

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Modern Times: A Poem

Sylvia Townsend Warner,¹ with an introductory note by Harriet Hall^{2,*}

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Modern Times: A Poem

*Sylvia Townsend Warner, with an introductory note by
Harriet Hall*

Abstract

'Modern Times' is a light verse narrative that Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote as a gift for her friend Stephen Clark. It is illustrated with adverts cut out of *The New Yorker*.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; light verse; space exploration; mock-epic.

Introductory note by Harriet Hall

My mother Marianna Clark died of old age in November 2020. She lived in a five-storey Georgian house in one of the Bath crescents. My siblings and I spent the following months clearing the house. It was where we had grown up and it had been her home since 1955. While not a full-blown hoarder, she found it unnecessary to throw anything away. There was lots of space for storage.

The house clearing was both nostalgic (all our school exercise books were kept), enjoyable (we turned up small treasures, albums of photographs, pictures never hung but hidden in drawers) and irritating. There were mountains of letters and papers, and my siblings and I are varied enough in temperament to disagree as to what could be thrown away.

Among the treasures we found this album made by Sylvia for my father in 1961. He died in 2011. My parents had a semi-detached marriage, but it was attached enough for him to leave his own collections of things he could not throw away with her when he moved to the USA after retirement. The album was buried in a trunk full of papers. None of us had seen it before.¹

My father's name was Stephen Clark. As far as I know Sylvia and Valentine were the only people who spelt his name Steven. I don't know why they did. He was born in 1913 in Street, Somerset, into the Clarks shoe family. The family were Quakers. In 1936 he went to Spain to report on a relief organisation that was supporting the government side in the Civil War. Quakers in London wanted to know whether they were solid enough to send money to. Meanwhile his brother Nathan, two years younger, went over to drive ambulances. Family myth told us that our father had gone to volunteer but that he had fallen seriously ill after two weeks and had had to come home. The falling ill is true, but he was a cautious man all his life and I don't think he would have volunteered. Two weeks was possibly long enough to make the report.

While there, he lodged in the same place in Barcelona as Sylvia and Valentine, who were volunteering for the Red Cross. And when he fell ill, with influenza, they nursed him back to health. That was the start of a friendship that continued for the rest of their lives. Sylvia and he wrote to



Figure 1. Stephen Clark, 1937. By permission of Harriet Hall.

each other often. The letters between them were deposited by him at the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester.

My father was 35 when I was born and so I did not know him as a young man. But among the things we unearthed in the house clearing were photographs from his earlier years, taken in a studio in Bath. He was always very careful about his appearance in later life and that is evident even then. So the dandyish look he takes in this photo from 1937 is entirely in character. And so is the fact that he let Sylvia and Valentine continue to write his name Steven. He liked to compartmentalise his life, and they were the unique compartment that spelt his name that way (Figure 1).

My parents had four children. Sylvia and Valentine obviously took an interest in us. On my birth in 1948 Sylvia wrote to my father to say that she could see from the photograph sent that I had a high forehead and was going to be an intellectual. In a letter dated 30.vii.1948 Sylvia



Figure 2. Alice and Harriet Clark and Fougere at Frome Vauchurch, August 1955. STW.2021.125.4691/D-TWA/A83, the Sylvia Townsend Warner Archive, held at the Dorset History Centre.

wrote about visiting Verona with her grandmother. She said: ‘when Lydia [my older sister, aged 2 at this time] is old enough to travel (say about 9 or 10) you will remember, won’t you, the importance of sitting for hours while Lydia expands? My grandmother was unsurpassable at sitting. She would sit on tombstones, glaciers, small hard benches with ants crawling all over them, fragments of public monuments, other people’s wheelbarrows...’

