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Book Review: Frances Bingham, *Valentine Ackland: A Transgressive Life*

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Maud Ellmann

In today's literary market, biographies of famous authors tend to attract more readers than the works that made those authors famous. This appetite for intimate details of writers' lives also extends to their wives and daughters: Zelda Fitzgerald, Constance Wilde, Véra Nabokov, Nora Joyce and even Joyce's psychotic daughter Lucia have been memorialised in hefty tomes titled by their given names. Shorn of surnames, Zelda, Constance, Véra and Nora have attained mythic status, requiring no further identification than Calliope or Terpsichore, those classical muses who inspired, rather than created, their respective arts.

Frances Bingham breaks with this condescending convention by titling her biography *Valentine Ackland*, signalling from the get-go that Sylvia Townsend Warner's 'wife' is to be taken seriously in her own right. Bingham's subtitle *A Transgressive Life* could refer either to Ackland's subversion of sexual norms – her cross-dressing, gender-bending, swashbuckling lesbian career – or to the biography itself, which is transgressive in the etymological sense that it 'steps across' the celebrated figure in this marriage to focus on her unsung partner. Indeed, Bingham justifies the biography on the basis of Ackland's poetic merits, not those of her more famous spouse, claiming that Ackland made her mark in a variety of modes: 'poetry of witness, commenting on the state of the world and the plight of the powerless individual; poetry celebrating the natural world while lamenting its loss to the encroachments of war and progress; love poetry of passionate complexity, and metaphysical poetry which meditates on the human place in the universe' (p. 10).

One of the many virtues of this biography is that it sifts through mountains of Ackland's unpublished papers, formerly housed in the Dorset County Museum, to unearth some unknown and accomplished works. Another virtue is that Bingham doesn't often overrate their merits. To a sceptical reader like myself, who finds most of Ackland's poetry soupy and self-indulgent, Bingham's judicious selections reveal unexpected felicities. Together with many admirers of Warner, however, I confess to being prejudiced against Ackland for tormenting her lover with infidelities, especially her long drawn-out affair with Elizabeth Wade White, an American heiress who published a study of her ancestor the poet Ann Bradstreet.[1] For an agonising ten years and more, Ackland kept Warner on a yo-yo, constantly betraying her yet refusing to let her go. At one point the threesome even shared a house in the United States where Warner, sleeping alone, was forced to overhear the sounds of love-making from an adjacent room. To top it all, Ackland finally renounced Wade White only to convert to Catholicism – to Warner's mind a grotesque betrayal not only of their marriage but of Ackland's personal integrity. Only the reforms of Vatican II persuaded Ackland to relinquish this new mistress, dismayed by the demise of the Latin mass and other fetishistic relics. Ultimately Ackland joined the Quakers, a less obnoxious rival to Warner than the Catholic Church and one that brought some peace to the marriage, since the Quakers' pacifism accorded with the partners' political commitment to nuclear disarmament.

In all her adulteries – sexual, moral, intellectual – Ackland seemed oblivious of Warner's anguish, partly because it was disguised in forbearance ('O WHY was I so restrained and undemanding? What mightn't a good YELL have done?' Warner asks herself in her diary in 1970 (p. 308)). On the rare occasions that she noticed Warner's pain, Ackland would indulge in orgies of self-reproach, which were 'without doubt enjoyable', as Freud says of the 'self-tormenting' typical of melancholia.[2] In fact, Ackland's behaviour displays the classic symptoms that Freud attributes to this disorder: 'The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable … He abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy.' Instead of feeling ashamed of these failings, however, the melancholic shows 'an almost opposite trait of insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure'.[3] In Ackland's case this communicativeness produced vast quantities of autobiographical writing: 'unfinished prose projects, multiple memoirs, daily diaries, and incessant letter-writing', characterised by

Bingham as 'mythomanic, guilt-ridden, self-deceptive, scaldingly honest' (p. 323). Paradoxically, much of this avalanche of writing is obsessed with its author's supposed inability to write. Freud claims that the self-reproaches of the melancholic are disguised 'reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego'.[4] The idea that the melancholic self-castigation disguises an attack on the loved object makes sense of the repellent combination of abjection and sadism that Ackland inflicted on her long-suffering spouse.

