

REVIEW

*ARGUMENTS OF HEART AND MIND:
SELECTED ESSAYS, 1977-2000*
JANET MONTEFIORE
(Manchester Univ. Press, 2002. £45)
by Glen Cavaliero

It's tempting to become proprietorial about one's favourite authors, especially when enthusiasm has to contend with the indifference or ignorance of the majority. Thus when I first read *Lolly Willowes* at the age of eighteen I was captivated by its distinctive elegance: this, I realised, was what was meant by 'style'. Over the succeeding decades I was to acquire, to cherish and to recommend each book by Sylvia Townsend Warner as it appeared; and it was always a joy to encounter a fellow enthusiast. But once the Virago reprints made her novels and stories generally available she was discovered by academic critics, and politics and sexuality took centre stage. Her work was no longer discussed simply in terms of readability and imaginative *élan*, but as part of the literary history of its time and as grist for academic mills. Ageing, faithful champions from the past might be excused for feeling that their cause was being hi-jacked; it would however be inexcusable in them to begrudge their heroine this belated recognition.

The work of a leading feminist critic, *Arguments of Heart and Mind* accords a prominent place to Sylvia Townsend Warner: three of the seventeen essays reprinted in it

focus on her work. The remainder are chiefly concerned with early twentieth-century women poets, although there are also interesting discussions of schoolgirl stories (once the preserve of the saucy Arthur Marshall) and of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse novel, *Aurora Leigh*. Janet Montefiore's range of interest is wide, and male authors are not excluded from consideration, witness an examination of Kipling's imagery of dark and light as found in his Indian tales, and a sympathetic account of the poet D.J. Enright, who so effectively cut loose from his confinement by literary journalists to the 1950s' 'Movement'.

Three aspects of Warner's writing in particular arouse this critic's interest. One of these is the poetry. In an essay on one of Warner's love poems of the 1930s Montefiore divides herself into two personæ, rather in the manner of W.B. Yeats's 'Hic' and 'Ille' (or 'Willie' to the poet's friends). Close textual readings combine with feminist theory to activate a dialogue, albeit one that is likely to speak more to professional than to non-academic readers. Elsewhere Montefiore writes perceptively about the gendered inflexions of much poetic language, and in this connection relates Warner's verse in an instructive manner to that of such contemporaries as Stevie Smith and Ruth Pitter. Her discussion of 'H.D', of Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov is not so much assertive as self-questioning, engaging with the question of what precisely constitutes a distinctively feminine poetics. She is also dispassionate enough to include the critic Alan Munton's attack on her reading of a poem by Edgell Rickword, together with her rebuttal of his accusations. Throughout this book there is a genuine sense of ongoing dialectic.

In another essay, 'Listening to Minna', Montefiore concentrates on a crucial episode in Warner's most avowedly political novel, *Summer Will Show*, subjecting the concept of 'realism' to a searching scrutiny. Less of a favourite, I would guess, with Warner's earlier readers than it is with contemporary critics, this novel is arguably her most original achievement and is undoubtedly, to quote her own comment on Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, 'a lion in the path' of those who

would consider her work to be in any way 'Charming, soothing, refreshing etc'. Those words may serve as a caution where Warner's own fiction is concerned.

Her achievement as a biographer is the third aspect of her work to attract Montefiore's attention. In discussing *T.H. White* she makes use of the procedures adopted in that book to effect a critical comparison between Claire Harman's biography of 1989 and Wendy Mulford's study, *This Narrow Place*, published in the previous year. In examining these two books in terms of their authors' controlling preoccupations (in Harman's case, her subject's personal and emotional life, in Mulford's her socio-political involvements) Montefiore highlights the peculiar justice and detachment with which the author of *T.H. White* handles her complex subject-matter. One welcomes her praise for Mulford's undeservedly neglected book, not least on account of the latter's championship of Valentine Ackland's poetry, too often dismissed as merely inferior to those of her more famous partner. This praise should be reassuring to those who, like myself, find it by no means easy to assign the unscribed poems in *Whether a Dove or Seagull* to their respective authors. (Incidentally, Montefiore refers throughout to *a* seagull, an error only to be found in the list of Warner's previous publications printed in *A Garland of Straw* (1943) and accordingly the more surprising to find in a scholarly collection such as this.)

While *Arguments of Heart and Mind* should enhance Sylvia Townsend Warner's standing in the groves of academe, it is written with a lucidity and ease which should appeal to all readers of her work. I noticed only one other inaccuracy: the suppression of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* took place not in 1926 but in 1928, a year after the publication of *Mr Fortune's Maggot*. Of the two novelists, it was Sylvia Townsend Warner who was to prove more adroit in the portrayal of homosexual love.