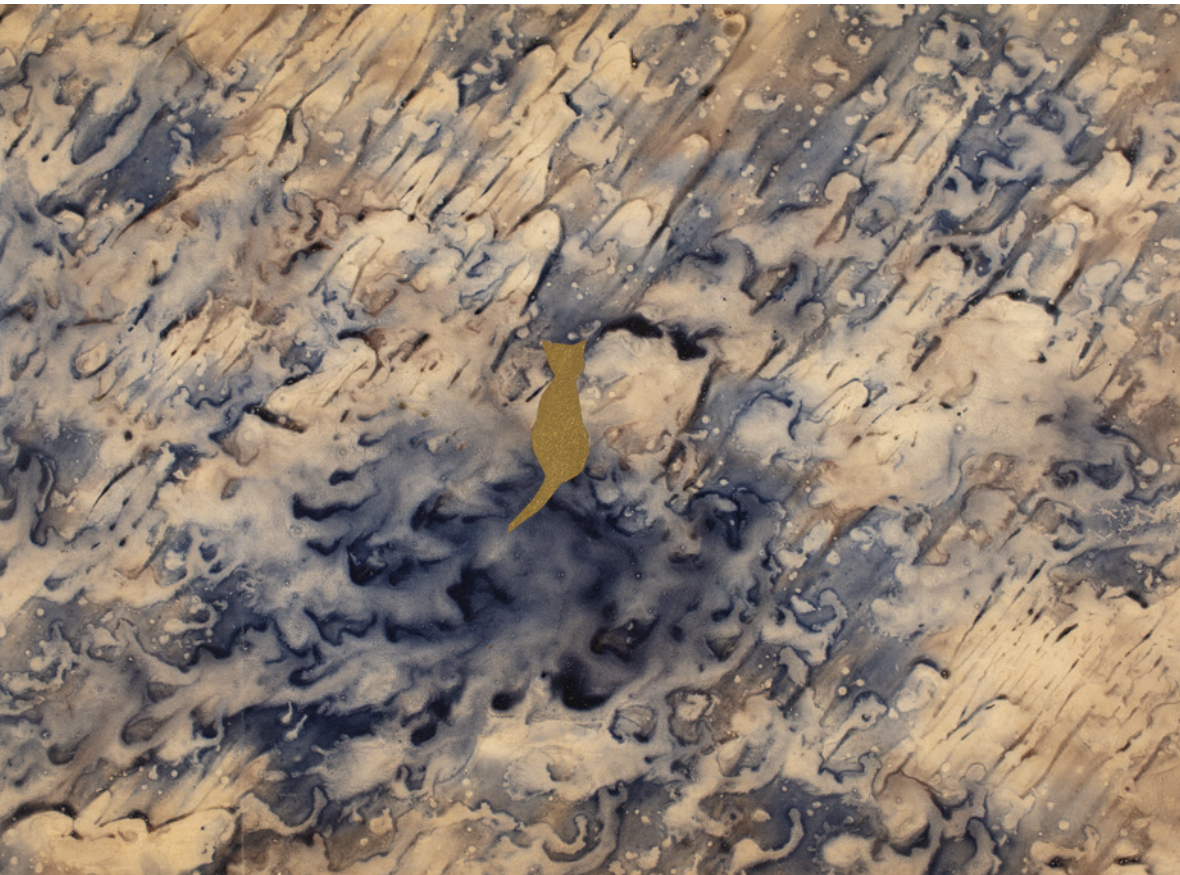
As children we were sometimes taken to Dorset to see them. A photo from 1955 shows my sister Alice and me in the back garden petting a black poodle. But it was not a regular event. I think this was a compartment of his life father was not entirely happy about sharing. And we, or at least I (and I don’t suppose it was only me), benefitted from little gifts from Valentine’s shop – an enamel snuff box, an ivory toothpick case – picked out by her because she thought I would like them. We felt affection from them both, even though at a distance, and knew he loved them (Figure 2).

The album will be donated to the Dorset History Centre. I know that is what my father would have wanted and would have done if he had remembered he had it.

