

**A WORD IS A BRIDGE:**  
**Death and Epistolary Form in the Correspondence**  
**of Sylvia Townsend Warner & David Garnett**  
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‘A correspondence’, Sylvia Townsend Warner once reflected, ‘kept up over a length of years with never a meeting is a bridge which with every letter seems more elastically reliable, but it is a bridge that only carries the weight of one person at a time. When the correspondents meet it collapses’, she brutally continued, ‘and they have to founder their way to the footing of actuality’.<sup>1</sup> Letters are indeed an ‘elastic bridge’, as magical as they are apparently reliable in the capacity to stretch across any distance or time. Yet Warner reminds us of the fragility at the heart of this protean form. Far from the solid and inflexible ground of ‘actuality’, an epistolary relationship is created out of the mutual projections of two writers, which, in another of Warner’s formulations, always risk being ‘slightly out of focus’.<sup>2</sup>

In the following discussion, I build on Warner’s image to explore the fictions of letter-writing as a positive aspect of the form not just for the correspondents themselves but for the reader of published letters. The ambiguity and intermittency of their appeal to the other can produce powerful literary effects. But we should avoid trying to fit letters into the classical literary mould of a unity constructed by a single author. Too often critics find themselves over-emphasising the monologue at the expense of the dialogue in trying to recoup a correspondence’s formal complexity. In my view, it

is the tension between monologue and dialogue, fracture and unity, which creates letters' literary interest, drawing on the 'sumptuous, desirable, yet anxiety-ridden interlude' of the epistolary experience itself.<sup>3</sup> Warner's own exquisite fifty-six year correspondence with the writer David Garnett exemplifies these tensions. Jovial and harmonious in style and sensibility, the underlying delicacy of its architecture emerges through the editorial intervention of Garnett's son, Richard Garnett. The double-edged nature of epistolary art is most obvious in Warner and Garnett's dryly aesthetic discussion of mortality followed by the literal interruption of their correspondence with Warner's death. In conclusion, I return to Warner's image of a bridge that 'carries the weight of only one person at a time', as a salutary reminder of the irony – and poetry – of epistolary reassurance....

...Dialogue, in the expanded form that dialogic theory conceives of it, includes the politics of the unsaid, the intonation of negotiation. Nowhere is this more painfully evident than in Warner's own extensive correspondence with her troubled partner Valentine Ackland, with whom she lived for 39 years. Warner and Ackland did not go a day without writing when they were apart, and sometimes even when they were together, most heart wrenchingly when Warner had agreed to abscond herself in a hotel so Valentine could pursue her affair with Elizabeth Wade White. The luxuriously inventive protestations of undying love and dependence on both sides were as much compensation for the tragedy that Valentine brought to their relationship, and their negotiation with the wider world as a lesbian couple, as they were the unstoppable demonstration of their intimacy.<sup>4</sup> Mismatched in their games, with Ackland always jealous of Warner's literary superiority and Warner watching Ackland's sexual talents turning their aim elsewhere, Warner competed with epistolary gifts that Ackland in the end could not live without. Warner's editorial narrative does not quite admit to this, wanting still to present the letters as commemoration of a triumphant life-long passion. Yet the very turn-taking of their voices conveys the uncertainty of love, a bridge being written by those who

were almost always physically together.

Although the tragic-comic beauty of Warner and Ackland's correspondence would provide an eloquent occasion for acknowledging the relationships involved in all writing, I take Warner's much happier correspondence with David Garnett as my example precisely because it was much more simply literary. As is the way with marriages and friendships, Garnett was more similar to Warner in his fundamentally comic temperament than her beloved but depressive Valentine. In addition, the fact that it was assembled by Garnett's son rather than either correspondent, shows a further level of contingency – a further level of relationship. The editor's contribution as mediator with the public reader is another, also neglected, element of an aesthetics of letter-writing. Narrative, as much as narcissism or empathy, structures what we read as epistolary selves, including such pragmatic concerns as having a full sequence and both sides of a correspondence. In other words, the aesthetic unity of coherence, and, with it, our vision of incoherence and loss, is partly imported. The rest of this paper explores Warner and Garnett's own correspondence as a tribute not just to the relationships at the heart of letter-writing, but of letter-editing and reading as well.

