

WRITERS AT WORK

Sylvia Townsend Warner Interviewed by Louise Morgan
(from *Writers at Work*, Dolphin Books, 1931)

“I WISH,” said Sylvia Townsend Warner, “that I could tell you I wrote standing on one leg. Then you’d have something really entertaining and original to say about me!”

“You do it, if not standing on one leg, then in some other way quite as unorthodox, I’m sure,” I answered.

She settled down then, lighting a cigarette, “to think how she did it.” The blue of her Chinese coat against the Spanish red of the cushions suddenly created a new harmony in a room that sang with colour. At first sight of her flat (which is in a quiet corner not far from Lancaster Gate) one would say it belonged to a painter—a painter who had lived a great deal in the South of Europe and loved the sun. The walls are in Egyptian yellow and red, and the curtains are of patchwork. The colours are all of a bright, glowing kind, yet at the same time of an infinite softness. To come into these rooms out of a London rain, as I did, was like stepping off the magic carpet into another country altogether.

She herself has that same quality of unexpectedness. It is part of her great personal charm that she keeps her listener constantly on the alert, and never by any chance gives him what he is prepared for. As a result, she sets one chuckling at once. She rarely laughs herself, however. All her expression is put into her voice, which is like a viola with harp accompaniment. In appearance she is tall and pale, and she moves her arms in a way that subtly suggests wings.

“I never work in the morning,” she began.

"Does that mean that you don't get up early?"

"If I did get up early, I shouldn't pride myself on it. This getting up early is entirely overrated. Most people get a wholly unjustifiable kick out of getting up at eight in the morning. They do it merely for the purpose of expressing their moral superiority over those who don't!"

"So you never work in the morning?"

"Never. I go to the greengrocer's instead. Or William takes me out for a walk."

William was a contemplative black chow with impeccable manners who lay very decoratively on a rug during the whole course of our conversation.

"That's one of the advantages of a dog to a writer," she went on. "William *must* have his walk. And if I get absorbed in something and forget it, he comes and reminds me. He keeps me to regular hours, and exercises me. Every writer should own a dog."

"When, then, do you work?" I persisted.

"After lunch sometimes. Generally in the evening."

"Every evening?"

"I know I ought to, but I don't."

"Do you write for long at a stretch?"

"Once I get started I could go on for ever. But I take a very long time boiling up!"

"And then you boil rapidly?"

"Quite fast. But on the whole I write slowly because it takes me so long to get down to it."

"What is this process of 'getting down to it'?"

"I think for a long time about a book before I begin writing it. I find that anything I've written has lain dormant for three or four years. The idea floats up in my mind from somewhere. But it must take its shape before I think out any of the details, or even the characters. I used to compose music, and I believe I write like a composer still. I must get the shape first, before the actions or words."

"Do you depart from that shape later?"

"I may modify it in details, but I never change it."

"Your ending remains the same?"

"Except for unimportant details."

"When you do get down to writing, do you write straight off without stopping?"

"I get stuck occasionally. Then I leave off completely for the time being."

"Do you revise very much?"

"I make dozens of revisions, but quite half of them are done before I begin to write at all."

"You like music, I take it."

"Very much. Yes, I have played one or two instruments. Very badly. But I am chiefly interested in music on the constructional side. I have edited a good deal of sixteenth-century music, and I mean to edit some more."

"Do you like the gramophone and the radio?"

"The radio I think is very bad for musical taste in general. It makes music seem to many people like water in a tap, to be turned on whenever needed, or just allowed to drip. I've been in houses where it dripped all day long."

"And the gramophone?"

"I have never wanted one for an instant, but of the two I prefer it to wireless. It is more honest about its limitations. . . a useful little instrument like a potato-peeler. Wireless is so damned God-like, and cheats all the time."

"What do you think of that other modern invention, the cinema?"

"I've seen very few films. I like the abstract ones."

"Are you fond of the theatre?"

"I don't go very much."

"What *do* you like, besides writing and music?"

"I like pictures, and architecture. And I'm interminably interested in people—quite ordinary people, the kind you meet in the street or see in buses. Not to talk to them. To watch them like rare wild animals. I love anything to do with cooking. I really enjoy cooking. I make jams and pickles too. I'm considered to be quite a successful cook!"

This interest of hers in cooking is not so odd as it might seem, for it goes with a feeling for the classic and the formal, which she has in exquisite degree. The eighteenth century, it will be remembered, when form reached its perfection, was a period when cooking was regarded as one of the arts, and

ladies of high degree prided themselves on their triumphs in the kitchen.

"Have you any special secret in cooking that you don't mind giving away?" I asked.

"One should always use butter."

"To go back to writing, what part of it do you like best?"

"I like best the beginning. I don't like it when it's all done and you feel you haven't brought off what you've wanted to. But I'm happy when it's shaping itself, and I'm thinking it out. It took me fourteen months to write *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*. For six months I lived on that island. I had a delightful time there. That was before I began writing. During all that time I saw real people in a sort of dream. They were there, like people in a railway carriage on a night journey, but I was scarcely aware of them. I was living my real life on the island. I was haunted by it."

"Are you haunted by your characters too?"

"I suppose I am. I take them about with me for a long time while I am getting to know them. They need understanding. It threw a light on Mr Fortune's character when I discovered his favourite composer was Haydn. I knew him fairly well before that, but not intimately."

"Are you conscious of the process by which your characters become familiar to you?"