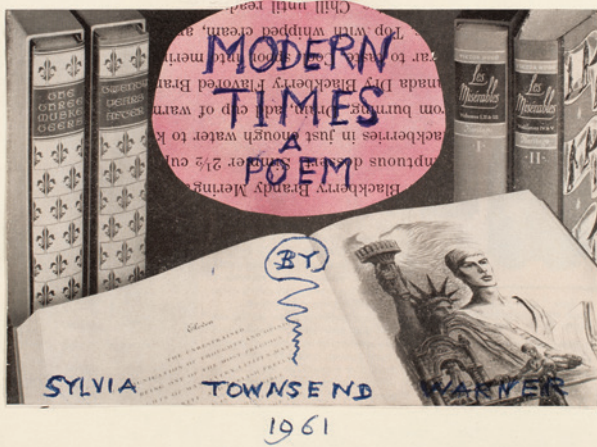
Modern Times: A Poem

By Sylvia Townsend Warner

1961



1. Front cover of the original album



2. p.1 of the original album

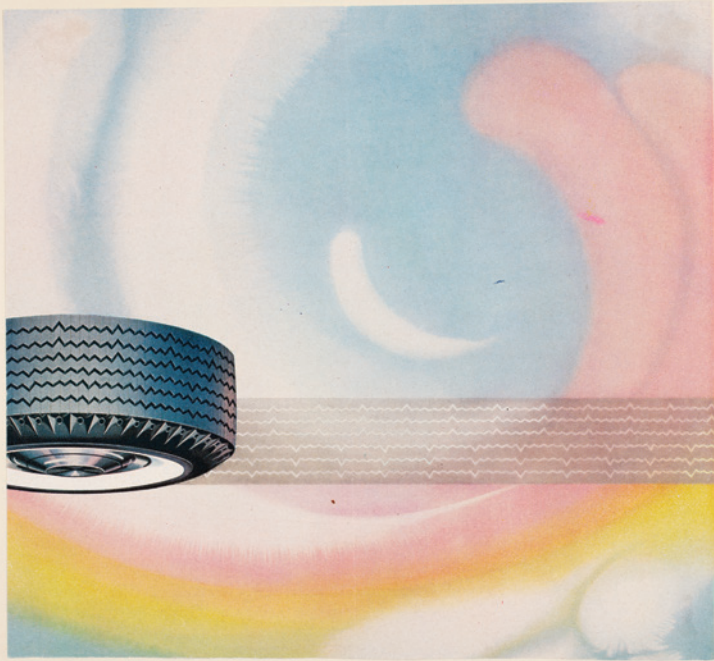
This edition of Modern Times, with illustrations compiled by the author from the advertisement pages of The New Yorker, 1960-61, is limited to one copy.

Sylvia Townsend Warner.

3. p.2 of the original album



4. p.3 of the original album

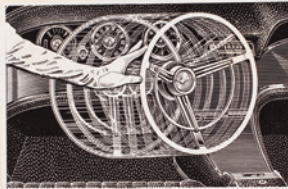


5. p.4 of the original album

1

Observe, advancing on the Moon,
A sealed rotatory Balloon
Upon a Cosmic Band,

6. p.5 of the original album



Equipped by Scientists for all

7. p.6 of the original album



Contingencies that might befall

8. p.7 of the original album



And by a Hero manned.

9. p.8 of the original album

②

To arrange all this took years and years;



10. p.9 of the original album



11. p.10 of the original album

Meanwhile from outer space appears
A ~~sent~~ similar machine;
And downward to our planet throws
Signals, but vain, since no one knows
What they are meant to mean.

12. p.11 of the original album



3

Though Cow, the economist, averred,
That 'Haik Democracy!' he heard,
The point is somewhat vexed;

