

## “THE TRUE STORY OF ENGLAND’S GREATNESS”: DEGENERACY, PRIMITIVISM, EUGENICS

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*The True Heart* (1929), Sylvia Townsend Warner’s third novel, is an apparently simple retelling of the myth of Eros and Psyche as recounted by Apuleius in *The Golden Ass*. But the subject-matter clearly attracted Warner as a tale of forbidden love that runs as counter to imperialist and family values as her story of incest, “A Love Match,” or the cross-species cat fables in *The Cat’s Cradle-Book* or the worldly, earth-bound tales of the seemingly supernatural in her last book, *Kingdoms of Elfin*. Warner’s estrangement from the dominant ideology is crystallized in these narratives’ matter-of-fact crossings of borders that are generally assumed to be impassable.

*The True Heart* is a guide to the interlocking, destructive, ideological absurdities of Empire—a guide book cross-dressed as a classical fable. The fable becomes an everyday love story, myth become mundane. Psyche is Sukey, an orphan servant girl, and Eric, a beautiful young man of irreproachably middle-class antecedents, is a neglected “idiot” Eros.<sup>1</sup> Because the mentally disabled were prototypical primitives, their “idiocy” was beyond question: obfuscation of their true mental state was basic to the maintenance of the Empire. The destitute or “unemployable,” the multitudinous “lower races,” prostitutes and, often, all women as a class were regarded as mentally-disabled “primitives” or, at

best, as innocent children in need of firm guidance from the white male ruling class. The rationale for the white man's burden was the convenient assumption that almost everyone else was an idiot.

The protagonist of *The True Heart* is at the very base of the British class and gender systems: Sukey Bond graduates in 1873 from the Warburton Memorial Female Orphanage; aged sixteen, she goes "out to service" as maid of all work at New Easter Farm in the Essex marshes; her place has been found for her by Mrs Seaborn, a "lady patroness" of the orphanage.<sup>2</sup> There, Sukey falls deeply in love with a young man whose position at the farm is anomalous; he returns her love affectionately but seems strangely detached; only when he falls twitching to the ground at the sight of a slaughtered rooster is Sukey told that her Eric is "an idiot in a fit". The young man has been farmed out to New Easter by his mother, the lady patroness who found Sukey her place there. Sukey is in love with the idiot scion of a most respectable family: his father is the Rector of Southend. And his mother, Mrs Seaborn, is Warner's version of the Venus in *The Golden Ass*.

For *The True Heart* retells the story of Cupid and Psyche to produce an allegory of class oppression. Its plot, from Eric's fit, when his mother takes him away from New Easter, right up to the marriage of the lovers through the intervention of a kindly Victorian Jupiter, consists of Sukey's apparently impossible quest for her lover. She knows pretty clearly what her culture thinks of such a match:

People could . . . send a policeman to take her to prison, a warder to carry Eric to the madhouse. Not only could they: she knew only too well that there was a great likelihood that they would; for people have strong views on such matters as hers: they disapprove when a servant-girl marries a gentleman, and they might further—for all she knew—disapprove when an idiot marries a servant-girl.<sup>3</sup>

Sukey was right. In the 1870s, "idiots" were considered degenerate, or retrogressive, as were immodest or fallen

women. To lose one's modesty, which was an unconscious quality since women were thought to have no willpower and an altogether more limited conscious mind than men's, was inevitably to fall. Sukey on her quest for her upper-middle-class lover was certainly not behaving as a modest, mid-Victorian young working woman should. And once modesty was lost, "a woman became transformed: she crossed the boundary on which the entire female sex already hovered and entered a state of pathology and/or vice".<sup>4</sup> There was no middle way between modesty and prostitution, and the prostitute was always atavistic, in a state of moral (and physical) idiocy.<sup>5</sup> The idea of degeneracy as a reversion to earlier stages of evolution had been current since the eighteenth century, based on the Lamarckian theory that acquired characteristics could alter heredity for better and for worse. It had been used alongside Christianity to justify the oppression of women, the poor, and "the lower races."<sup>6</sup> As mid-Victorian intellectuals became free-thinkers, evolutionary theory gradually replaced Christianity as the main source of the ideology of Empire. The ideas of progress and retrogression became essential to maintaining the patriarchal status quo. This appeared somewhat precarious in the 1850s and 1860s when threats from the colonized in both hemispheres—the Mutiny in India and the Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica—were followed by the beginnings of the British women's movement; there was concern also about the question of extending the franchise to the working classes.