The story of the love triangle of Warner, Ackland and Wade White makes for painful reading, and it has been retold many times, most poignantly in *I'll Stand by You* (1998), Warner's compilation of her correspondence with Ackland that was edited by Susanna Pinney after Warner's death. Bingham retells the story well, but many questions remain unanswered, including Warner's 'What mightn't a good YELL have done?' Why didn't the partners separate, which might have saved them both a lot of misery and rescued Ackland from the fate of second fiddle? What drew them to each other and locked them in what D.H. Lawrence once described as 'a relation of utter inter-destruction'?[5] The answer, I suspect, has to do with their demanding mothers, who exacted a high tax of servitude for their grudging love.

At the end of her biography Bingham proposes an intriguing counterfactual, speculating what might have happened if Ackland had been born the boy her father longed for. As a boy, she would have benefitted from a prestigious education and earned her family's admiration for her literary talents, while avoiding their persecution for her sexual adventures. Taking up Bingham's cue, we might consider another counterfactual in which Warner and Ackland split up after the debacle of *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1933), their joint collection of poetry, the reviews of which left Ackland feeling overshadowed and humiliated. As Bingham tells the story, this publication brought about the first rift in their relationship, goading Ackland into the vengeful promiscuity that culminated in the Wade White mess. What if the lovers had realised that this rift could not be mended and agreed to go their separate ways? Warner might now be better known as a poet – she never published another volume of poetry in Ackland's lifetime, probably to spare her partner chagrin – and Ackland might have found some satisfaction in her sexual and literary independence, though given her addiction to ambivalence it's likely that she would have engineered another love triangle. What if the couple had lived in London – 'Darling London', as they called it (p. 322) – where Ackland could have found a wider audience instead of relying on a single

interlocutor whose talents greatly eclipsed her own? Although saving them money and bringing them bucolic pleasures, country life isolated them in a claustrophobic intimacy reminiscent of Edith Wharton's toxic triangle in *Ethan Frome*.

Bingham takes an evenhanded approach to this stormy marriage, resisting the temptation to blame Ackland for all its woes. If Ackland was oblivious to Warner's pain, Warner could also be insensitive to Ackland's fragile self-esteem, and Warner's propensity to lose herself in work exacerbated Ackland's loneliness and self-despair. Bingham's account of Ackland's early life, especially her persecution at the hands of a sadistic sister, helps to explain how the damage she caused arose from the damage she suffered. By ransacking the archives for Ackland's own accounts of her life and work, Bingham succeeds in shifting our focus from the bright star of Sylvia Townsend Warner to the dimmer light of her less-fortunate partner, who was cursed with the vocation of the poet without the genius. At times Bingham overstates her case, especially about the questionable merits of Ackland's poetry, and there's little evidence of the sense of humour that Bingham attributes to her melancholy heroine. But Bingham has a more ambitious aim in view: to contribute to the 'transgressive' history of lesbian love, with all its tribulations. 'S&V' were 'out' at a time when outness demanded steely courage; they never concealed or 'closeted' their unconventional liaison. And putting counterfactuals aside, their achievements thrived on the vicissitudes of their relationship, nurturing whatever talent Ackland possessed and disciplining Warner's 'will to whimsy' – as Terry Castle has suggested – with a salutary antidote of human misery.[6]

Note on Contributor

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Notes

1 Elizabeth Wade White, *Anne Bradstreet: The tenth muse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).
2 Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, standard edn, ed. James Strachey, Vol. 14 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 251.
3 Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', pp. 246–7.

4 Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', p. 248.
5 D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Minneola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 2002), p. 180.
6 Terry Castle, 'The will to whimsy', *Times Literary Supplement* 4757 (3 June 1994), p. 8.

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