

SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER:
'The Centrifugal Kick'
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Sylvia Townsend Warner is rare among writers of the 1930s in producing work at once sceptical about belief and wholehearted in its relish of the possible. The Utopian reach of her fictions of the 1930s is, over and over again, undermined sardonically from within. Her narratives never rest content with their initial project; instead, the eye of the reader is obliged to pan across fields and back alleys obliterated by the opening vision. The eye and mind are led to focus on people socially and psychologically excluded at the outset, to accept the impossibility of hopes provoked, old tales recognised and thwarted.

Warner's first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), written in the mid-Twenties and an immediate bestseller, is, uniquely among her works, about successful escape. The spinster heroine leaves behind the demands of her family and achieves independence in a solitary country life as a witch, striking a happy and unpunished bargain with the devil. Before the publication of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*, Warner imagines a different way for female self-discovery. Warner nonchalantly topples the whole Faustian edifice of the devil's bargain: masculine knowledge may be achieved only at the cost of death but female knowledge, it seems, can triumph as independent life.

The total fantasy gratification of this first novel was never repeated in her work, nor indeed was its commercial success. *The True Heart* (1929), a version of the Cupid and Psyche myth, struggles awkwardly with innocence and ends with the acceptance of a yoked life. In her other novels of the late Twenties and Thirties, escape is investigated rather than celebrated. The hoped-for alterity - of island life in *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (1927), of revolution in *Summer Will Show* (1936), of Spain in *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938) is bared to view, with all its catastrophic losses. These sound like sombre tales, but they shine too.

Before I go further, let me sketch something of Sylvia Townsend Warner's career and life. These may throw light on how we ordinarily characterise Modernism and how that characterisation may need to be opened out in order to think afresh about the 1930s. Of course, there is no need to turn writers into Modernists to justify them, nor can the Modernist project encompass all kinds of creativity. Indeed, in the early Thirties few writers knew that they were, or were not, Modernists. Harold Nicolson wrote, as it were, alongside James Joyce and indeed acted as his champion. Modernism at the time referred also to movements in theology and quantum mechanics, as well as to new genetic understandings of evolutionary theory.

Like Ivy Compton Burnett and Henry Green, Stevie Smith, David Jones and the Powys brothers, Sylvia Townsend Warner's work abutts the Modernist: it uses surreal appositions, nonsense strides, narrative fractures and shifting scales. It is nevertheless pellucid, determined and mischievous rather than allusive and indeterminate. Its experiments are narratological rather than verbal, though the peculiar lift of her sentences produces an idiosyncratic humour. John Updike reviewing one of her later collections of short stories, *A Stranger with a Bag* (1966), wrote admiringly: 'She has the spiritual digestion of a goat. Her stories tend to convince us in process and baffle us in conclusion; they are not rounded with meaning but lift jaggedly toward new, unseen, developments.'¹

The novels are also experiments in *affect*, for these works

at once baffle *and possess* the reader. Douce, whimsical and shifting seamlessly across verbal registers, they suddenly expose us to appalling suffering that cannot be set aside. Calamity is simply there, and to be practised. It is shared with the characters. Sometimes it closes up again into comedy.

The charged dismay experienced in *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, or *Summer Will Show*, or, above all, in *After the Death of Don Juan*, depends upon the readerly desire she provokes: the desire to read on, certainly, but also to move closer inside the text than it quite permits. As Levinas puts it: 'an exterior vision - of a total exteriority, like the exteriority in rhythm ... is the true vision of the novelist.'² Empathy is encouraged and then deflected. The process of her novels induces attachment at once sophisticated and infantile. Joy is unforeseen, suddenly present. As she writes of a disastrous life-story in *Summer Will Show*: 'Candour gave a quality almost like blitheness to the story'.³

In 1929, having just been reading I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*, Warner noted in her diary two lists side by side, one headed 'I am prejudiced: against', the other 'in favour of'. The topic was kinds of poetry and was related to her own ambitions as a poet. But the deadpan account gives some forward glimpses as well into the methods she developed in her fiction, both novels and short stories:

I am prejudiced:
 against poems that/ are in *vers libre*
 express soul-states and interior rumpuses
 talk much about love, unless sub-acidly
 go on for a long time
 are verbally rich
 sonnets, if petrarchan
 end on a soul-stirring note
 ask questions and exclaim
 describe

The parallel list runs:

I am prejudiced:
 in favour of poems/ that are

formally tight in thought and construction
 evoke frames of mind, mention death
 contain conceits, and intellectual stresses
 look neat
 use few images, especially visual
 contain references to christian faith and mythology
 end cynically
 appear very self-controlled
 state⁴

'State' not 'describe': despite the plainness of 'state', a closer form of identification is induced between writer and reader than through description. She rejects Richards's discrimination between 'accepting emotionally, rejecting intellectually' when reading a Donne sonnet.

