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### 'Possibilities in a Collaboration': *Boxwood* in Context

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# ‘Possibilities in a Collaboration’: *Boxwood* in Context

*Michael Nott*

## Abstract

A biographical reminiscence by Sylvia Townsend Warner describing a moment in her early childhood when she awoke to the power of language, and recalling some of her glimpses of the nuns living nearby in the Convent of the Visitation.

**Keywords** Sylvia Townsend Warner; life-writing; nuns; constipation; bicycles.

Sylvia Townsend Warner’s 1958 poetry collection *Boxwood* is an unusual book with an unusual genesis. As Warner herself remarked in an interview,

That was a ridiculous affair because Reynolds Stone was a friend of mine and we’d gone to visit him one day and found him sitting on the floor in an attitude of despair, tossing over anthologies. It developed that Ruari Maclean [*sic*] wanted to do a collection of his woodcuts and thought it would be child’s play for Reynolds to find suitable quotations to ‘illustrate’ the woodcuts. Poor Reynolds was going out of his mind looking for suitable quotations and I thought to myself that it was far more important for him to go on with his woodcuts than to be hunting out quotations and I said to him, ‘Leave all this nonsense. I’ll write you poems to illustrate your drawings; I can do it in half the time!’ And that’s what they were.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, Stone had been commissioned by the Monotype Corporation, via McLean, to make 16 wood engravings for a book, the purpose of which was to foreground a newly cut type – Dante Roman and Italic – designed by Giovanni Mardersteig. His resultant engravings of trees, hillsides, churchyards and woodland prompted Warner to write quiet meditations on rural life, storytelling and human mortality. ‘Though these poems are avowedly written to order’, writes Peter Scupham,

they reveal, as does everything she wrote, an unillusioned way of seeing, feeling, and thinking demonstrated in plain style – her poetic vocabulary never mines the more outré veins of the dictionary – her deceptive simplicities and occasional archaisms made enticing by a sure and strange fitness of cadence – she was herself executant, composer and musicologist. Her concerns, ostensibly rural, haunted, balladic, were never modified to suit the exigencies of passing fashion ...<sup>2</sup>

Many of the poems recall details and themes from Warner’s early work. Several of the *Boxwood* poems feature headstones and churchyards, common images in her poetry since her first collection, *The Espalier* (1925). The ninth poem, ‘People whom I never knew’, recalls ‘Quiet Neighbours’, the opening poem of *The Espalier*, with its sense of lives lived unseen. With the poems finished, Stone called Warner in May 1957 to say that Stanley Morison at Monotype wanted to produce their book in a limited edition. ‘My poor poems are part of the charm’, Warner wrote in her diary:

At the same moment I looked out of the telephone window, and saw the first rain breaking through the drought, and knew just how the plants & the ground felt. For a blessed stranger called Beatrice Ward [*sic*] had found them moving; and after so long, to rouse an uncompromised emotion.<sup>3</sup>

Warde, a writer and scholar of typography who was, at this time, publicity manager at Monotype, wrote a short foreword to the first edition of *Boxwood*, a curious meditation on how unusual it is for poems to illustrate pictures. The foreword was later cut from the slightly enlarged version of *Boxwood* published by Chatto & Windus in 1960, which added five new pairings of poem and wood engraving to the 16 in the original edition.

Warner and Stone shared a locale, so the poems derive as much from the Dorset countryside as from Stone's vision(s) of it. According to Warner, Reynolds was 'a delightful neighbour, since there is always something going on, two hand-presses, and a great long table heaped with blocks, tools, paintbrushes, books, leaves, specimen papers, an indestructible confusion with Reynolds serenely finding whatever it is he wants, like a bumblebee over a flower-bed'.<sup>4</sup> Reynolds and his wife Janet Stone moved to the Old Rectory in Litton Cheney, Dorset, in early 1953, some 10 miles from Warner and her lover, Valentine Ackland. The Old Rectory, writes McLean, was 'an extraordinary and magical-feeling place ... On one side tall beeches and elms, with an old church tower, made a picture that brought back echoes of a hundred Birket Foster wood engravings; according to Lord Clark, Reynolds loved the splendid trees in his garden "more