Professional authors who write a lot of letters luxuriate in what William Maxwell, editor of Warner's *Selected Letters*, describes as 'throwing away one of their better efforts'.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, a consummate letter-writer, called it 'writing off-duty'.<sup>6</sup> Warner was such a writer. Much like her short stories, her unfailingly elegant letters abound with matchless wit.<sup>7</sup> She often wrote several a day, and, very unusually, rarely repeated herself in any of them; her regular correspondents treasured the thousands that she wrote. Although Warner did intend for many to be published (she even wrote a connecting narrative for her correspondence with Valentine), Claire Harman observes that her most highly valued friendships were founded and maintained by transatlantic correspondences, contending that she 'loved, and needed, the uncluttered intellectual intimacy which

depended on distance and separateness and which such correspondence allowed'.<sup>8</sup>

Warner's relationship with David Garnett was one patterned on this 'uncluttered intellectual intimacy'. Their correspondence, which began when she was 29 and he 30, lasted until just a month before she died, age 85. Published in 1994, it amply demonstrates the qualities of coherence considered characteristic of great writing. But just as essential is its literary gift-giving and subtle politics. The letters sprang from the mutual literary interest of two professional writers in the early stages of both their careers, both writing in a style oblique to their high modernist contemporaries. In 1920, Warner was working as a musicologist and writing the odd poem. Garnett, of a more literary background, was a publisher's reader and partner of the Soho bookshop of Birrell and Garnett. Stephen Tomlin introduced them; they walked over the desolate Essex marshes in an epiphanic moment of communion.<sup>9</sup> Garnett gave her the notebook in which she began keeping her first diary,<sup>10</sup> and more importantly, prompted Chatto and Windus to publish Warner's first collection of poetry, *The Espalier* (1925). *Lolly Willowes*, the novel with which she made her name, came out a few months later. Forever after, she saw him as having launched her literary career, writing in 1966:

If it had not been for you, by now I would probably have given up writing poems and keeping them in a drawer. And if I had written any prose it would have appeared in the *Musical Times*.<sup>12</sup>

Garnett replied:

You should not write such letters. You make me insufferably proud, and it will require the united efforts of Angelica [his wife] and my three daughters batting me over the head with a spoon and exclaiming 'Down, wanton, down!' – as though I were an eel in the pan – to reduce me to my proper place. Nobody has ever had such a wonderful letter. (97)

Garnett did not see Warner as a mentor in the same way, but

he was equally eager for her responses to each of his publications, the occasion that usually prompted each of them to write for the first decades of their correspondence. The tone is set by this mutual admiration and encouragement and although it modulates to a more serious key, the echo of gratified ambition remains. Both writers were extraordinarily prolific and able to live off their writing throughout their lives.

This narrowly literary focus dominates the correspondence until both were in their 70s, only a third of the way through the collection. This is in part due to a twenty-three year hiatus in their correspondence, which Richard Garnett suggests was a result of Valentine Ackland's jealousy of Garnett. (Maxwell concurs with this.)<sup>12</sup> When it is resumed, however, there is little sense of the passing of this time. The settings are the same: Warner had been installed in Maiden Newton, Dorset, since 1937, he at Hilton Hall, in Huntingdonshire since 1924. The writerly games are also familiar: they are as ferociously productive as ever. They make no reference to the events of those twenty-three years, during which Warner fell in love and settled down with Ackland, left heterosexual forays behind, worked for the British Communist Party and went to Spain to support the Spanish Civil War; during which Garnett was Literary Editor for *The New Statesman and Nation*, worked for the Air Ministry during the war, lost his first wife Ray Marshall to breast cancer and married Angelica Bell, the young daughter of Vanessa Bell, fathering four daughters by her in addition to his two sons by Ray.

It is a literary project that rejuvenates their correspondence, but one that also spotlights its own status as a creative form. In 1964, at the age of 70, Warner was asked to write the biography of T.H. White, an idiosyncratic author best known for his rewrite of Malory's Arthurian epic, *The Once and Future King*, and a close friend of David Garnett. After giving Garnett first refusal, she accepted, while he eventually decided to edit his own correspondence with White. Both are trying to write about White, a subject in which their own status as friends and readers is implicated, and it forces them to be explicit about the different kinds of truths that letters and biographies can tell. Garnett advises Warner that:

The chief thing in a biography – not that I know anything about writing them – is to exhibit your subject, or let him exhibit himself, from all angles, which is what a tailor does when making one a suit.