I think the process is more of an identification. The reader must for the space of that sonnet *become* the writer: for this accounts for much subtler digestions, matters of tone.⁵

Digestion, with its processes of absorption, transformation and expulsion, well fits the intimacy and internality her writing also demands of the reader. And 'tone' here for her, as a musician, is no cliché but an awakened metaphor. Her writing occupies the inner ear like a voice, with a wide and various range of intonation and pitch. But she never suggests we become her characters, rather that we inhabit the sinuous discourse of the writer who approaches, makes and sometimes vitiates these apparitions, so close to the human. Paradoxically, through this lean distance, her fictions have the power to move profoundly.

The attachments, political and personal, of Sylvia Townsend Warner chime with a number of other Thirties writers like W. H. Auden. She was for several years a committed Communist Party member; she went to Spain at the start of the Spanish Civil War (among the party was Stephen Spender: they heartily loathed each other); from 1930 onwards she lived in a life partnership, at times extremely troubled but devoted, with a woman, her lover Valentine Ackland.

At the start of the Thirties Warner was herself in her mid-thirties, having been born in 1893; she lived until 1978. The first half of her life seems quite out of kilter with the life she later lived with Valentine and with her own socialist concerns. In mid-life she shifted both gender and class attachments; yet there are continuities, particularly in her competence as a professional woman in two careers (as musicologist and writer) and in her capacity for sustained friendship. Warner's father was a housemaster at Harrow and she grew up at the school, always on its edge, educated by private tuition, much of it from her father. From the age of nineteen she was for seventeen years the lover of Percy Buck, an older and married musicologist who had been her music teacher since her mid-teens. Though her attachment to him was not exclusive, it shaped her profoundly, both professionally and personally and, I would argue, in the temper of her writing. The long secrecy of their affair seems to have been a means of imagining multiple lives, making space for contradictory experiences that could lie almost autonomously alongside each other. It also hampered her; she found control through writing down with droll detachment and livid insight the shocks between herself and Buck.

For example: her lover (whom she always calls Teague) returns from several months in Africa and lets himself into her flat with the laundry; she has been thinking about ending the long affair and in her mind has chimed the start of the shooting season with the return of Teague:

October 1. Teague came to tea. He got himself into the house with the wash, and when I came on him in the hall he appeared so perfectly life-size that I began to feel that I had been in Africa, not he. How are you? he said. Rather dirty, said I, too surprised to be anything but immediate. I should have added that during a great part of his absence I had been perfectly clean. The pheasant-shooting effect was perfectly unnoticed in the greater shock of discovering how massively intimacy can just sweep one on as before. And there was the reflecting piano-top accepting the umbrella, calm as a glacier; and it was only when he said Kiss me, that absence, his share of it, roared in my ears for a moment.⁶

The economy here is extraordinary. It seizes the shock of return: the lover 'perfectly life-size'; the umbrella for the umpteenth time placed and reflected on the piano, the menace of glacier-slow change caught by the act of observing its repose; the roaring abyss of absence; helplessness and relief in the grip of intimacy's repeat. The writing is forthright, light, humorous and devastating. This is private writing (part of its pleasure is, of course, that it is secret also from Teague), but she is able to transfer those same qualities into texts meant for eyes other than her own. And she feels wry pleasure when Percy Buck does not thoroughly appreciate her new public life as fiction-writer and poet.

Her early career was as a composer (she later destroyed almost all her own music) and musicologist. She was one of the five editors of *Tudor Church Music*, the ambitious ten-volume project which, over twelve years from 1918 on, established and published the corpus of sacred music that has been one of the foundation stones of the Early Music movement in Britain. Working almost entirely from manuscript part-books, the editors brought into currency the work of Taverner, Thomas Tallis, Robert White, William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons and Thomas Tomkins among others. Sylvia Townsend Warner was considerably the youngest among the editors and the only woman. She was also decisively anti-clerical in opinion and opposed to all forms of religious belief. Still, she could not keep altogether away from it in her fiction, so deeply tintured was her imagination by her long habitation among the staves of church music. And she relished the paradoxes of religion, devoting herself to the growing unbelief of Mr Fortune, her missionary character, and to the worldliness and fear within convent life over two centuries in *The Corner That Held Them* (1948). She is fundamentally sceptical, indeed, in all matters of belief, often to comic effect. In May 1928 she remarks in her Diary:

