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Book Review: Ailsa Granne, *Life-Writing, Genre and Criticism in the Texts of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Women Writing for Women*

New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2020; 216 pp.; ISBNs: 978-0-367520-72-4 (hbk), 978-1-00305-627-0 (ePub)

Janet Montefiore

This is a fascinating book.¹ I read it almost at a sitting, so that the reviewer's traditional acclaim 'I couldn't put it down' was almost literally true of Ailsa Granne's account of the written lives of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland.² These two women wrote, experienced – and sometimes invented – their lives together, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, for nearly 40 years. Their close textual relationship continued even after death parted them, when Sylvia returned to their old diaries and love-letters and wrote the narrative linking them ('by far the best thing I have ever written', p. 168) for what became *I'll Stand By You*, edited by Susanna Pinney (1998).

Ailsa Granne's somewhat clunky title (perhaps imposed by Routledge, an emphatically academic publisher) gives little hint of the riveting story inside the book, but is not otherwise misleading; this is as thorough an account as it could be of the poetry and love-letters of the two women, their correspondence with Elizabeth Wade White and the diaries they each kept, often reading each other's entries, like Leo and Countess Tolstoy. It cites and discusses a good deal of previously unpublished material, all of it fascinating. Granne's scope also extends to Sylvia's editing and publishing of Valentine's poems, both in her lifetime (*Twenty-Eight Poems* by Valentine Ackland [1957] and then posthumously in

The Nature of the Moment [Chatto, 1973] and in other privately printed collections), and to Sylvia's later editing of their correspondence. She delves into the two diaries Sylvia kept in 1970, one for her daily life and the other, as she mourned Valentine's death in 1969, for their posthumous relationship – and into even the late *Kingdoms of Elfin* stories, in which Sylvia took refuge from her sorrow in a fantasy world of heartless elvish rationality. Granne is also very well-read in theories of life-writing, using Margaretta Jolly on feminist letter-writing, Philippe Lejeune's *On Diary*, Max Saunders on life-writing and others, the most illuminating of whom are Adam Phillips and Julian Barnes, to frame her discussions of the letters and diaries.

Sylvia was a professional author living off her earnings, which from 1950 until her death were substantial. Valentine likewise wrote almost as she breathed, producing a great deal of poetry (mostly unpublished during her lifetime), which she felt to be her vocation, along with love-letters, diaries, autobiographies in several versions, prayers and meditations. Because both women lived in reading and writing as intensely as they did in the external world (and sometimes even more so), to think about their writings, which in Valentine's case almost always means life-writings (even in her poetry), necessarily means thinking about their shared lives. These were always loving but full of difficulties, both because of their inequality of achievement and because of Valentine's infidelities, principally but not exclusively with Elizabeth Wade White, the second great love of her life. An obvious parallel to their marriage is the troubled yet lasting relationship of Wystan Hugh Auden and Chester Kallman. Auden, like Sylvia, physically plain but a great writer and full of fertile invention, fell in lifelong love with his junior Chester who, like Valentine, was beautiful and talented but no genius. Scarred by an unhappy family history, Chester suffered from comparison with his partner, was notoriously unfaithful and fairly soon lost his desire for the other. Yet he remained the centre of Auden's life, as Valentine did of Sylvia's. A telling difference, though, is that Auden and Kallman, however difficult and chaotic their lives might otherwise become, were able to collaborate happily and productively in writing opera librettos, whereas, after the failure of *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, Sylvia and Valentine never again collaborated creatively. However, Granne argues that in their letters and diaries, the two women did collaborate, for better or worse, in transforming themselves, their thoughts and actions into textual fantasy, though not necessarily of a creative kind.

Two key chapters deal with the letters which Sylvia and Valentine wrote to each other during the fraught period between Valentine's