13. p.12 of the original album

And as my theme transcends surmise
I will pursue it through the skies,



And tell what happened next-

14. p.13 of the original album

④

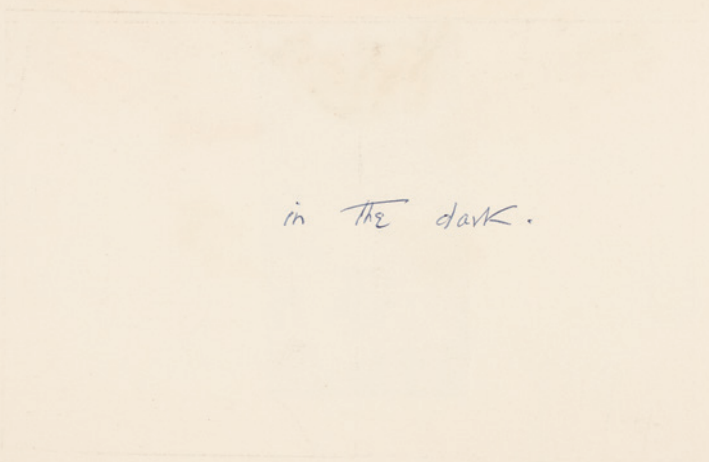
The astronauts toward the Moon
Sped on — and landed pretty soon,
And both at once; but, Mark!
As they arrived from opposite
Directions, one by day alive,

15. p.14 of the original album



the other

16. p.15 of the original album



in the dark.

17. p.16 of the original album



18. p.17 of the original album



19. p.18 of the original album

5

Over and plains,

20. p.19 of the original album



21. p.20 of the original album

through darksome maze
They trudged alone for days and days
with deepening regret;

22. p.21 of the original album

And each one to himself had said,
'The Moon



'is uninhabited',

23. p.22 of the original album

When all at once they met!

6

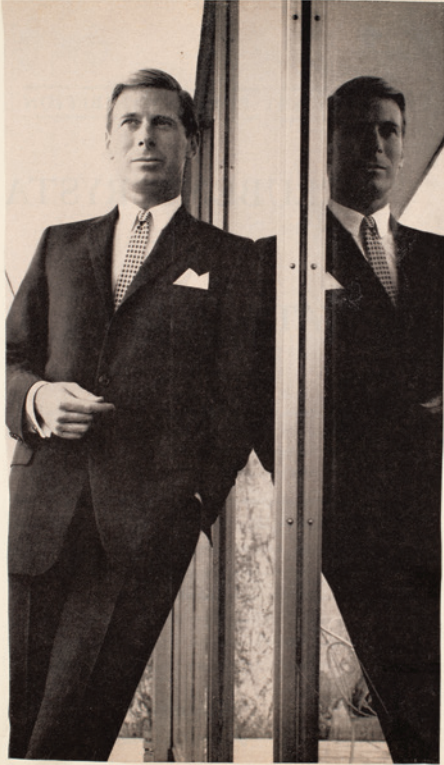
They met - yet could not wholly meet;
Their flow of soul was incomplete,
Mistrust still spread its pinions



Between the junction of warm hearts,

Since neither knew his counterpart's
Political opinions.

25. p.24 of the original album



26. p.25 of the original album



(7)

Wordless to ask what they surmised
They watched, assessed, & analysed
As with a fine tooth comb;

27. p.26 of the original album

Yet by degrees acquaintance sprung —
For both were brave, and both were young
And both were far from home.



28. p.27 of the original album



8

They went for country walks, they climbed

29. p.28 of the original album



The lunar Alps in mood sublined,
The picniced now and then.

30. p.29 of the original album

Their lack of language proved no bar —
Fostering the long, particular,
Silences dear to men.



31. p.30 of the original album



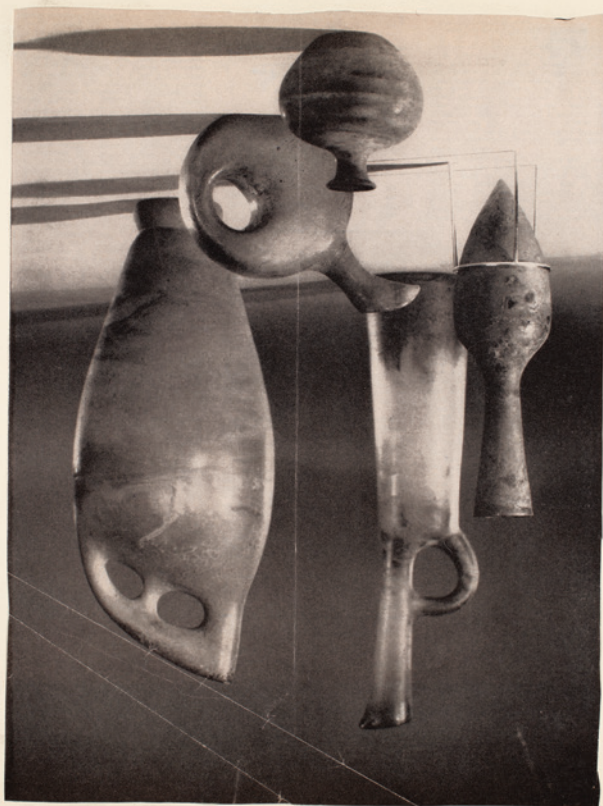
Months passed; ⁹ their failure to return
Eventually aroused concern;

