally clear example of the way her poetry can take its inspiration from 'the oldest nurse of all' to present an anti-pastoral vision of English folk tradition. The poem is modelled closely on the traditional Scottish ballad, 'Lord Ronald' (also known as 'Lord Randall'), in which a son returns home after dining with his lover. He repeatedly tells his mother that he 'fain wad lie doon', and after he reveals that his dogs have swollen and died, she realises that he has been poisoned.⁹ Where 'Lord Ronald' is written in four-line tetrameter stanzas rhyming *aabb*, Warner chooses the more conventional ballad stanza of alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines rhyming *abcb*. While the literary ballad has a long history in English going back to the late eighteenth century, Warner's imitation of 'Lord Ronald' raises questions about gender, poetic form and tradition. Jan Montefiore has observed that 'The ambivalent relationship of women poets to the English traditions which they "inherited" as educated women often appears in their fondness for imitating other styles.'¹⁰ The ballad form in English occupies an ambivalent place in poetic tradition, associated on the one hand with canonical male poets like Coleridge and Keats and on the other with a folk tradition transmitted mainly by women. By imitating the traditional ballad form, Warner knowingly participates in both traditions, perhaps even restoring the ballad to its origins as a form favoured by women singers and storytellers. The story she tells is more sinister than that told in 'Lord Randall', evoking the arcane tradition of women's magic that is at the core of witchcraft. The poem opens with the son, named William, returning home late. His mother scolds him for visiting 'a young maiden / At this hour of the night'.¹¹ William pleads his innocence, claiming he only wished to 'walk around the house / And think she was within' (48). He sees her inside, sitting by the fire with her cat, but what he witnesses is a scene of terror:

Slowly she drew out from under her apron
An image made of wax,

Shaped like a man, and all stuck over
With pins and with tacks.

In the hair he sees 'hanging down to its shoulders', William recognises the lock of his own that he gave her three days prior. To his horror, the maiden puts the image in the dying fire:

She set it down to stand in the embers –
The wax began to run.
Mother! Mother! That waxen image,
I think it was your son! (48)

Despite his mother's reassurances about the figure being 'but a piece of maiden foolishness', William succumbs to the spell. All the mother can do is curse the maiden and the day that William left to find a wife. The ballad concludes with William dreaming of his wedding and wondering, 'What have I done to her that she / Should do me this harm?' (49). Psychologically, the apparently groundless malice of the maiden can perhaps be seen as reflecting the mother's resentment at the departure of her son; the overall feeling is that the son has unwittingly triggered forces beyond his power to understand or resist, forces that are gendered as female.

As a well-read if largely self-educated poet, Warner participates in the wider English literary tradition while drawing inspiration from the oral tradition of 'ballad and folklore'. In a late interview, she singles out seventeenth-century poetry, particularly John Dryden's, as an abiding example of poetic excellence.¹² Her taste here is aligned with that of many modern poets, perhaps most obviously T. S. Eliot, who favoured Donne as well as Dryden, but also with women poets such as Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, for whom metaphysical poets and especially George Herbert were important models of formal inventiveness. Nonetheless, one of the challenges involved in thinking about Warner's poetry is its relationship to other twentieth-century poetry (including that by modernist poets) and its immediate antecedents. Jane Marcus, for example, stresses the need to stretch the definitional boundaries of modernism to include Warner's radical critique of modern rural life, noting that 'In the age of metropolitan modernism, Warner politicizes the pastoral.'¹³ Given the scarcity of critical commentary on her poems, however, it is unclear whether such repositioning is enough to bring Warner's poetry into the canon of modern verse. Claire Harman, in her introduction to the *New Collected Poems*, asks 'whether

or not Warner can be retrospectively inserted into the canon' of modern poetry.¹⁴ Where her poems would fit depends in part on how we read her in relation to other poets. Her portrayals of rural England, keen sense of irony and inventiveness with traditional verse forms suggest aspects of the poetry of Edward Thomas, A. E. Housman (who praised her poems) and Thomas Hardy, but Warner's own poetry both participates in and revises this native male English tradition. Her vision of England similarly revises – even parodies – the idyllic pastoral world of early twentieth-century English music, familiar to Warner through her work as a composer and musicologist.

Housman is part of the cultural background of that pastoral world for many early twentieth-century English composers, including John Ireland. Ireland, who composed a song cycle of poems from *A Shropshire Lad* called *The Land of Lost Content* (1920–1), also wrote settings for three of Warner's poems, 'Hymn for a Child', 'The Soldier's Return' and 'The Scapegoat' in his *Songs Sacred and Profane* (1929–31). Of these, 'The Soldier's Return' is the most Housmanesque in its dramatic situation, though Warner revises both Housman's typical form and his theme. The poem is written in four-line stanzas rhyming *abcb*, the most common stanza in *A Shropshire Lad*, but Warner chooses trimeter lines rather than the tetrameter favoured by Housman. The three-beat lines give the poem a brisk rhythm that captures the urgency of a soldier returning home to his lover. Where *A Shropshire Lad* typically mourns the death or departure of young men for the battlefield, Warner celebrates the homecoming of a survivor:

Jump through the hedge, lass!
Run down the lane!
Here's your soldier-laddie
Come back again. (50)

The terms of address and self-reference – 'lass' and 'laddie' – play variations on Housman's ubiquitous 'lad'. They also playfully revise the subtle homoeroticism of Housman's language into almost parodically heterosexual terms. The soldier-speaker is presented as the embodiment of heterosexual desire and as a threatening presence even if not an actual threat. He urges his lover to 'Never be fear'd' of his 'black' looks or 'hoarse' voice as he bounds over hedge, lane, hill, meadow and watercourse:

Belike he's out of breath
With walking from the town.