Lucy Bland explains late-Victorian stereotypes about primitive sexuality as follows:

To most evolutionists . . . 'savages' or 'primitives' were thought to be 'living fossils'—relics of an earlier evolutionary stage. In examining the sexual and moral behavior of contemporary 'savages,' anthropologists claimed to have access to the behaviour of the 'savage' ancestors of whites. There was much talk of 'primitive promiscuity.' Although the term was used by anthropologists to refer to an early stage of human development, it was also used as a description of contemporary 'primitives.'<sup>7</sup>

The contemporary "primitives" included the prostitute in London as well as the "savage" in Africa. And even if they were not promiscuous, both women and the "lower races" were considered childlike, necessitating protection by white, Western man. Sukey Bond, in 1873, was a mid-Victorian "primitive" on account of her childlike innocence—she thinks a kiss has made her pregnant—as well as her immodest forwardness in searching for her lover. In 1873 as in 1929, people would certainly have disapproved "when a servant-girl marrie[d] a gentleman" and "when an idiot marrie[d]" at all.

As soon as Eric is brought home to Southend by his mother, the gossip about primitive sexuality and degeneracy starts. Here is a conversation in the Rectory kitchen; the speakers at this point believe that Sukey is pregnant:

"Fancy an idiot getting a girl that way," remarked the housemaid, filling her mouth with currants. "I shouldn't have thought it hardly possible."

"Oh, they're wonderful at it. Like the blacks. If you must wolf all the currants, all I say is, wolf those you've picked over yourself."

"Well, I call it disgusting. Do you suppose the child will be wanting too?"<sup>8</sup>

Both Sukey and Eric are in danger of institutionalization. And Sukey is determined to keep Eric out of an asylum, for she has memories of being driven past the local madhouse each year on the way to the orphans' annual picnic. It was a solitary house, "surrounded by a high wall, built of stone and topped with iron spikes. Beneath that wall, under that roof, were the lunatics, creatures so different from their fellows that at the thought of them congregated there, the mind quickened with a peculiar excitement, almost as if they were gas and might explode".<sup>9</sup> The "peculiar excitement" here is erotic; the lunatics are the ultimate Other, and "the very separateness of the Other promotes curiosity and desire".<sup>10</sup> Warner had examined another aspect of that desire in *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (1927).

Throughout her writing life, Sylvia Townsend Warner

was a learned and reliable historian; in *The True Heart*, the first of her five historical novels, she satirizes the dominant ideology of her own time together with that of 1873. I agree with Warner's friend and comrade, Arnold Rattenbury, who argues that Warner's historical novels are all about the time of their writing.<sup>11</sup>

Sylvia is deeply concerned about her own times, is always and only political, and that is why whatever the ostensible period, setting and concerns may seem to be, however carefully researched for detail, and then however accurately described, the actuality is now. In fact, the ideological requirements of Empire had hardly changed between 1873 and 1929. The main difference was the growth of the science of eugenics, which was enormously influential from the beginning of the twentieth century until World War Two, when it was taken to its logical conclusion in Nazism's Final Solution. The word "eugenics" had been coined by Francis Galton in 1883; he defined it as "the science of improving stock".<sup>12</sup> By 1900 his followers were increasingly emphasizing the dangers of breeding by the "dysgenic" as well as the importance of encouraging eugenic marriages among the "fit": white, middle-class or respectable working-class couples. It should be clear that eugenics, like the older ideas of primitivism and degeneracy, strongly encouraged racial, class, and gender discrimination.