32. p.31 of the original album

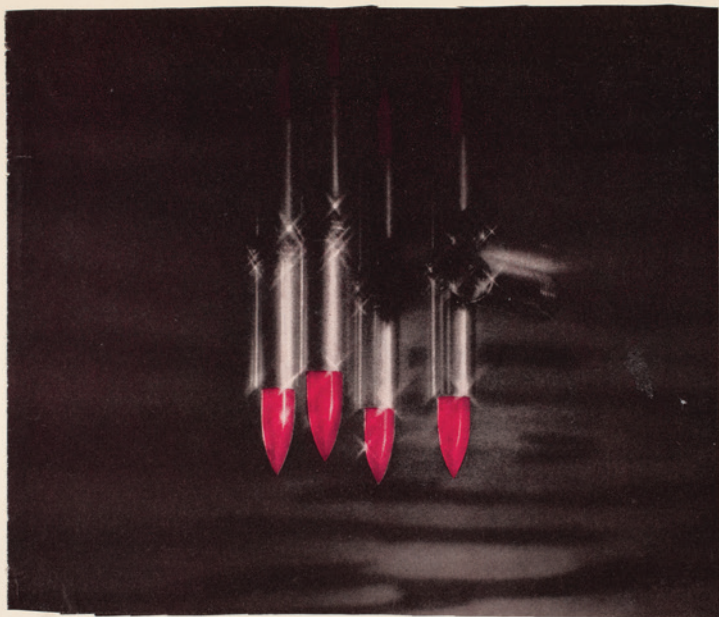
One quiet eve tide
They heard a sound, they saw a swarm
of things of scientific form
falling on every side.

(10)

They served themselves for what might be
stern tasks of hospitality,
Assumed a smiling face -
When, but a moment later, they



34. p.33 of the original album



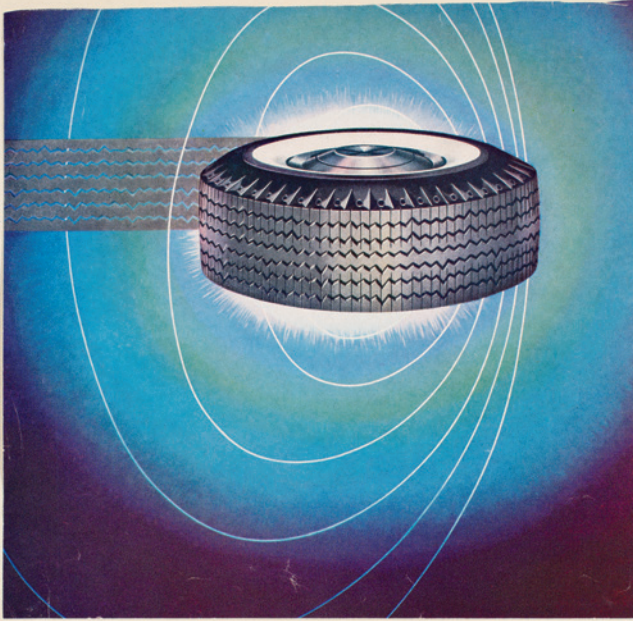
*Behold. a similar array
Coming from outer space.*

35. p.34 of the original album

(11)