Luckily for you, White exhibited himself in the most contradictory ones. In fact his metier was to do so. He was inspired by his own multiform image, which is not how you and I work. (74)

There were limits to the ‘angles’ that Warner could show White from, as she discovered his diary accounts of sadistic and paedophilic desires. Jan Montefiore has shown how Warner eventually found a way to ‘be honest’ in concentrating on his identity as a writer rather than his sexuality.<sup>13</sup> But this solution still left Warner struggling with the form:

Dearest David,... White is killing me. I don’t see how I can give the book any air of proportion. Do you realise that all his creative work was over by 1945? From then on, he splutters and gutters. If I could use his lust and rage and frenzy and defeat over the – boy I could make a real dragon’s tail ending. But everybody’s bloody feelings are in the way, and if I observe them I shall be reduced to the portrait of a frustrated Scout Master. (83)

Both of them feel as strongly about aesthetic balance as free speech. Garnett argues that biography can bring the two together since truth is more interesting when it is not sanitised. But Warner amuses him on the limit-case of White:

I won’t cheat; and have a beginning idea of what I can’t do, which is a bottomless pit. It is a sad reflection, darling David, that after all the years intelligent people like ourselves have been illuminating English society it is still totally impossible to be honest... (73)

Garnett considered that Warner was successful in her enterprise, confessing with wonder that she seemed to know his friend better than he did himself. He dedicated his eventual edition of the *White/Garnett Letters* in 1968 to her with the words: ‘To Sylvia Townsend Warner, who in her biography of T.H. White has given us the real man’. But this was after some revealing doubts about the very different – indeed, ‘false’ –

version of White he felt emerged from his letters:

I wish you here, because I wanted to tell you, to confess to you, by word of mouth what I hesitate to say on paper. The fact is I am horribly bored, not by Tim himself, but my friendship with him exemplified in all those idiotic solemn letters written from false premises. (Garnett 94)

Warner tried to reassure him without further dishonesty:

As for the D.G./T.H.W letters, why shouldn't they wait? If you leave them long enough, they will come back to life, and you will be able to accept the false premises as part of the set-up: which they are. True, I don't at the moment see how you can editorially remark: At this moment I hated his guts. But you will find a way, if you leave them to simmer at the back of the stove. (95)

It is these same 'false premises' that Warner described in the more subtle terms of the 'bridge that only carries the weight of one person at a time'. As she tells it in the biography, however, her formal observation of a covert monologue is immediately and comically returned to the story of Garnett and White's very real relationship:

When White reached Hilton Hall on the evening of September 25th he and Garnett met with affection; for six years the bridge had carried a traffic of sympathy, advice, enlivening nonsense, exasperations, understanding and misunderstanding, dependence and assurance. It could have been the happy reunion they had earned by remaining alive to each other if the dogs had not added their overwhelming goodwill. Garnett was irked by 'the noise and physical presence of Quince, who stood four foot six on his pads and knocked everything off any table with his amiable tail and Killie, bouncing, ingratiating and all too female'. White sensed this, fled into the defensive, ... decided that Garnett knew nothing about dogs and trailed his petticoat about the war. Worse was to come.<sup>14</sup>

The particular deceptions involved in Garnett's friendship with White, she suggests, were magnified by those inherent in letter-writing, indeed, the abstraction of writing itself, so graphically punctured with the image of the two noisy,

bouncing dogs. Although the ‘enlivening nonsense’ that fills many letters seems to make them a realist genre, in fact, their reference is entirely relational. In this sense, Warner’s approach is dialogical most especially in its teasing out of monologue, for it is the relationship, not any absolute truth that counts.

Warner’s view of the White/Garnett letters points up the slipperiness of her own ‘set-up’ with Garnett, although of this, she writes nothing. Frequently declaring their mutual fondness and solidarity as the years pass, Warner and Garnett reach their eighties with the White biography having been declared a masterpiece and Garnett in full swing of a seemingly endless flow of novels. Even so, there is a complex tension between writerly affection and distance in person that makes this last and longest stage of correspondence a powerful example of the ‘one-person bridge.’ For example, the sharp anatomising of male sexual hypocrisy, so important to Warner’s fiction, is never discussed with the womanising Garnett. This is in part due to mutual discretion about their personal relationships, but also their shared dedication to art. Precisely because of their insistent optimism over meaning’s arrival, the glimpses of its errancy are poignant. From 1968 to Warner’s deaths in 1978 and Garnett’s in 1981, both suffered painful and tragic losses. Angelica left Garnett in 1967, Valentine died in 1969, Garnett’s eldest daughter committed suicide in 1973 and an old mutual friend did so the following year. Both ended by living for years alone. For each other, they chart these events briefly and stoically: Sylvia observed that Garnett’s offhand announcement on the back of an envelope that his wife has left him was ‘one of the best placed sentences you have ever written’ (130). Warner was meanwhile grateful for Garnett’s refusal to coddle after Ackland’s death:

8 December 1969

Dear Sylvia, I send you my love.