"By always referring real life to them, not the other way round. I speculate as to what they would think of this or that; do in such circumstances. Sometimes they take one by surprise by striking out quite new lines for themselves."

"Are they founded on real people?"

"I never put a real person into a book. There's no trace of actual people in my characters. I see someone at a street corner, and speculate about him."

"You mean your characters are purely fantastic?"

"Oh no. You could look out all my characters in the ABC. Or rather in Bradshaw, where you find all the very slow country trains that stop at every junction. Ordinary people and the adventures of the everyday are much the most interesting. Wilamovitz-Moellendorff was a great

archaeologist, but the best pages in his memoirs are those in which he tells how he ate ham in his childhood or fell off a mule in Greece."

"Have you ever thought of writing the life of any special person?"

"John Thomas Smith's *Life of Nollekens* is almost the ideal biography. Smith disliked Nollekens, and his dislike gave the book vitality. But though he disliked him he did not despise him. There the book differs from much modern biography, which is sneering. It's usually men of action that are made the subject of biography. But they are poor material compared with ordinary people. Think, for instance, what a marvellous subject for biography Mrs Beeton would make. A life of Mrs Beeton would be enthralling!"

"Why not do it?"

"Nothing is vital unless you want to do it, and I don't particularly want to write a life of Mrs Beeton."

"Whom do you like among the writers of today?"

"I'm very ordinary in my tastes. I like most of the seriously admired writers. I think T.F. Powys is the most important writer at the moment. I admired D.H. Lawrence immensely. And what exciting things the Americans are doing! I admire Elizabeth Madox Roberts extremely. And Hemingway—I like his stream-line style."

"Whom do you like among the writers of the past?"

"Richardson—Samuel. I don't know how many times I've read *Clarissa*. Of nineteenth-century writers to me the most thrilling is G.M. Hopkins. He's very hard to get nowadays. I believe he's the only modern poet who is learned by heart as Homer was. I know of two men who have many of his poems by heart. One learned from the other. The first man had seen the poems in manuscript. Neither had seen a printed book of the poems."

Here the telephone rang again, for the fifth or sixth time.

"This accursed telephone!" she sighed, and proceeded very affectionately but firmly to tell the speaker at the other end that she was busy for the rest of the day. And then, as she had with all the others, she relented.

"If you really must," she said. "But it can't be for long. Just one minute. Come at seven, then. But only for one minute."

"When did you begin to write?" I asked when she had put down the receiver.

"I began to write when I came to live alone in London. I wrote first quite by accident, to amuse myself, without thought of publication. David Garnett saw my poems and showed them to a publisher. I had a novel done, too, by that time. The poems were published in 1925, and the novel in 1926. The publisher would do it, though I protested against the polygamy of bringing out poetry and prose by the same author."

"Can you write them both at the same time?"

"No, they are written at different periods. They are two different things altogether, requiring a different approach and technique."

"Could you define this difference?"

"Put it like this. In prose one tries how much one can get out of a subject; in poetry, how far one can get into it."

"Do you use a typewriter?"

"Yes. If it's ordinary work, I use a typewriter. But if it's difficult I use ink. I don't like either. I hate having to scratch out mistakes. If one sees a mess before one, one's mind becomes messy. But in a tight place the familiar feeling of holding a pen in one's hand is reassuring."

"Is it a fountain-pen?"

"I can't endure a fountain-pen."

"Do you use a thesaurus of any sort?"

"I borrowed one for crossword puzzles. The only dictionary I possess is a French dictionary."

"Where do you do most of your writing?"

"Here. I do all of my writing in London. In the country I'm like the dogs—I rush out rabbiting. But I suppose I'd write wherever I lived."

"Does the weather affect you?"

"I like a long rainy afternoon with its sense of security and isolation. That always puts me in a writing mood."

"Do you mind being interrupted?"

"Bitterly."

"Does noise distract you?"

"I don't like noise. I came here mainly because it was quiet."

"Do you find health affects your work?"

"I'm not abounding in health. But it doesn't affect me in the least. Some of the work I like best was written when I was very tired."

"Are you very orderly about your writing?"

"I sympathize with Haydn, who always put on his best suit and his best wig to compose in. I like everything clean and tidy and in order before I begin writing."

"Do you ever discuss work with others while it is in progress?"

"*Never*. I'm superstitious about that. If I should talk it over with any one else, I should lose the whole thing. I'd be bound to get that other person's point of view, and it would destroy my own."

"Do you read your books once they appear in print?"

"I should only read a book of mine if it were so long after publication that I'd forgotten all about it, and could read it as a new book by a somebody called Warner. My work always seems dead when it comes from the typist's. It seems even deader in proof. And the book is its coffin."

"Have you anything to say about the present arrangement between author and literary agent?"

"It seems satisfactory enough. The only exception I take to literary agents is that they beg one to write such strange things. If one excels in light verse, they want one to do treatises on theology."

"In case you could be persuaded to give a word of advice to beginning writers, what would it be?"

"That's difficult, because each writer has his own special way of writing. It's like a natural parting—sometimes it comes in the middle and sometimes on one side. But if I said anything, I'd say, Don't write with a sense of duty and don't fuss. Flaubert is responsible for the bad tradition that one must write in misery. This has spoilt many a book that might otherwise have been a good one."

William, divining the end of the inquisition, at this instant lifted his bulk from the rug and approached his mistress. Like her, he evidently has an infallible instinct for the right gesture.