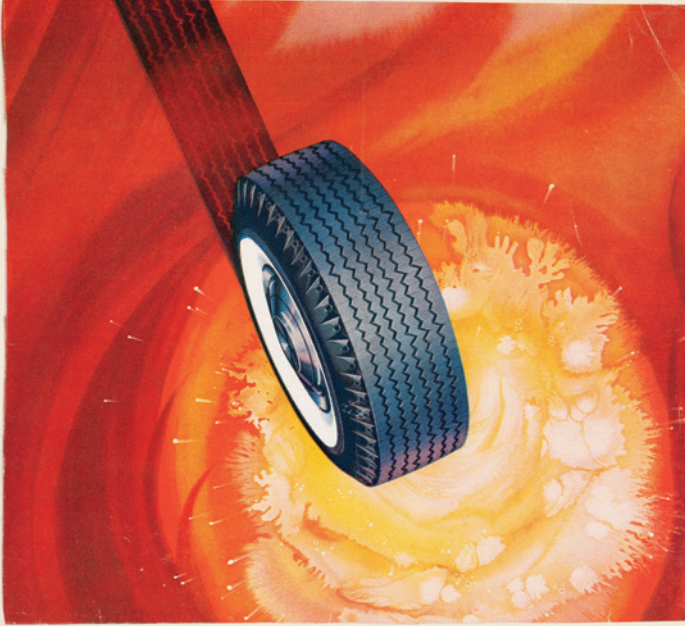
C'est trop! They rush with one accord
To their balloons, they leap on board;
After a rapid try-out

36. p.35 of the original album



They press the appropriate knobs, they soar

37. p.36 of the original album



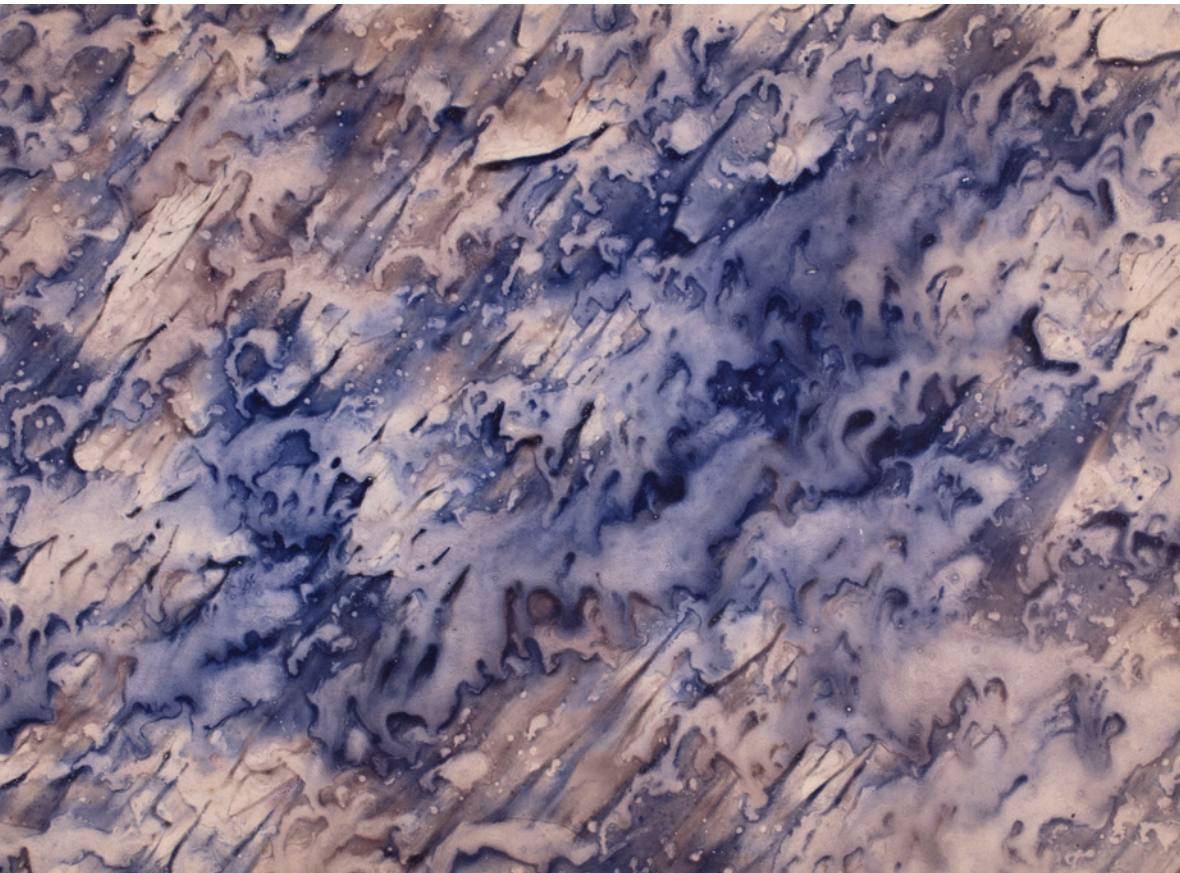
Along The Cosmic Band once more,
In search of peace and quiet.

