

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Sylvia Townsend Warner's Spanish Civil War Love Poems, with an Introduction by Mercedes Aguirre

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How to cite: Warner, S. T. and Aguirre, M. 'Sylvia Townsend Warner's Spanish Civil War Love Poems, with an Introduction by Mercedes Aguirre.' *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2020, 19(1–2), pp. 64–69 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2020.10>

Published: 15 April 2020

Peer Review:

The Introduction in this article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard single blind peer-review, where the reviewers are anonymised during review.

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Abstract

A short story published first in the *New Yorker* as 'The Shirt in Mexico' on 4 January 1941, and later as 'My Shirt Is in Mexico' in *A Garland of Straw* (1943).

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Valentine Ackland; Ludwig Renn; train travel; refugees; Mexico; gay and lesbian.

Introduction by Mercedes Aguirre

From its outbreak in July 1936, and aware of the threat to democracy in Europe that Franco's military coup represented the Spanish Civil War became a crucial political cause for British writers. Sylvia Townsend Warner became involved in the activism to support the Spanish Republic from its very early stages. Her interest in the war was connected to her involvement with the Dorset branch of the British Communist Party, which Warner and her partner Valentine Ackland had joined in 1935.¹ From the first weeks of the conflict the Communist Party organised initiatives to send supplies and financial help to the territories fighting the advance of Franco's troops. As early as September 1936 Warner and Ackland travelled to Barcelona to join relief work organised by the Spanish Medical Aid Committee. There they mostly performed administrative tasks, an 'office-boy sort of job', as Warner wrote to Elizabeth Wade White.² Travelling to Spain at war was not an easy undertaking for British volunteers. The non-intervention agreement that had been

signed at the beginning of the conflict by several democratic nations, including Britain, prevented British citizens from obtaining visas to visit Spain. Ackland records in her diary that they had to make three attempts to cross the Spanish frontier at the Pyrenees, eventually reaching Barcelona on 26 September 1936.³ Their three-week stay in Spain, then in the middle of a social revolution led by anti-fascist workers' militias, had a significant impact on Warner's political thought. But their experience also had a deep personal meaning for Warner, as shown in a sequence of love poems to Valentine Ackland written during their stay in revolutionary Barcelona.

Warner wrote extensively about Spain throughout the duration of the conflict, and in a variety of genres. She wrote articles stressing the urgent need for foreign intervention in the conflict by democratic powers, short stories for different publications, including the American Communist periodical *New Masses* but also the more mainstream *New Yorker* magazine, political poems, translations of Spanish-language poetry about the war and her historical novel *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938), a semi-allegorical representation of the conflict set in the eighteenth century. In addition to these published works, Warner wrote a sequence of poems, contained in a small manuscript notebook that is currently archived with her papers. The notebook, bearing the manuscript dedication 'For Valentine', contains six poems, untitled and numbered one to six. Five of them are love poems to Ackland set in the civil war, in which the romantic theme appears interwoven with their experience of social revolution in Barcelona. The poems are particularly important because their combination of radical politics and queer desire is unprecedented in the English literature of the Spanish Civil War.⁴

Only one of the poems, with the opening line 'In that country pallor was from the ground', has previously appeared in print, though not in this same version. It originally appeared in *Left Review* in December 1936, and it was later reprinted in Claire Harman's *Collected Poems* and *New Collected Poems* with the title 'Journey to Barcelona'.⁵ This is the only poem in the group that focuses solely on the political significance of the Spanish conflict and does not include a romantic theme, thus aligning it more with the other political poems Warner wrote about the war, such as 'Benicasim'⁶ and 'Waiting at Cerbère',⁷ than with the intimate poems she gifted to Ackland. The poems suggest that, while their 1936 trip to Barcelona was initially driven by their ethical and political commitment, it also represented a liberation for their relationship, and they provide a new perspective on Warner's relation to the Spanish conflict.

1

You pull the stranded air
 And through our house the unbowed
 The marching Catalan tune goes by.

Perish do they, the vowed
 The good, the resolute?
 Speed may be summed by any fixed.

Measure, this tune compute
 How many miles an hour
 The bombers from Majorca fly.