**Figure 1** Sylvia Townsend Warner at the Old Rectory, Litton Cheney. Image courtesy of the Estate of Reynolds and Janet Stone.

than anything in the world except his family”.<sup>5</sup> Among the Victorian wood engravers of the 1860s, whose technique and book illustrations were a major influence on his work, Forster was a favourite of Stone’s. That McLean compares Stone’s immediate surroundings with Foster’s wood engravings blurs the boundaries of life and art, past and present. In numerous descriptions of Stone’s locale by friends and colleagues, one might be forgiven for thinking that he lived inside a pastoral wood engraving. As Kenneth Clark notes, Dorset ‘has become more and more the world of Reynolds Stone’s engravings, and it is only after wandering round the dell and stopping at every miniature cascade, that one begins to realise how much of his visual imagination has been nourished by the relationship of detail and mystery that is everywhere in his own surroundings’.<sup>6</sup>

But such a relationship has not been without its critics. In the context of twentieth-century wood engraving, landscape traditions re-emerged in the 1950s, with practitioners such as Joan Hassell and Stone working in such a manner that the influence of Thomas Bewick was unmissable. Stone was central to this new revival. As James Hamilton writes,

From the mid 1930s [Stone’s] own work has been directly inspired by the wood engravings of Bewick, Calvert and the Victorian wood engravers of the 1860s. Stone had been educated at Eton and Magdalene College, Cambridge, and had thus been isolated from the rough and tumble of art school. Living deep in rural Dorset, Stone also remained aloof from the art movements of the mid-twentieth century, creating instead a world in which nature is held at bay only by the benign and unassertive amendments of man.<sup>7</sup>

Hamilton tends to be critical of this Bewick revival, and he asks whether Bewick did as much harm as good to British wood engraving. ‘Bewick’s precise depiction of country life and the social order has set an example that generations of wood engravers have followed’, he writes,

leading to such a demand for intensity of detail that the viewer is in danger of judging wood engravings ... by the number of cuts visible per square inch. The neat and quaint little depictions of country life by Bewick’s twentieth-century followers, fine though some may be, have tended to drive wood engraving into a nostalgic dream, and damaged the art by reinforcing prejudices and received values.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary accounts were similarly critical, not to say scathing. Woodcut artist Rigby Graham denounced wood engravers for whom technical dexterity was the be-all and end-all, and whose lack of soul or spirit was killing off book illustration. In 1966 Graham addressed the Newcastle Imprint Club, saying, among other things, that

[s]o often the man who is prepared to sit and nibble away hour after hour in the manner of so and so is a stodgy and unimaginative being ... The by now large number of woodpeckers were everywhere and the faint tubercular cry of the young [Aubrey] Beardsley was hardly audible over the peck, peck, peck of the latter-day Bewicks. What is fresh in the line-block field has come from outside this birdseed class. It has come from painters, lithographers and others whose fire has not been quenched by a long and arduous training of eye stuck fast to graver and piece of boxwood hardly bigger than an Oxo cube.<sup>9</sup>