During the morning I thought about thought, and decided it would really be easier to believe in the divinity of Christ than in twice two making four. Somehow the very frequency of twice two etc. seems to invalidate it as a concept.⁷

Her training as a transcriber of music and her gifts as a musician move into the pacing and timbre of her writing: she has a particularly acute ear for the nuanced hesitations of dialogue; the narrative presence of her work relies often on the unvoiced rests between sentences for its effect, and she also draws freely on musical experience in describing emotional states - or everyday scenes: 'the raspberries go on and on like Schubert' she tosses off in a letter. Engaging directly with the hands of individual scribes in sixteenth-century manuscripts also taught her intimacy with unknown people across a long historical span:

The patient organist
 Who scrolled this clef;
 The boy who drew him horned
 On Gibbons in F;
 Singers and hearers all
 Are dumb and deaf⁸

Despite their long-ago deaths, she hears, as she edits, the same music in her head as they did in theirs:

At the bass entry on *mortem Domine* I was cast into such a rapture of knowing the man's mind that I was ready to count all the damnations of scholarship as nought for the sake of that one passage alone. O William, my dear, I said. And William chow woke up, not knowing the William I addressed had been bones for three hundred years.⁹

That intimacy with the absent other (here, perhaps, William Byrd), a feeling for the mind and body lost, yet still present, persists throughout her fiction.

From the Thirties on, her main source of income was from the *New Yorker* for which she wrote short stories for many years. As a result, she became - has remained - better known in the United States than in Britain. Throughout her life from the mid-1920s she wrote and published technically dextrous poetry, some of it oddly Georgian in vocabulary and word order, some mordant and gripping. In recent years several of her novels have been republished by Virago, and selected letters and diaries have become available, largely so far

through the work of Claire Harman. Warner was one of the most wonderful letter writers of the twentieth century in English; much of the correspondence was addressed to people far away whom she had only rarely met, and partly for that reason the letters admit each reader to an intimacy immediate and uncurtailed.

Perhaps the thing that now most stands out about her novelistic career in terms of genre is its prescience. If *After the Death of Don Juan* had been published, not in 1936 but fifty years later, it would have been greeted as a magic-realist fiction; if *Mr Fortune's Maggot* had been published, not in 1928 but, likewise, fifty years later, it would be read as a post-colonial text; while *Summer Will Show* would be seen as part of the current vogue for novels that rewrite the nineteenth century, and the medieval *The Corner that Held Them* as a follower of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. But Warner in fact wrote each of these very diverse novels long before those critical templates were in place. She composed with an exploratory verve that is quite extraordinary.

That narrative confidence, even recklessness, never blurs the intransigent clarity of her language. Embedded in that language is a story-teller's voice, droll, discomfiting, serene and implacable. But the storyteller, too, is subject to revisionary judgment as her career goes on. In *Summer Will Show* Minna makes her living as a storyteller, embroidering and recounting her picaresque life: the child surviving the pogrom, the refugee, the courtesan, the revolutionary. Warner had no such terrible and romantic personal background to recount, but the relation between apparent improvisation and revision in her work produces an effect of communal intimacy often more like that which Benjamin attributes to the storyteller in his 1936 essay of that name than to that of the novelist. The telling is ruthless. The reader flinches but is sustained by the unexpected sequencing of her narratives, which gives an affect of improvisation, of freedom for the reader, even while the characters are pinched.

In 1928 Warner met a young German publisher who turned out to have been a prisoner of war in a hospital in Dartford while she was working down the road in a munitions factory

in 1915. In a surge of intimacy 'as though we had not seen each other for years and there was a great deal to tell' they talked the war through.

His theory of the war: that it is like a work of art, unstayable, obeying its own laws, a masterpiece to itself; and live men and dead men and courage and rancour all powerless but to one purpose: to be constructive units in that work of art.¹⁰

At the time in her diary she seems contented by this codification. By the time she came to write *Summer Will Show* and *After the Death of Don Juan* a few years later, she set against that kind of Futurist patterning the muddle and stench of human participants in armed struggle which springs up unorganised out of class tension. In both these novels dire conflict is the product of justified class hatred. In both of them, too, the arc of the narrative concern shifts gradually and inexorably across from one group of characters to another.