I love the visible world so much that it consoles me to know that it is going on: however much we mess it up – day and night, high



tide and low tide, summer and winter: forever – and that we don't.

But such reflections are no help for pain and loneliness: for that there's no cure, my dear.

Well, all my love

David

2 September 1970

Dearest David,... How old we both are, my dear. Alike in that, if in nothing else. In a way, I am more like the Sylvia you first knew, for I have reverted to solitude. I live in a house too large for me, with three cats; and when the telephone rings and it is a wrong number I feel a rush of thankfulness. I was grateful to you for your letter after Valentine's death, for you were the sole person who said that for pain and loneliness there is no cure. I suppose people have not the moral stamina to contemplate the idea of no cure; and to ease their uneasiness they trot out the most astonishing placebos. I was assured I would find consolation in writing, in gardening, in religion, in tortoises, in keeping bees, in social service (the world is so full of misery); and many of these consolers were people whom I had previously found quite rational. Your only runner-up was Reynolds Stone's wife, who said, whiskey.

But when one has had one's head cut off –

Please, if only for my peace of mind, outlive Michael Holroyd. For my pleasure too, come to that.

There you are with your enormous hearth, your refrigerator, £1000 p.a., the days drawing in: you are ideally circumstanced to write to me from time to time.

With my mortal love

Sylvia (156-7)

The dogged humour and appeals to the indifferent beauty of nature grow more insistent as friends drop away, or turn to self-pity and religious comfort. Injustice, foolishness and irrationality become spectres exorcised by their superior, always amused, worldliness. Such reason and self-sufficiency is exaggerated by the pastoral setting, for both writers chose a life and retirement of relative isolation in the country. The letters abound with descriptions of gardening, harvesting, cooking, animal husbandry, recipes and passionate weather

reports. Garnett keeps bees. Sylvia grows white currants. These themes of the good life, occasionally punctuated by a sardonic reference to contemporary political events, provide the classical themes of comic renewal:

14 December 1968

Self-pity is despised – but let me please give way – and despise me to your heart's content. My young birds are all fledged: I have seen them fly out of the nest. All duty is over. Yes duty. But what has that got to do with it? One can't stop loving as the barn owls do in October – or as the cats feel towards their mature kittens. ... Well, Sylvia, my trouble – and I think yours – is that we love life. How extraordinarily happy they must be who hate it! What a good wicket they are on! In ten years' time – universal nuclear destruction of the populations, animal and vegetable, of the earth. So in the season of Peace on Earth, I wish you a Very Merry Christmas and Glorious New Year. (149)

2 July 1973

Yes, [David] you are like Peacock, my dear: like Peacock in having lived on into an age of uncongenial Faith. I suppose people have to be believers. The object varies, but the devotees are much the same. I sit appalled at the sheepishness and credulity of the present iconophiles, who believe that every irregularity of mind, such as genius, can be ironed out by People who know Better, psychoanalysts, sociologists, psychotherapists, qualified social workers.

All faiths are worldly. Do you agree? – means for getting on, rising in the world, social insurance. (178)

But the virtual youth sustained by such literary sensuality is a performance that sometimes sounds shrill, particularly in Garnett's lengthy descriptions of his physical prowess. Aged 82, he recounts driving from Britain to Spain to swim in the Canaries (190-91); aged 84, finishing a 100,000-word novel, giving a huge birthday party, house-training a wild cat, and industrial-scale washing. Compare this to a diary account of Warner's of 1959, when he was 67:

He has grown a little deaf, and at first it was uneasy, dimmed; then he began to talk about the wall-paintings discovered in Sparrow's Farm, and the pheasants made by the Women's Institute falling dead to the Victorian sportsmen... alas! he is very hurt and smouldering about Chatto and Windus's rejection of his book.<sup>15</sup>

To him, she wrote a week later, 'Darling David, Thank you for giving me *A Shot in the Dark*, thank you for writing it. It is an enamoured book, Stendhal could not have written of Italy more lovingly.... I think Chatto and Windus were fools to turn it down' (Garnett 63). To Valentine, Warner saw David as bearing a 'mixture of shyness and a great deal of sexual condescension',<sup>16</sup> and in a letter to Bea Howe in 1975, she noted:

David came last week, and I gave him brandy with his coffee, and some admirable fillet steak. I watched his start of delighted surprise when he sank his teeth into the first mouthful.