Graham does not mention Stone specifically, but it is clear from Stone's repertoire that he is one of several woodpeckers in Graham's cross hairs. As well as acknowledging his own debt to Bewick, Stone also provided a long, laudatory biographical introduction to an edition of Bewick's work published by Rupert Hart-Davis in 1953. (He provided a similar introduction for a retrospective of Gwen Raverat – another of Bewick's twentieth-century followers – in 1959.) Stone's debt to Bewick is not lost on Janet Montefiore, who has offered the one extended analysis of the *Boxwood* poems; or rather, of one of the *Boxwood* poems, 'Enter if you will'. According to Montefiore,

the poems and engravings of *Boxwood* conform to familiar, recognizable forms of Englishness. Both the stanzaic pattern of 'Enter if you will', its diction and most of all the picture it accompanies are very traditional in form. The style of Reynolds Stone's engravings of country landscapes, old houses, and churchyards and hens in an old stableyard belongs to a pastoral tradition of English wood engraving that descends in unbroken line from Thomas Bewick's eighteenth-century woodcuts depicting rural life. The mode in which the forgetful present appears in both poem and picture is gently pastoral: oblivion is represented by a chicken-run and 'henwife' (herself an archaism), not a battery farm and a car park.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2** Illustration for *Boxwood* poem XXI. Image courtesy of the Estate of Reynolds Stone.

Warner's poem, Montefiore suggests, makes no mention of the main features of Stone's picture – the ruined walls, the hens – and instead dwells on the vanished details of a past time: it is an elegiac listing of details. A 'perception of mortality' haunts the poem, and 'the sadness of Warner's lyric allows no consolation beyond the music of its own words'.<sup>11</sup> The invitation to the reader to 'enter if you will' is an invitation 'from the sunlit stable-yard of the present . . . into a vanished past that like the destroyed or crumbling mansion behind the wall, cannot be shown in Stone's engraving'.<sup>12</sup>

The word 'enter' occurs again in the final *Boxwood* poem, 'This year, last year', which shares a concern with mortality:

This year, last year . . . Leaf falls on leaf, life treads on life,  
 Innovation subsides upon innovation,  
 Time's lap hushes them all. Only the dragonflies  
 Flitting over the moat, or visiting children  
 Finding a story-tale, enter here as by right. (XXI)<sup>13</sup>

Stone's accompanying illustration shows a moated castle surrounded by trees. The dragonflies are Warner's invention: that level of detail is beyond wood engraving. Nor do we see the 'visiting children' in Stone's picture. Instead, the reader-viewer adopts this role, using Warner's

poems to look for stories in Stone's engravings. As in 'Enter if you will', Warner only alludes to the main focus of Stone's picture – the moated castle – instead treating it with the word 'here': to Warner, the visual subject of the picture is self-evident and does not need verbal description or confirmation. On the title page of both editions of *Boxwood*, the engravings are said to be 'illustrated in verse' by Warner. However, her approach to illustration is not to provide verbal pictures of Stone's engravings but to attempt to reveal the deeper meanings and emotional states behind them.

Prior to the first edition of *Boxwood*, Warner had not published a sole-authored book of poems since 1931. That book, *Opus 7*, was a long 1,400-line poem in couplets concerning the state of English pastoral. A joint collection with Ackland, *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, had appeared first in America in 1933 with Viking, and the following year in Britain with Chatto. One might argue, then, as Claire Harman does in her introduction to the *Collected Poems* (1982), that Warner had not published a conventional collection of poems since *Time Importuned* in 1928.<sup>14</sup> Nor is *Boxwood* what you might call conventional. As a collection, it has been called 'trivial' (Warner), 'distinctly modest' (Swaab) and 'a book of secondary importance' (Harman). When Norah Smallwood at Chatto wanted to publish an expanded edition, Warner at first 'gently blew on the project, which I feel is rather to[o] Georgian and precious to do any of us any good'.<sup>15</sup> To put the 1958 edition of *Boxwood* into the context of English-language poetry, *Howl and Other Poems* was published in 1956, Ted Hughes' *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957 and Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* in the same year. Again, we are reminded of the question Donald Davie asks of Warner's poetry up to and including *King Duffus* (1968): 'when is a style that is out of fashion also out of date?'<sup>16</sup> The poems are quiet meditations on human mortality and the longevity of the natural world, couched in the terms of the British pastoral and framed by the limits of Stone's wood engravings. *Boxwood* garners the occasional mention in discussions of Warner's poetry, usually as a reference point in terms of her later work, bracketed with *King Duffus*. Occasionally its poems are considered a little more closely. Montefiore, as we have seen, examines questions of absence and mortality in 'Enter if you will'. Peter Swaab, in his review of the *New Collected Poems* (2008), examines *Boxwood*'s 'fine example of the risky genre of cat poems' and discusses the differences between the cats in the two stanzas.<sup>17</sup> The first cat finds joy in 'The fire, the cushion, and the toy', the second in 'The wind, the dangerous dark ... The midnight world so wide'. Here 'Warner stays true to one