rediscovery in April 1949 of her passion for Elizabeth Wade White, whom she had abandoned ten years earlier to return with Sylvia to England at war, and the end of the affair in March 1950. Granne argues cogently that the lovers created an alternative world in their letters which enabled them to deny (or, as they would have preferred to say, to transcend) the impossible conflict between Valentine's determined commitment to passion with Elizabeth 'as lover, as husband, as companion' (p. 53) and her refusal to let go of her shared life with Sylvia. So Valentine writes to Sylvia in July 1949: 'In some manner I always take you with me and I am always with you, so that you came with me into bed with Elizabeth ... because you are quite literally bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh' (p. 54). Astonishingly, on the day she drove to London Airport to collect Elizabeth for a month's trial cohabitation, she 'wrote to Warner at 6 am and 4 pm, telephoned in the evening and sent a telegram, as well as leaving a letter in the house for Warner to find' (p. 57). Sylvia, living in Yeovil so that the adulterous lovers were free to have their passionate reunion in the home she had shared with Valentine, tells Valentine that although she loathes the thought of Elizabeth, she feels 'pleasure that you are happy and released in making love to her'. Granne perceptively writes of these exchanges that 'both correspondents appear to have become transfixed by dissimulation and disguise' (p. 58).

In the following chapter, she traces how Sylvia put her sorrow, undisguised, into poetry such as her 'river-poems', which Paul Nordoff would later set to music in the song cycle *Lost Summer*, greatly to Valentine's grief and chagrin. In the poem 'And past the quay the river flowing', written in June 1949, the poet watches the reflected bridge 'Making and unmaking / Its grey parapet, and I not knowing / How in your mind I am coming and going', while in 'On the forsaken bridge as I went over' (September 1949), the speaker once 'thought I would row my darling', but now 'I remember and cannot remember'. Re-reading these sorrowful 'river-poems', I was reminded of Sylvia's love poem from their honeymoon years, 'Drawing you, heavy with sleep, to lie closer' (1935), and noticed how closely it is echoed in the thought, imagery and rhythms of these later poems. I have analysed 'Drawing you, heavy with sleep' in detail in *Feminism and Poetry* (1987), tracing how the beloved's slumberous embrace becomes a pellucid life-giving river, granting 'him at the river's brim ... that yet he lives / Since in that mirroring tide he moves'.³ So I was particularly interested when Granne shows how in these poems Sylvia writes as if her own identity, no longer reflected in Valentine's mind, were dissolving into incoherence (p. 67). She did not always protect her lover from knowing

about her sorrow, since she sent 'On the forsaken bridge' to Valentine, who responded that 'I fell passionately in love with it. It made my knees shake' (p. 69). (She would respond to the poem negatively, and even more intensely, on hearing Paul Nordoff's setting of it a few years later.)

Granne's probing account of the 1949 correspondence in the lovers' letters and poems is followed by an equally astute and subtle analysis of Valentine's 1949 autobiography *For Sylvia: An Honest Account*, which she reads, illuminatingly, in the light of Adam Phillips' questions from *On Flirtation*: 'Who is the autobiographical text's implied ideal reader, and what is the catastrophic reading it is trying to avert?' (p. 74). She finds the answer in Valentine's two telling omissions. For all her self-reproach for her many failings, Valentine says nothing in *For Sylvia*, until the very end, about her own ambition to become a published and famous poet and her lifelong sorrow at her failure to achieve this. Also, despite the title and its implied devotion to her lover, only the 'last dozen pages refer to [Sylvia] and the life they had shared since 1930' – as if, says Granne, 'the presence of Warner in Ackland's life and her lack of success as a published poet are linked and constitute Ackland's real tragedy' (p. 74).

The following two chapters on the diaries are a little less satisfactory, partly because their focus on the crisis of 1949–50 and its aftermath begins to feel relentless, and partly because Granne's discussion of Sylvia's diaries frames almost all its points via theorists of life-writing or diaries, not all of them as illuminating as Adam Phillips. It sometimes feels as though the writer felt obliged to cite previous authorities for her argument, convincing enough in itself, that Sylvia used her diaries to invent a version of herself, as in a different way she used her letters to invent an idealised Valentine. That said, Granne quotes some wonderful unpublished material from Sylvia's diaries, such as 'I can see no prospect of joy, only this devoted attempt to raise a crop of corn on the sea's strand ... and the sea's tide coming back and back to wash at the poor seed' (p. 98, 25 October 1949, surely echoing the folk poem 'Scarborough Fair' and its impossible commands to a 'true love of mine'). And she makes an important point: because both lovers read each other's diaries at different times, the meanings and implications may shift and change according to their implied reader. She argues at the end of the chapter that Valentine's unpublished diaries 'constitute perhaps the only place where her own voice can be heard without interventions from her lover' and that 'the diary form emerges as a site for maintenance of a voice despite the experience or perception of voicelessness' (p. 130). This is just and, accordingly, I would have liked more, longer and more varied quotations than are given