In *Summer Will Show* the shift takes place within the life of Sophia Willoughby, haughty mistress of a fine estate, mother of two beloved children and wife of the unsatisfactory Frederick who at the novel's start is dallying in Paris with a mistress whom Sophia scorns by repute as 'a byword, half actress, half strumpet; a Jewess; a nonsensical creature bedizened with airs of prophecy, who trailed across Europe with a tag-rag of poets, revolutionaries, musicians and circus-riders snuffing at her heels'.¹¹ In a series of leisurely disasters Sophia is denuded: the children die, in deathbed scenes as extreme and more abstemious than those of the Victorian novels in whose period this is set; she is humiliated in sex and class by the limekiln man whose plague has unwittingly brought about the children's deaths; she seeks her husband and is worsted by him, losing all her wealth. She meets Minna, the scorned mistress, and life begins again for her, a new life emboldened and enriched by Minna's own past life told to her as story and rendered stringent by sharing the revolutionary struggle of Paris in 1848. Sophia remains constant in person, still austere, but free and rejoicing in her mutual love with Minna. So far, so romantic. But Warner refuses to let the personal dominate the political entirely. She

wrote the novel through the Thirties from 1931 to publication in 1936. Not only does she incorporate terrible scenes of a pogrom against the Jews, told by Minna from her old childhood, but she ends with a turn that challenges her own past work and looks forward relentlessly, too.

The last scenes of the novel show the muddle, the spattered blood and bone of the barricades, the senseless ignominy of unsuccessful uprising. But more than that they take up a figure from the start of the book, the lovely black bastard child Pascal, child of a male relative from whose colonial estates, it is suggested, some of Sophia's wealth (as does any British reader's) inevitably flows. Sophia first delights in Pascal, then ships him off to a terrible school remote from her home when he becomes a nuisance. He finds her again in Paris, seeking her love and support; but he is now a considerably less comely young man, no longer a plaything, and he interrupts the free pleasures of the life that she and Minna have designed for themselves. Again she rejects him; he falls into the hands of her husband, who enlists him in the French army. Pascal, the black outsider, it is who comes tumbling over the barricade as part of the troop of soldiers and stabs Minna; Sophia kills him with a shot. This is a very different version of race relations from the poignant idyll of Mr Fortune and his lovely boy Lueli. That enchanting novel explores with delicate compunction the balances between missionary and seeming convert, between sex and love, faith and disenchantment. The rancour of the ending of *Summer Will Show* does not obliterate that earlier work, but it does scrutinise and enlarge its possibilities. *Summer Will Show* is written into the face of Fascism and accepts the full weight of those fickle attachments with which the powerful (which again includes the reader in the economy of the narrative) seek to salve their consciences.

The bleak conclusion of *Summer Will Show* comes at the end of a perhaps over-long narrative indulgence in the private pleasures of a loving relationship. It is not difficult to see personal guilts here in the light of the newly fledged commitment of both Valentine and Sylvia to Communism and activism, a commitment that for Valentine was already uneasy

but which carried Sylvia through the period of the Spanish Civil War and some of World War Two.

In *After the Death of Don Juan* she achieves an unflinching comedy about oppression. The work opens in brilliant high pastiche of Mozart's Don Giovanni. The sounds of the opera fill out the text. But there is a crucial difference between theatre and narrative. In theatre we see the statue of the Commendatore enter Don Giovanni's dining room, while Don Giovanni is taken down to Hell before our eyes. In narrative, though, there is only Leporello's witness. We have to rely on his account. And so do all the characters, for a while. The staid Goya-like aristocrats rattle through the countryside to tell Don Juan's father of his death, under the inexorable command of Dona Ana's obsession with Don Juan. The book is full of lively character drawings and some sly slapstick. Its narrative eye slowly, intransigently shifts across the arc from aristocrats to the village community. The peasants lack water. Their crops are withering. Don Juan's father, liberal, learned, dilatory, never quite gets the promised irrigation going. Yet after consultation with his village representatives, it seems that at last he may. Suddenly, three-quarters of the way through the tale, Don Juan is back among them. Leporello's story of Juan's death has become in each retelling more threadbare, less probable. Now Juan is all at once there, alive again, crawling out from behind a table.