**Figure 3** Illustration for *Boxwood* poem I. Image courtesy of the Estate of Reynolds Stone.

of her central convictions', Swaab argues, 'that to give due regard to another creature you have to let it go where it mysteriously will as well as inviting it in'.<sup>18</sup> Stone's wood engraving shows a cat sitting on a cushion: there is nothing about the picture that suggests the second of Warner's cats. In fact, Swaab has identified a common structural feature of the *Boxwood* poems – two stanzas that examine a question, theme or scene – prompted by Stone's engravings – from different perspectives.

Of the 21 poems in the 1960 edition, nine have this two-stanza structure, including the opening poem:

Out of the silent rock the spring came welling  
And air gave it a voice immediately.  
I am free, it sang, I am free to hurry away.  
But here is happiness, said the fern, in this cool dell –

Stay!  
Here is security, said the swaying tree –  
Dwell!  
Never, never, never! sang the spring, I must go on  
my way though I know not whither.

In the second stanza, ‘the listening fox’ suggests that ‘the force of gravity, / Necessity, planetary influence, something of that sort, governs us all’ before he himself trots off for ‘breakfast on this fine morning’. The words of the fox support the stream and defy the fern and tree. Stone’s engraving shows the ‘cool dell’, with the stream welling in the foreground and the fox in the bottom left corner. The illustration is thick with foliage and it is difficult, at first glance, to distinguish the fox and stream from the trees, ferns, and leaves. It would not have been lost on Warner that wood engraving is a relief printing process, where the artist cuts away the area of the material that will not take ink (i.e. will print white), and the uncut area will print black. ‘As it is a relief medium’, Hamilton writes,

a xylograph [an engraving in wood] is made by, literally, carving light out of the dark. For this reason it is ideally suited to depicting night scenes. This quality is particularly apparent in wood engraving, in which a single white highlight can be smoothly engraved out of a black background ... Even daylight scenes engraved on wood cannot help but have a quality of moonlight, due to the silvery effect of light against black shadowy areas, and the sharpness of the boundary that can be drawn between them.<sup>19</sup>

These daylight scenes, Hamilton remarks, retain a ‘magical, distancing quality’, and we can see an example of this in the first poem, where Warner explicitly calls the scene in the wood engraving ‘this fine morning’.<sup>20</sup> The dell takes up the entire frame of the engraving, and the lack of anything outside the foliage – a hint of clouds or sky, for example – makes it feel more like an evening scene. Moreover, this opening pairing of poem and picture sets the tone for the rest of the collection. The key phrase is ‘here is security’, which Warner uses as a metaphor for her poems. Stone’s wood engravings offer a security, and Warner has been tasked to ‘illustrate the illustrations’. She could have remained within the ‘cool dell’ of Stone’s pictures, describing the scenes and providing the kind of pastoral captions Stone could have found in anthologies of eighteenth-century poetry. Instead, Warner uses them as

starting points for narratives. In this instance, she chooses to embody the stream, ‘free to hurry away’ from the frames of the pictures to interpret and expand them.