Embraced with all my power
 Of love, not only you
 I clasp, not only you I greet.

Their heartsblood signals through,
 Your hastened heartbeat, erect
 In you their stature comforts mine.

We march as they direct
 For freedom, while the unbowed,
 The marching Catalan hymn goes by.

2

We did not go there with hearts unexercised
 In love, and falling in love, and the minds' marriage—
 Love for each other was the chiefest part of our baggage,
 Love for our kind, too. But more than we surmised.

Befell us even before we had passed the Pyrenees.
 On our journey's threshold we loved the never-again
 Militia boy who would champion us into Spain,
 And Tioli with his good brown face and his bare knees.

Emmrich we loved, Fideli at the Colon,
 Veteran Ramona, the Persecutor of Fascists,

The petrol-lights' man, the man at the tobacconists,
Pallach sleeping with one eye, Serafin and Asuncion.

These stretched our hearts. We should be vilely their debtor
If we do not love further henceforth, and hate better.

3

In that new city we felt at home,
We were at ease in that air;
Hatless and hand-in-hand, like children allowed
Out by themselves, we walked amid the kind crowd.

We could look people openly in the face.
There was no need to glance
First at the clothes, surmising if we might dare
Then look higher into the countenance of such wear.

They gave us back good as we gave.
No longer was our own
Freedom an exile, there was no need to glove
Glance, we could look at our fellows openly with love.

These other cities cannot unteach
The gait, the guise we learned
Walking by ruined churches where now the clear
Daylight runs and where the sparrows will build next year.

4

When we had snapped the holy tapers, and thrown away
The silken, the embroidered, the elegant scapulars,
With drowsy bodies and easy minds we lay
In the matrimonial bed, smooth field of former wars.

The greed and distaste had striven, there the cadet hopes
Flowering in all flesh had been regimented for gain,
There lust had trudged in treadmill, supervised by the pope's
Encyclical on Christian Marriage, Edition for Spain.

But in that bed with lean bodies and laughing minds we lay.
If they return whom we usurped, though they call in exorcist
Hire holy smoke and water, pin image and palm-spray,
It seems to me that their next child may well prove a communist.

5

In that country pallor was from the ground,
Darkness from the sky.
As the train took us by
We debated if it were mountain we saw or cloud.

These bleached fields are pallid as truth might be.
Men move on them like clouds.
Dwellings like hempen shrouds.
Wrap up squalor with a grave dignity.

Pale is this country like a country of bone,
Dry is the river bed;
Darkness is over-head,
Threatening the fruitfulness implicit in storm.

Rigid and pale under canopy of death. . .
It rains in the hills!
The parched river-bed fills,
The sky thunders down fruitfulness;

Faithful to that earth clouds gather again.
If the profile unknown
Were cloud, it will be stone
Before long. Rain from the red cloud, come to Spain!

6

Love long the ply of the body, the purpose of mind,
Had seemed our own affair;
But carrying it abroad among our kind
Was our surest permit, our best passport there.

My hand on your arm plainer than badge on sleeve
Credentialed and nationed you
As coming from love's country with love's leave,
Experienced and compassionate, intrepid and heart-true.

Note on contributor

Mercedes Aguirre is Lead Curator of the Americas Collections at the British Library. She completed her doctoral dissertation at University College London on the Spanish Civil War in English Literature, which she is currently preparing for publication. Her current research is on Nancy Cunard's Hours Press.

Notes

- 1 Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 140.
- 2 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982).
- 3 Ackland recorded their struggle to cross to the border in the brief diary entries she wrote between 23 and 26 September. Diary of Valentine Ackland, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive, T (LL)/13, Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, Dorset.
- 4 This introduction is part of a forthcoming article exploring the notebook of poems in the context of Warner and Ackland's first visit to revolutionary Barcelona in 1936 and the intersections of radical politics and queer desire in Warner's works.
- 5 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), p. 258; Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Port Bou', *Left Review* 2 (1936), p. 812.
- 6 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Benicasim', *Left Review* 3 (March 1938), p. 841.
- 7 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Waiting at Cerbère', in *Poems for Spain* (London: Hogarth Press, 1939), pp. 86–7.

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