The comfortable version of these events would be that eroticism must return; it drives desire. Warner makes that reading impossible. The uncomfortable version, worked out in this novel, is that eroticism is economic, mean-spirited, wasting and spending for its own monstrous pleasure, miserly to others. Libertinism feeds on the peasants. It is Fascism and dictatorship. Don Juan says irrigate, and then turn the peasants out, re-let the land. When his father is appalled he imprisons him brutally. The final spare scenes of the book are of absolute disaster. The book keeps its poise. With eerie absurdity the village men find themselves ambushed as part of an uprising that never quite happened and shot down by the soldiery Don Juan has sent for. At the end Juan lurks in a doorway as the forgettable massacre takes place. By then

Warner had seen the charred and humdrum horrors of the Spanish Civil War. But yet, in the midst of her bare account, Warner closes with dialogue - a restorative dialogue that acknowledges at the same time anonymity, obliteration, and the significance of the local and the personal. Ramon is dying; Diego kneels beside him and whispers:

'You can't fight, they will take you prisoner. I can't leave you to them, Ramon. Shall I kill you? I would do it well.'

'I'll see it out.'

Kneeling beside him he brushed away a fly and smoothed the tumbled lock of hair off the brow.

'What are you looking at, Ramon? What do you see?'

'So large a country,' said the dying man. 'And there in the middle of it, like a heart, is Madrid. But our Tenorio Viejo is not marked. I have often looked for it. It is not there, though. It is too small, I suppose. We have lived in a very small place, Diego.'

'We have lived in Spain,' said the other.

'Aye.'

His gaze left the map and turned to the face bent over him. They looked at each other long and intently, as though they were pledged to meet again and would ensure a recognition.¹²

Later Warner said that this novel was a parable of the Spanish Civil War but later still she refused the idea that the Spanish Civil War was a local war that had ended. Instead she saw a longer compass in the struggle between Fascism and Socialism and faced a struggle continuing past her lifetime. Yet always, alongside that severe conviction, in all her writing whether fiction, verse, letters or diaries, she registered through into extreme old age the tumbling pleasures of the ordinary moment: 'Why does one feel this acknowledging joy?'¹³ she wrote one day in 1958 as she looked at a snowfall in the midst of her anger and anxiety about American missile sites in Britain.

Throughout her long career she realised extremity by means of humour and abstention. In Proust and Racine she admired 'the same paucity of language' and knew that she must not 'cool it into eloquence.'¹⁴ Her own passionate control chimes strangely with the unforeseeable quality of her stories. Her narratives cannot be predicted, nor, can the droll

buzz of the language by whose means she contrives to speak in chords. Her works in the 1930s are imbued with the major historical events and dreads of the time: the persecution of the Jews and of other groups such as gypsies and gays, the sense of betrayal and yet of the necessity for secret organisations, the willingness to be active, the dry despair in the face of overwhelming Fascist forces. But with all that she still writes with a lift, relishes experience that will not fit neatly, improvises pleasure for the reader.

Misfitting, discontinuous, eccentric, imperturbable: as she entered the 1930s she had delighted in the astronomer James Jeans's 1929 book *The Universe Around Us*: 'For one minute I felt quite alert about atoms in orbits being energy, being a going-round, and so filling the entire orbit.' But immediately further questions come to her mind: 'Does it take greater energy to go round in the lesser orbit, or what?' So she writes to Jeans and (admirably) gets a letter two days later: 'He admits that in the end something like a going-round reading may be found to be the right one ... Now I want to know if a centrifugal kick wouldn't supply this for long enough for the electron-life'¹⁵ 'Does it take greater energy to go round in a smaller orbit, or what?' It seems an apt question with which to leave Sylvia Townsend Warner whose wit provides the 'centrifugal kick' and whose 'going-round reading' turns the great issues of the 1930s in the erratic yet concentrated orbit of her insight.

Notes

1. John Updike, 'The Mastery of Miss Warner', *New Republic*, 5 March 1966, quoted in Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1989), p.287.
2. 'Reality and its Shadow' in Sean Hand (ed.), *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.140.
3. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (London: Virago, 1987), p.200.
4. Warner, quoted in Harman, *Biography*, p.79.
5. Claire Harman (ed.), *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), p.42.

6. Harman, *Diaries*, p.44.
7. Harman, *Diaries*, p.17.
8. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Espalier* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935), p.10.
9. Harman, *Diaries*, p.44.
10. Harman. *Diaries*, p.25.
11. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (London: Virago, 1987), p.31.
12. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *After the Death of Don Juan* (London: Virago, 1989), p.301.
13. Harman, *Diaries*, p.243.
14. Harman, *Diaries*, p.227.
15. Harman, *Diaries*, pp.45, 48.