38. p.37 of the original album



'Personal Books' Inc.

39. p.38 of the original album



40. Back cover of the original album

This edition of *Modern Times*, with illustrations compiled by the author from the advertisement pages of *The New Yorker*, is limited to One Copy.

Sylvia Townsend Warner

Modern Times

Dedicated to Steven Clark

1

Observe, advancing on the Moon,
A sealed rotatory Balloon
 Upon a cosmic Band,
Equipped by Scientists for all
Contingencies that might befall,
 And by a Hero manned.

2

To arrange all this took years and years;
Meanwhile from outer space appears
 A similar machine;
And downward to our planet throws
Signals, but vain, since no one knows
 What they are meant to mean.

3

Though Cow, the agronomist, averred
'Twas 'Hail, Democracy!' he heard,
 The point is somewhat vexed;
And as my theme transcends surmise
I will pursue it through the skies,
 And tell what happened next.

4

The astronauts toward the Moon
Sped on – and landed pretty soon,
 And both at once; but, Mark!
As they arrived from opposite
Directions, one by day alit,
 The other
 in the dark.

5

O'er arid plains, through darksome maze
They trudged alone for days and days
 With deepening regret;
And each one to himself had said,
'The Moon is uninhabited',
 When all at once they met!

6

They met – yet could not wholly meet;
Their flow of soul was incomplete,
 Mistrust still spread its pinions
Between the junction of warm hearts,
Since neither knew his counterpart's
 Political Opinions.

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 They watched, assessed, & analysed
 As with a fine tooth comb;
 Yet by degrees acquaintance sprung –
 For both were brave, and both were young
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They went for country walks, they climbed
 The lunar Alps in mood sublimed,
 They picniced now and then.
 Their lack of language proved no bar –
 Fostering the long, particular,
 Silences dear to men.

9

Months passed; their failure to return
 Eventually aroused concern;
 One quiet eventide
 They heard a sound, they saw a swarm
 Of things of scientific form
 Falling on every side.

10

They nerved themselves for what might be
 Stern tasks of hospitality,
 Assumed a smiling face –
 When, but a moment later, they
 Beheld a similar array
 Coming from outer Space.

C'est trop! they rush with one accord
 To their balloons, they leap on board;
 After a rapid try-out
 They press the appropriate knobs, they soar
 Along the Cosmic Band once more,
 In search of peace and quiet.

'Personal Books', Inc.

Note on Contributor

Harriet Hall is the daughter of Stephen and Marianna Clark. She grew up in Bath and studied Classics at Cambridge. She has lived in London since graduating, with strong ties to the West Country.

Note

- 1 Enclosed in the album was a letter from Stephen Clark to Marianna dated 28 September 1996, hoping that the poem might continue to give pleasure to others: 'the poem illustrated from advertisements in the New Yorker: do you think you could make slides of the pages? If you could, one might throw them onto a screen while someone read the poem aloud. Would that not make a pleasant divertissement for a family – or a non-family – party? Think about it, I pray you. Try an experiment.'