here. Granne makes the sensible point that diarists are necessarily selective about the life they record, and that editors are more selective still; but when she tells us that often Valentine writes nothing about Sylvia, I found myself wondering: What *did* she write about, then? Most likely the answer is: brooding about Elizabeth and yearning for her, no doubt mixed with a great deal of self-reproach. Still, she did have other interests – politics (on which she increasingly differed from Sylvia after 1945); their beloved cats and dogs; the hills, meadows, river, sky and birds around her; the small antique objects for which she always had a collector's eye that she would put to use in her successful antique shop; her mother Ruth, whom she loved and needed even if Sylvia couldn't stand her – and of course, after 1952, religion. Did she never write about any of these in her diaries?

Conversely, Granne's single-minded focus on the drama of Valentine's 1949 infidelity enables the excellent account of Sylvia playing the recording of Nordoff's song cycle *Lost Summer* in 1952, as recorded in Valentine's diary, an event which powerfully demonstrates the full complexity of the couple's symbiosis. Sylvia's own diary entry – 'Alas that it had to grieve her so; but after the first hearing, the music will reconcile her, perhaps' – was extraordinarily obtuse, as Sylvia could sometimes be. (It remains very puzzling, likewise, that she apparently never noticed her lover's long struggle with alcoholism before reading about it in *For Sylvia*.) In truth, Valentine was devastated by despairing envy of her lover's creativity 'but it has been sterile for me', and she records feeling like Judas going off to hang himself. She later turned the eloquence of this diary into the (unpublished) short story 'Time Spent' in which the poet-lover is designated male. She sits in 'rapt envy', hearing

the words he [the poet/Warner] had never spoken. While the tempest raged, he had kept them safe and dry, kept them as seeds for a new sowing. He had watched them patiently, afterwards, as they grew and flowered at last into poems; and at last they dropped their bright petals into this tide – becoming the songs she had heard as she began to drown ... And now I sit in this chair, hearing the music and the words and knowing that he, in his truth, remained potent, able again to engender out of himself and fructify this sad little musician too ... For sad he was and little,' she thought bitterly, 'Until our disaster became his fortune!' (pp. 123–4)

In terms of dating this seems unfair. The 'river-poems' by Sylvia which Nordoff set to music were not in fact recollections in (comparative)

tranquillity, but were actually written during the crisis, for Sylvia had sent Valentine at least one of them at the time (p. 69), even while complaining of her own sterility; her diary entry for 17 March 1950 records: 'I have created nothing, for the poems that have broken out of me were no more creative than the sweat of anguish.'⁴ This image is curiously similar to Valentine writing later of her response to the song in *Lost Summer*: 'I sat there like a stone, and when I wept I felt as if I were only a stone sweating its few drops of moisture' (p. 122). It is interesting, however, that she didn't, apparently, have a similar appalled reaction to Sylvia's short story 'Winter in the Air', in which a wife whose husband has abandoned her for another woman begins the lonely single life which Sylvia had feared in 1949 would be hers. In that story (originally titled 'Farewell My Love'), Sylvia really *did* make retrospective art out of her own past agony, yet it doesn't seem to have provoked Valentine to envy and despair, perhaps because it was not poetry and didn't involve collaboration with another artist. (And, after all, Valentine had written her own short story, successfully turning misery to aesthetic account, even if it didn't appear in the *New Yorker*.)

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the couple's later lives, Valentine's death and Sylvia's works of mourning. Chapter 6, 'Valentine Ackland as Poet-Priest', promises to deal with Valentine becoming a Roman Catholic convert and the effects of this in her writing, but it is actually dominated by Sylvia's grief and chagrin at her lover's conversion to an institution that she detested as an enemy to freedom, and for which, as an ex-Anglican Protestant with a lifelong love of Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, she had a permanent aesthetic distaste. Although Granne tells us that 'her diary allowed Ackland to reveal to Warner her new religious self' (p. 149), we learn less about this self than about Sylvia's revulsion from her lover's new role as convert and disciple, her own absorption in translating Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and writing her anti-religious novel *The Flint Anchor*, which is discussed at some length, and her decision to publish privately a small selection of Valentine's poems. Granne plainly feels that Sylvia's hatred and suspicion of the Roman Catholic Church was excessive; she quotes her on the absurdity of Valentine fasting for the sake of 'a mystical biscuit' (p. 146), just after she herself has been 'superstitious' enough to suggest a Tarot reading for a 'Screaming Skull' (p. 145). This reading, I think, misses two points: first, that the Tarot reading was at least half a game (Sylvia always enjoyed playing at magic and ghosts); second, and more importantly, that the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church represented pious authority, which she always detested. As a lifelong rebel, she could only resent her lover's subjection to church discipline.