In 1929, the feeble-minded were definitely considered dysgenic—unfit breeders—as were the undeserving poor.<sup>13</sup> Feeble-mindedness was thought to be hereditary, and the feeble-minded were believed more prolific than others. The definition of "feeble-mindedness"—the term that had replaced "idiocy"—was very broad indeed: alcoholics, vagrants, criminals, prostitutes, and other undesirables, such as unmarried, pregnant young women without visible means of support, could all be considered feeble-minded and open to incarceration in mental-defective establishments. "To the eugenicist, the feeble-minded person became the archetypal representation of a deteriorating, degenerate race".<sup>14</sup>

In the course of her quest for Eric, Sukey Bond finds a second farming family to employ her, the Mulleins. Theirs is

not a clean farm, either outdoors, because Mr Mullein is lazy and has a roving eye, or indoors, where Mrs Mullein is entirely occupied with her seven indistinguishable and constantly ailing children—who form an ironic allusion both to the joys of motherhood and to the heap of small seeds which Psyche is required to sort. Sukey, who enjoys cleaning, is delighted to unveil from a thick coating of grime an engraving entitled “The True Secret of England’s Greatness.”

The story was simple, but at the same time magnificent. Queen Victoria stood on the steps of her throne, as upright as a pillar-box. Round her, at a lower level and in a suitable shading of perspective, were grouped statesmen, courtiers, field-m Marshalls, bishops, pages, and ladies-in-waiting. At the foot of the throne knelt a negro . . . [and] with her gloved hand she was extending to him the gift of a Bible. Sukey would stand in front of this picture and sigh. She wanted to marry Eric beyond all things, but she had also a natural wish to go to court.<sup>15</sup>

This particular celebration of imperial largesse was probably on the walls of many Essex farmhouses. A similar example is a painting by G. Durand, “Queen Victoria Opens the Imperial Institute,” which illustrated an account of this long-awaited event in *The Illustrated London News* in 1893.<sup>16</sup> The Imperial Institute in South Kensington was a propagandist institution which had been planned since the 1870s as “a permanent exhibition, ‘The Empire under One Roof,’ to which the populace could flock to wonder at the benefits colonial rule afforded them”.<sup>17</sup> Durand’s painting shows Queen Victoria and assorted members of the ruling class standing on the steps of this florid example of Victorian baroque facing a crowd of imperial subjects who stand or kneel with their backs to the viewer. Predominantly African and Asian, these appear in “national” dress or undress and are accompanied by some characteristically colonial animals; there is no Bible, but the place of Sukey’s negro is taken by a muscular young man in a loincloth who is paired with a kangaroo and so presumably hails from Australia. Writing forty years after Warner, Paul Scott uses a similar picture as a central symbol to satirize imperialist propaganda in *The Raj*

*Quartet*, his series of historical novels depicting the British in India during the years before 1947;<sup>18</sup> a passage in *The Towers of Silence* recalls how Edwina Crane had used the painting as an instructional text in 1914 at the mission school in Muz-zafirabad:

Here is the Queen. The Queen is sitting on her throne. The uniform of the Sahib is scarlet. The sky here is blue. Who are these people in the sky? They are angels. They blow on golden trumpets. They protect the Queen. The Queen protects the people. The people bring presents to the Queen. The Prince carries a Jewel on a velvet cushion. The Jewel is India. She will place the Jewel in her Crown.<sup>19</sup>

I have no doubt that the charges of the Warburton Memorial Female Orphanage were thoroughly enough indoctrinated with the romance and respectability of the court for Sukey to feel a “natural” wish to participate in this most unnatural, most posed and calculated, of settings.

When Sukey hears that Mrs Seaborn is “carrying on something frantic” because she has been snubbed by a Royal Princess who has heard the gossip about Eric, she looks at the engraving and is inspired:

There was Queen Victoria, and there behind her were the statesmen and the courtiers, the field-marshalls, bishops, pages, and ladies-in-waiting. The Bible was still in the royal hand. Only the negro was not there; in his place, kneeling at the foot of the throne, was Sukey Bond. She had always wanted to go to court. Now she was going.<sup>20</sup>