If Warner was aware that xylography is a relief process, she was also aware of its broader history. It is not only the duality of light and dark, nor how her poems of two stanzas use the wood engravings as a hinge between two different perspectives of the same scene, that inform *Boxwood*, but her use of the physicality of wood engraving in her poems. It is this awareness that turns *Boxwood* into a collection, or sequence, rather than just a series of individual poems brought together as illustrations or captions. As a result, the collection is self-reflexive, and Warner uses Stone’s focus on trees – as images in his engravings and as the material for them – as the central structure of the collection. Almost all of Stone’s *Boxwood* engravings – in both editions – feature trees. It is clear that Warner made a conscious choice to engage with this aspect of the engravings, as many of her poems refer directly to trees, or at least allude to them. Stone’s love of trees was well known, and Warner once said of him, ‘he looks at trees with an astonishing degree of love and trust and penetration; almost as though he were exiled from being a tree himself.’<sup>21</sup> As Scupham has argued, the strength of Warner’s writing is ‘that the physicality of the natural world



**Figure 4** Illustration for *Boxwood* poem III. Image courtesy of the Estate of Reynolds Stone.

is never far away', and nowhere is this more true than in the *Boxwood* poems.<sup>22</sup> The title of the collection refers to the tree from which blocks for wood engraving are cut. Boxwood, as Marigold Coleman writes, 'is a dense hard wood which offers maximum resistance to the graver's tools'.<sup>23</sup> In wood engraving, lines are incised across the end grain of the boxwood, as against the method in a woodcut, which is with the grain, on the plank side, using a knife. Bewick invented this new technique and, in Stone's words, 'showed that a graver and a piece of end-grain box-wood could produce a great range of tones, or what he called colour'.<sup>24</sup> In naming the collection *Boxwood*, Warner and Stone are purposefully highlighting the physicality of the wood engraver's craft.<sup>25</sup> The New Zealand illustrator and engraver John Buckland Wright, for example, preferred wood engraving because it has, in his words, 'perhaps more physical limitations than any other medium'.<sup>26</sup> Human mortality, as Montefiore has emphasised, haunts the *Boxwood* poems, and the ageless quality of the trees in Stone's engravings provides some interesting contrasts, both in the challenges they present to the engraver and in their longevity compared with a human lifetime, a recurrent theme of Warner's poems.

The third poem contrasts the youthfulness of children and the age of trees:

Playing among the boughs that were  
So high and out of mind last year,  
The children seem in a sleep-walking dream  
As though they played in upper air. (III)

Stone's picture shows children sitting and climbing on fallen trees in a scene that he drew from his own childhood. 'A great gale blew down 400 trees in Windsor Park', he writes in a biographical introduction to a book of his engravings in 1977, 'and laid low twelve enormous elms in the playing fields. I remember the look of devastation and the shock of a piece of our little world being turned upside-down, and how the great trunks were fun to play on.'<sup>27</sup> This informs our understanding of the connection between stories and trees in the pairings of poem and picture. Perhaps this is a story Stone told Warner when he showed her the engraving: with 'upper air' Warner seems to echo Stone's language of the world being turned 'upside-down'. This is the only picture in the sequence in which trees are not upstanding, where people seem to have some mastery over the natural world. It is important, however, that the figures are children: these trees have not been felled specifically



**Figure 5** Illustration for *Boxwood* poem IV. Image courtesy of the Estate of Reynolds Stone.

for human use but by a storm. Children are important for emphasising our imaginative engagement with the natural world, just as they are in the final poem when Warner writes that they enter the scene ‘by right’, looking for a ‘story-tale’.

In Warner’s fourth poem, ‘The book I had saved up to buy’, the speaker receives a book and, to read it in private, goes outside, ‘as though to read such poems were / A kind of prayer’. Searching for any bank or shade, the speaker settles down to read:

So why not here  
Where these old creaking chestnuts frown?  
There I sat down  
And read the poems; but the tree  
Spoke them to me. (IV)

Warner invents a narrative for Stone’s picture, where a solitary figure sits reading on a grassy bank in the shade of several tall, gnarled trees that transcend the frame of the engraving. Warner imagines the journey from an inside space to an outside one, across fields and through woods.