After the first mutual shock of seeing ourselves so much changed for the worst, we found we had not changed so much after all, and it was a happy visit.<sup>17</sup>

Her next letter to David comes out as, 'It was a pleasing astonishment to find out how well you still knew me' (Garnett 205).

Self-sufficiency as a model of aesthetic value is thus alone insufficient to explain what moves us about this correspondence, ironically because of its very centrality as both writers' personal and aesthetic ideal. Although there is nothing of the degree of hidden monologue in Garnett's correspondence with White, or the complex substitution of Warner's correspondence with Ackland, its value is measured by the costs as well as pleasures of standing alone. As with writers like Johnson and Sévigné, physical distance is transmuted into aesthetic confidence, in which a fantasy of reason and wit seems to thrive against emotion, disability and death. But even in this most coherent of correspondences, it is the contradiction between unity and disunity, teased out by editorial connection and commentary, which is so fundamental to its literary effect. The theme of transcendence

is embodied in an ephemeral form that, strung together, marks the implacable march of time. The ending, which they of course, did not write, delivers this message most definitively, with the abrupt, abashed entrance of editor on stage. Sylvia died, then David did: dialogue hangs in ungainly monologue, waiting for an answer to which there is no longer any point. Contrast this to Warner's gleeful description to Garnett of a more controlled aesthetic death:

Today I ... took out Housman's *Last Poems*.... And on the last page was THE END. As you might expect. But I suddenly had a vivid sense of the goblin pleasure A.E.H. must have had as he wrote those words, in a neat scholar's handwriting, licking dry lips, slamming that noiseless door. (206)

Epistolary bridges are always shaky in the uncertainty of the future they must be thrown towards, even when each correspondent takes such pleasure in watching the other cross over. This is not because virtual relationships are less serious or real than physical ones. On the contrary, writing's defence against the transience of the body is as simple in letters as the acknowledgement of underlying absence. Warner and Garnett's defiant dialogue shows, however, that this is a more poetic wager when it recognises that though we are not autonomous, we can also only cross the bridge alone.

- 1 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, *T.H. White: A Biography*, O.U.P., 1989, p.219
- 2 *Ibid*, p.143
- 3 Hallett, Nicky. 'Anxiously Yours': The Epistolary Self and the Culture of Concern.' *Journal of European Studies* 32.2 & 3 (2002), p.111.
- 4 Castle, Terry, 'The Will to Whimsy.' *Boss Ladies, Watch Out!: Essays on Women, Sex, and Writing*, New York: Routledge, 2002. 237-44.
- 5 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, *Selected Letters*. Ed. William Maxwell. London: Viking Penguin, 1982, p.viii
- 6 Paulin, Tom. 'Newness and Nowness: The Extraordinary Brilliance of Elizabeth Bishop's Letters.' *Times Literary Supplement* 29 April 1994: 3-6.
- 7 Castle, Teery, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, New York, Columbia UP, 1993, p.74
- 8 Harman, Claire. *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1989, p.309
- 9 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, *Selected Letters*, p.xiii

- 10 Castle, Terry, 'The Will to Whimsy.' p.237
- 11 Garnett, Richard, ed. *Sylvia and David: The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters*, London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994, p.97 Henceforth references to these letters are given as page numbers in the text.
- 12 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, *Selected Letters*, p.247
- 13 Montefiore, Jan. 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: Authority and the Biographer's Moral Sense.' *Imitating Art: Essays in Biography*. Ed. David Ellis, London: Pluto, 1993. 124-48.
- 14 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, *T.H. White: A Biography*, p.220
- 15 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, and Claire Harman. *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994, p.62
- 16 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, Valentine Ackland, and Susanna Pinney. *I'll Stand by You: Selected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland* : With Narrative by Sylvia Townsend Warner. London: Pimlico, 1998, p.319
- 17 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, *Selected Letters*, p.203

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