He will speak better
When the sun's gone down. (50)

The soldier's allusion to love-making after sunset betokens a transformation from lowering and gruff soldier into sweet-talking lover. It also suggests the brutalising effect of war upon men, transforming Housman's lads into something rougher, at least outwardly.

Solitary men and women, tramps and outcasts, appear often in Warner's early poetry. 'Nelly Trim' is one such figure and her poem is more straightforwardly and explicitly pastoral. The poem narrates an erotic encounter between a traveller and Nelly Trim, a woman who lives alone and welcomes him into her home. Responding to the depth of the man's need, she willingly acquiesces to his desire and he departs after their encounter. Warner excludes any sense of tragedy – Nelly Trim is not a 'ruined maid' of the sort elegised by Thomas Hardy. She is presented instead as a model of sexual independence who lives on apparently indifferent to public opinion. In the poem's final stanzas, the narrator relates that this story has passed into popular memory, 'And some aver / She'd comfort thus any / Poor traveller' (45). Her poem includes us as readers among those who would judge her – 'A wanton, you say?' – before casting Nelly's dalliance with the tramp in universal terms that make it authentically pastoral. Warner's narrator asks us to consider their encounter in light of the way wives love their husbands:

Yet where's the spouse,
However true
To her marriage-vows,
To whom the lot
Of the earth-born allows

More than this? –

Warner's question presents the sexual union of Nelly and the traveller as no different in kind than the more long-term relationships implied by marriage, driven by the desire and necessity common to all 'the earth-born'. The final lines of the poem describe what a wife's lot 'allows' her:

To comfort the care
Of a stranger, bound
She knows not where,

And afraid of the dark,
As his fathers were.

Portraying the union of man and woman as fundamentally the same, regardless of circumstance or social approval, turns the tale of Nelly Trim into a pastoral fable. We as readers identify with them as figures who embody a common desire and compassion in which we too share.

The final (and longest) poem in *The Espalier*, 'Peeping-Tom', narrates the transformation of a farm labourer into a tramp, exploring how someone crosses the threshold from the human world to the wilderness. It is a fundamentally anti-pastoral poem. Warner presents rural society as exploitative and cruel, while nature remains indifferent to human suffering and void of meaning. When Tom's employer, a local farmer, learns that he hopes one day to own land, he grants him as a joke an uncultivated field by a cliff overlooking the sea. Tom's plans to grow food come to nothing as his land is overrun by weeds and saltwater and the few beans he grows are devoured by rabbits. He endures his wife's scorn and his friends' laughter. Then one day Tom gazes too long and too deeply into a wildflower growing on the hillside and succumbs to its natural magic. He has become one of those:

Who kneel and worship before the undesigned,
And all their strength relinquish to obey
A voice that seeks not to be understood –
No, nor yet purpose has enough to be a mock. (83)

The effect such an encounter with ultimate meaninglessness has on those who experience it is to make them, after an initial enchantment, 'find their hearts astray, and their blood frozen, / And know themselves averted from their kind' (83). Tom gives up weeding his lot and is dismissed by the farmer for dereliction of duty. Rejected by society, Tom abandons it for the wilderness, becoming a tramp. The poem concludes in the less distant past, when the speaker stumbles upon the land once cultivated by Tom and encounters an old man who is likely Tom himself. He seems 'Scarcely more human' than the seagulls and when he bends over to pull up a weed, the old man can only stare, puzzled, before limping on his way. The poem is both a post-Darwinian fable about our own alienation from an ultimately meaningless natural world that cannot satisfy our need for meaning on its own terms and a critique of how a class-ridden society exploits and rejects the powerless.

Because of its capacity for social criticism and its power to accommodate ironies, the pastoral mode offers a suggestive way of reading Sylvia Townsend Warner's poetry. Her pastoral modernism is deeply ironic, employing traditional modes and forms to question gender roles and social injustice. In doing so, Warner expands the possibilities of traditional verse in ways that anticipate the canonical poets of the 1930s and challenge the urban bias of Anglo-American modernism.

Notes

- 1 'Pastoral, n. and adj.': in the OED Online, Oxford University Press, accessed 1 June 2018. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138625?rskey=eKuhvj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.
- 2 William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1979), p. 95.
- 3 Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, p. 95.
- 4 Mary Jacobs, 'Trees and Dreams: Sylvia Townsend Warner, the Pastoral, and Fantastic Ruralism', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2011*, p. 2.
- 5 Jacobs, 'Trees and Dreams', pp. 2–3.
- 6 Jacobs, 'Trees and Dreams', p. 3.
- 7 Quoted in Jacobs, 'Trees and Dreams', p. 1.
- 8 Jacobs, 'Trees and Dreams', p. 4.
- 9 'Lord Ronald', in Emily Lyle (ed.), *Scottish Ballads* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), pp. 257–8.
- 10 Jan Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 129.
- 11 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), p. 48. Further references to Warner's poems are from this edition and are cited in the text.
- 12 Michael Schmidt and Val Warner, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in Conversation', *PN Review* 8.3 (1982), pp. 36–7.
- 13 Jane Marcus, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner', in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 531–8.
- 14 Claire Harman, 'Introduction', in Warner, *New Collected Poems*, p. 2.

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