That the book is carried to beneath the shade of a tree is significant. Warner may have had in mind letterpress printing, which, like wood engraving, is a relief process for printing text that was in use from the mid-fifteenth century until the second half of the twentieth. That is to say, Warner constructs her poems with this kind of circularity in mind: stories in books are indebted to trees for both the method of printing (wood blocks) and what they are printed on (paper). Furthermore, the 'old creaking chestnuts' have been standing for hundreds of years and have stories of their own. We can read the closing lines as an image of Warner's composition: the trees, or wood engravings, spoke the poems to her, and allowed her to illustrate them.

It is this dynamic of 'illustration' that makes *Boxwood* such an unconventional collection. As Joanna Selborne argues, '[b]eyond decoration and literal interpretation lies the imaginative: an extension of the text, describing visually something more than words alone can express. . . . The capacity to work from darkness to light imbued wood engraving with a spiritual quality, making it a particularly appropriate illustrative medium through which to translate poetic texts.'<sup>28</sup> For *Boxwood*, though, we have to reverse this procedure and ask how poetry can 'translate' wood engraving, and what kind of spiritual quality, if any, Warner's poems drew from Stone's pictures. To do this, we must return to Warde's foreword and her assertion that *Boxwood* is a reversal of expectations as far as illustrated books are concerned, in that 'it is *the poet who is illustrating the wood engravings*'.<sup>29</sup> Warde is right to suggest that such a procedure was highly unusual. From the height of Victorian illustrated books from 1855–70, where wood engraving was a common form of illustration, artists illustrated existing literary texts. It was a similar story when photographically illustrated books began to appear in the 1860s. The relationship of the photographer to the literary text resembled that of other artists: the text provided scenes or landscapes for visual illustration. From photographically illustrated versions of Walter Scott's long poems, to anthologies of choice extracts from Wordsworth, to Julia Margaret Cameron's edition of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1875), photographers provided illustrations to existing literary texts. None of these works are what we might call collaborations in the sense that poet and photographer were actively working together on a project. Instead, this mode is what, in the context of the photo-essay, Andy Stafford calls 'retrospective', but it is widely applicable to other kinds of image-text where writer and artist are somehow engaged in or with each other's work.<sup>30</sup> This mode continued to structure illustrated books far into the twentieth century.

In *Boxwood*, the wood engraving – an art form the essence of which is to provide a means for illustration – becomes the interpretative centre *from* which the ‘illustrations’ in verse emerge; or, in Warde’s phrase, the poems are ‘projected out of the wood engravings. According to Warde, Warner ‘has stooped in ardent humility to the servant task of annotating and explaining what the artist has already said or hinted in his own medium; yet far from merely expanding upon the obvious, the words send the reader back to the picture to see it anew and with an enormous emotional enrichment’.<sup>31</sup> Each of Stone’s engravings, she writes, ‘was a small and masterly graphic exploration of a theme – a statement in light and shade, a pictorial meditation within a rectangle’, each conveying to Warner’s ‘agile and speculative mind something of the emotional content of the scene depicted and of the tenderness and wit with which it had been graphically interpreted’.<sup>32</sup> The frame of the woodblock would have appealed to Warner, and in the *Boxwood* poems we can see elements of the poetic programme she set out around 1930: Warner was ‘prejudiced’ against poems that ‘express soul-states’, ‘go on for a long time’ and ‘are verbally rich’, and she favoured poems ‘that are formally tight in thought and construction’, ‘evoke frames of mind’, ‘use few images’ and ‘look neat’.<sup>33</sup> With the image already in place through Stone’s picture, Warner is able to evoke an atmosphere or frame of mind by hinting at a narrative or event beyond – or leading into – the picture. That being said, if we were not told that the poems had been written in response to the pictures, would we be able to tell, or at least realise that this was not a typical example of the illustrated book?