In her vision of disempowered empowerment, Sukey is delighted to imagine herself as literally interchangeable with the negro. Class, gender, and racial oppression have become identical in the fantasy world of this novel. In terms of the Cupid and Psyche story, Queen Victoria takes the place of Proserpine, and London becomes identified with Hades. For just as Psyche is miraculously guided through Hades to Proserpine’s throne, where the Queen of the Underworld graciously fills Venus’s empty box with her magic beauty, so Sukey is miraculously lucky on her way to her audience with



Queen Victoria, who kindly bestows on her the Bible for Mrs Seaborn,—a sign of royal favour bound, as Sukey thinks, to ensure her acceptance as a daughter-in-law. In this absurdly topsy-turvy, ebulliently satirical representation of Empire, *The True Heart* expresses the political concerns that were to preoccupy Sylvia Townsend Warner throughout her writing life.

Notes

1. Stephen Jay Gould in *The Mismeasure of Man*, New York, Norton, 1981, p.158, notes that for eugenicist classifiers of intelligence the terms "idiot" and "imbecile" came to have technical rather than merely pejorative meaning: "[I]diots could not develop full speech and had mental ages below three; imbeciles could not master written language and ranged from three to seven in mental age".
2. "Sukey" meant a general servant or slavey from about 1820, according to Eric Partridge's dictionary of slang. And indeed, in the Apuleius story Venus forces the former princess, Psyche, to become a slavey. A sukey can also be a tea-kettle; this definition explains the "finished tea-set" for which Warner thanked Ray Garnett, who had contributed the engraving of a teapot, cups, milk jug, and sugar bowl surrounded by leaves and flowers which appeared on the title page of the first British edition of *The True Heart*. Partridge's fourth and final definition of "sukey" is "Perhaps . . . a simpleton: mid-C.19-20." I was delighted to find this characteristic example of slippage within the terminology of degeneration theory.
3. Townsend Warner, Sylvia *The True Heart*, London, Chatto, 1929, pp.250-251
4. Bland, Lucy, *Bashing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists*, London: Penguin, 1995, p.60.
5. See Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in late Nineteenth-century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, New York, Routledge, 1986, p.243, for an account of the equation of the appearance of prostitutes with that of "primitives" in nineteenth-century medical writing. He includes illustrations taken from papers by Pauline Tarnowsky of prostitutes' "degenerate" faces with abnormalities [including] asymmetry of features, misshapen noses, overdevelopment of the parietal region of the skull, and the appearance of the so-called Darwin's ear . . . [which is] a sign of the atavistic female." See also Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast* p.73: "The new sciences of craniology and anthropometry 'discovered' that women shared with negroes a narrow, child-like skull and head in comparison to the rounded-head, small-jawed males of the 'higher races'". There are



reproductions of anthropometrists' photographs of "primitives" in Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*, pp.138-139. According to Bland, p.76, these "provided a surrogate pornography for European middle-class males".

6. This phrase was widely current: it was used by Darwin and can be found later in the writings of the socialist Edward Carpenter, who found the notion of "higher" and "lower" classes unacceptable. The idea of a hierarchy of races was prevalent from mid-Victorian times onwards as part of the rationale for imperialist exploitation. The term "lower races" was used interchangeably with "primitives" and "savages."

7. Bland, p.57

8. Warner, p.110

9. Warner, pp.203-204

10. Bland, p.76

11. See Arnold Rattenbury, "Literature, Lying and Sober Truth: Attitudes to the Work of Patrick Hamilton and Sylvia Townsend Warner." *Writing and Radicalism*, ed. John Lucas, London, Longman, 1996, pp.201-244.

12. Quoted by Bland, p.222

13. See Lucy Bland's account of eugenics in *Banishing the Beast*, and also Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, 2nd edition, London, Longman, pp.126-138.

14. Bland, p.240.

15. Warner, p.185

16. Kathy Phillips reproduces this painting in *Virginia Woolf Against Empire*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1994, p.233.

17. Mackenzie, John M., *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960*, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984, p.122.

18. Scott's four novels were made into a television series and were enormously popular in Britain in the 1970s. Despite their irony, they are profoundly nostalgic for Empire.

19. Scott, Paul, *The Towers of Silence*, New York, Avon, 1979, p.72

20. Warner, p.200