In the final chapter, 'The Death of Valentine Ackland', Granne writes perceptively and at length about Valentine's death from cancer and Sylvia mourning her, first discussing her elegiac poems of loss and then showing how, 'by returning to their traditional meeting place – their letters and diaries ... Warner was able to breathe life back into her lover' (p. 165). In her intensive reading of their old letters and diaries and in assembling and writing the material which was to become *I'll Stand By You*, Warner created 'texts of such power that they resisted the absence caused by her lover's death ... [They] enabled her to believe that Ackland had fulfilled her promise to "never" leave her' (p. 167).

Granne also analyses the strange parallel diaries Sylvia kept in the first year of her bereavement, one recording her daily life and the other her ghostly communion with Valentine. Granne illuminatingly compares her textual practice to Julian Barnes writing after the death of his wife, 'the fact that someone is dead may mean they are not alive, but doesn't mean that they do not exist. So I talk to her constantly' (p. 173), and to C. S. Lewis writing in *A Grief Observed* about his inevitable transformation of his dead wife into an 'imaginary woman' (p. 174). Yet Sylvia had further resources, for she kept Valentine alive by editing their letters and by publishing her poems, and she was able to escape her grief by inventing the heartless realms of *Kingdoms of Elfin*. As Granne observes,

only an author ... who resisted classification could have simultaneously created such polar opposites – the worlds of *I'll Stand By You* and *Kingdoms of Elfin*. And it is the distance between these two secondary worlds and the world in which she wrote her diaries which I suggest is the point ... What was insupportable was this world without Ackland. (p. 181)

Ailsa Granne's approach to this multifarious life-writing material inevitably invites comparison with the biographies of Sylvia by Wendy Mulford (1988) and Claire Harman (1989) and of Valentine by Frances Bingham (2021), although her approach is quite different. Whereas literary biographers aim both to tell the story of the writer's life and to describe the scope and qualities of her works, Granne as a scholar of life-writing is concerned less with the lifetime stories of Sylvia and Valentine, or with literary criticism (though she reads both women's work well), than with the ways in which the lovers constructed and reconstructed themselves and their relationship in the 'fluid textual space' of correspondence and diaries, and more formally in their lyric poems and short stories. But also, like a biographer,

she constantly judges their actions and their writings, and the degree to which the latter told the truth (or not) about what was happening to them outside the charmed space of their texts. By showing in depth and in detail how the two women conducted their relationship, both on the page and off it, Ailsa Granne has written a book worthy of appearing on the same shelf (for those who can afford the steep price charged by the publisher) as the classic biographies *Sylvia Townsend Warner* by Claire Harman and *Valentine Ackland: A Transgressive Life* by Frances Bingham, and one that will be required reading for scholars working on these women writers.

Note on Contributor

Janet Montefiore is Professor Emerita of the University of Kent. Her books include *Feminism and Poetry: Language, experience, identity in women's writing* (Pandora, 1987, 1993 [2nd edition], 2004 [3rd edition]), *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The dangerous flood of history* (Routledge, 1996) and, most recently, a book of essays co-edited with Harish Trivedi, *Kipling in India: India in Kipling* (Routledge, 2020).

Notes

- 1 This is a seriously belated review, because Laura Marcus, renowned scholar of life-writing (among her other areas of scholarship) and much-valued member of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society, who was originally to review the book, died before she could carry out the task. So I am doing my best here, although no one can replace Laura.
- 2 I would normally write 'Warner' and 'Ackland'; but since both the book and my review deal with the intimate lives of both women, I refer to them here as Sylvia and Valentine.
- 3 Janet Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, experience, identity in women's writing* (London: Pandora, 1987), pp. 158–60. See also the extended discussion 'Mirror writing: a dialogue on Sylvia Townsend Warner', in *Feminism and Poetry*, 3rd edn (London: Pandora, 2004), pp. 156–63.
- 4 Claire Harman, ed., *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 162.

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