What is perhaps most interesting in Warde’s foreword is the method she posits for how one should read and view the book. ‘After only the swiftest glance at the open page’, she writes,

let him lay a restraining palm down upon the printed words, pushing them back into the wings until his eyes have had a full chance to examine the picture by itself, with special reference to its ability to touch the emotions as a representation of something. Let him fix in that moment to his own satisfaction whatever remembrances, analogy or ‘train of thought’ it has started up in his own mind. And then, but only then, let the hand be lifted from the page ... to see how nimbly and poignantly Miss Warner has surpassed his expectations.<sup>34</sup>

Warner’s poems are ekphrastic in the sense that they were written in response to Stone’s engravings and, to some degree, describe

them. While they may be, to some extent, ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’, in James Heffernan’s commonly cited definition of ekphrasis, the relationship that Warner’s poems seek with Stone’s engravings is not one of ‘rivalry’ or ‘supremacy’ – again to use Heffernan’s terms – but what David Kennedy has described as ‘one that, in effect, changes both’ in a more symbiotic manner.<sup>35</sup> Warner’s poems work with Stone’s engravings to create a complementary visual and verbal representation; they do not challenge the pictures but encounter them and work with them. This is especially the case when the piece of visual art that has prompted the poem appears alongside it on the page. When they appear side by side, the poem must do more than describe the photograph, painting, or engraving so as not to be simply derivative.<sup>36</sup>

Warde claims that any of Warner’s *Boxwood* poems ‘might take its place in an anthology on its own merits without reference to the picture it was written to “illustrate”’.<sup>37</sup> As it turns out, the *Boxwood* poems were gathered as part of Warner’s *Collected Poems* (1982) and the much expanded *New Collected Poems* (2008): on both occasions they were printed alone, without the accompanying engravings. Reviewing the *New Collected Poems*, Swaab makes an illuminating comparison with another unusual collection of poems:

Copyright issues may also have played a part in the omission of the illustrations to *Boxwood*, an understandable loss, but an important one given that the poems were produced in dialogue with specific images, like Thom Gunn’s poetic illustrations to his brother’s photos in *Positives* (which, perhaps for that reason, Gunn omitted from his own *Collected Poems*).<sup>38</sup>

Thom Gunn’s collaboration with his brother Ander, *Positives* (1966), contains 37 poems in unrhymed syllabics facing 39 black-and-white photographs. Gunn conceived of them as captions for Ander’s photographs, and as such only included two in his *Collected Poems* (1994) which he felt could stand alone without the photographs. Despite the great differences in tone and theme between *Boxwood* and *Positives*, Swaab’s comparison is instructive in highlighting the unusual practice of writing poems to illustrate pictures, be they photographs or wood engravings. ‘Looking through Ander’s photographs’, Gunn later reflected, ‘I found some interesting possibilities in a collaboration. I had always wanted to work with pictures, and he was taking just the kind that made a good starting point for my imagination . . . I was never very



sure whether what I was writing opposite the photographs were poems or captions – they were somewhere between the two, I suspect.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that Warner took Stone's engravings as points of imaginative departure, not as a strictly illustrative exercise in which felicity to the visual pictures was the governing principle.

Another point of comparison between *Boxwood* and *Positives* is the idea of sequences. Like most of Gunn's poems in *Positives*, none of the *Boxwood* poems (except for XII 'Dr Johnson's cat') has an individual title. The overarching structure of *Positives* is the arc of human life, from birth to death: the poems and photographs record scenes and events from childhood, adolescence and youth through to work, relationships and old age. Gunn was often dismissive about the individual merits of the poems, referring to them as captions, and was more inclined to view them as part of the larger project. 'I am not exactly sure what to say in answer to your question about whether the poems in *Positives* are one poem or many', he wrote to Jack Hagstrom. 'They are many I guess, but they are more closely a sequence than those in most of my books, so it would be doing them no violence to treat them as one.'<sup>40</sup> Perhaps



**Figure 6** Sylvia Townsend Warner at the Old Rectory, Litton Cheney. Image courtesy of the Estate of Reynolds and Janet Stone.

*Boxwood* is better treated as a sequence of poems than as a collection, especially when they are not read alongside Stone's engravings. Their cumulative impact is such that they become not the 'trivial', 'distinctly modest' book that Warner and her critics suggest, but an insightful sequence of poems. Combining an unfashionable art form with an unfashionable style of poetry in an unconventional manner, *Boxwood* examines our assumptions about the purpose and limits of 'illustration' and raises important questions about man's relationship with the natural world.

## Note on contributor

**Michael Nott** is the author of *Photopoetry 1845–2015, a Critical History* (2018). Most recently he was an Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellow at University College Cork, Ireland.

## Notes

- 1 Michael Schmidt and Val Warner, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in Conversation', *PN Review* 23 (1981), p. 36. Ruari McLean (1917–2006) was a leading typographic designer.
- 2 Peter Scupham, 'Shelf Lives 11: Sylvia Townsend Warner', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2003), p. 48. Reprinted from *PN Review* 133 (May–June, 2000), pp. 63–5.
- 3 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Virago, 1995), p. 236.
- 4 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 170.
- 5 Ruari McLean, Introduction to *Reynolds Stone 1909–1979* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982), p. 11.
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- 8 Hamilton, *Wood Engraving*, p. 23.
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- 10 Janet Montefiore, "'Enter If You Will": Echoes from a Haunted House', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2002), p. 16.
- 11 Montefiore, 'Echoes', pp. 16, 17.
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- 13 All quotations from *Boxwood* refer to the 1960 edition.
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- 16 Donald Davie, *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain 1960–1988* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 58.
- 17 Peter Swaab, 'Authenticity, Not Originality', *Essays in Criticism* 59, no. 4 (October 2009), p. 378.
- 18 Swaab, 'Authenticity', p. 378.
- 19 Hamilton, *Wood Engraving*, pp. 19–20.
- 20 Hamilton, *Wood Engraving*, p. 20.
- 21 Warner, *Letters*; letter to George Plank, 30 December 1958, p. 170.
- 22 Scupham, 'Shelf Lives', p. 51.
- 23 Marigold Coleman, 'Reynolds Stone', *Crafts* 31 (March–April 1978), p. 32.

- 24 Reynolds Stone, Introduction to *Wood Engravings of Thomas Bewick* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), p. 41.
- 25 I cannot say for sure whether the title is Warner's, Stone's, both of theirs or that of the Monotype Corporation, but it seems fair to suggest that the title played an important part in how Warner conceived of her poetic illustrations.
- 26 Quoted in Hamilton, *Wood Engraving*, p. 14.
- 27 Reynolds Stone, Introduction to *Reynolds Stone: Engravings* (London: John Murray, 1977), p. xi.
- 28 Joanna Selborne, *British Wood-Engraved Book Illustration 1904–1940: A Break with Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 14.
- 29 Beatrice Warde, Foreword to *Boxwood*, by Reynolds Stone and Sylvia Townsend Warner (London: Monotype Corporation, 1958), p. 1.
- 30 Andy Stafford, *Photo-texts: Contemporary French Writing of the Photographic Image* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 6.
- 31 Warde, Foreword, p. 3.
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- 34 Warde, Foreword, pp. 2–3.
- 35 James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3; and David Kennedy, *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012), p. 2.
- 36 For an exploration of these ideas in relation to poems and photographs, see Michael Nott, *Photopoetry 1845–2015, a Critical History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 9–10.
- 37 Warde, Foreword, pp. 1–2.
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- 39 Thom Gunn, 'My Life Up to Now', in *The Occasions of Poetry*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Faber, 1982), p. 181.
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