

## MODERNISM, FEMINSISM, AND JEWISHNESS

*Maren Tova Linett*

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In *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* Maren Tova Linett explores the 'aesthetic and political work performed by Jewish characters in women's fiction between the World Wars' (p.2), and argues that key authors, namely Djuna Barnes, Jean Rhys, Dorothy Richardson, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf, enlist a 'multifaceted vision of Jewishness to help them shape fictions that are thematically daring and formally experimental' (p.2). Jewishness is thus used to create a modernism which is both feminist and spiritual.

The book is clearly structured around five main themes, each of which is given a chapter, and the arguments and evidence are adduced from whichever of the writers is most appropriate. While this causes some repetition, this structure allows different aspects of a writer or her work to be discussed in detail and the various chapters offer different readings which illuminate each other.

There are, however, some problems with the overarching argument, certainly as far as Sylvia Townsend Warner is concerned. In the first place, Linett's starting point is the exclusion of women from literary tradition as rehearsed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and by Warner in her lecture on 'Women as Writers' (1959),

with Jewishness being a metaphor for this exclusion. While this is not unreasonable, the point is immediately undermined by the passage from Warner's lecture intended to substantiate it, for having suggested that women writers sneak into literary history through the pantry window, she then refers to a female literary tradition, albeit a recent and brief one, before describing how these women write with 'great clearness what they have in mind to say . . . and seldom blotting a line' (qtd. p.18). It is a description which suggests great assurance and confidence as women writers, despite their unorthodox entry into the Palace of Art, and is, perhaps a reflection of Warner's own sense of identity as a writer.

The second problem concerns the classification of Warner as a modernist, which fails to take into account, or even acknowledge, her ambivalent relation to the modernist movement. This is not to say that Warner was not a modernist, but to suggest that she was not a modernist in the more straightforward way that Virginia Woolf was, and that this merits some discussion and clarification.

However, when we reach Linett's discussion of Warner's *Summer Will Show* (1936) in chapters one and three, we are on surer ground. The analysis centres on the Jewess, Minna, and her relationship to the Gentile, bourgeois Englishwoman, Sophia, to explore the ways in which Warner offers a critique of, and protest against, the commodification of both love and art. According to this analysis, Warner's strategy is to remind the reader of the stereotypical bond between Jews and money even as she subverts it in the person of Minna, whose greed is never for financial gain but only for an audience's response to her artistic powers in story-telling, without any regard even for how that response might affect payment. A link is thus forged between Minna and disinterested art which exists for its own sake and is free both from commercial pressures (including those of publishing houses), and from the ideological pressures of propaganda.

This subversion from the cultural stereotype of the money-mad Jew is reinforced by the deliberate evocation

of Shylock as Sophia gives twenty-five gold pounds to the now starving Minna, who immediately gives it away in a gesture which begins to free Sophia from her accustomed self-interested culture in which even emotion is part of a political economy governed by cost-benefit analysis.

As Linett notes, *Summer Will Show* was written while Warner was considering her own political position, and she rightly suggests that the novel and its critique of love and art carries the imprint of that process for it is 'informed by, though not reducible to, her Communist sympathies' (p.36) which led Warner to join the Communist Party in 1935. This political aspect takes a more central position in Linett's second, overlapping, reading of the novel which she elaborates in chapter 3, arguing that Warner used Jewishness to 'demonstrate her commitment to revolution while critiquing its likely excesses' (p.83). Here Warner re-writes the prominent link between Jews and Communism traced in contemporary anti-semitism, viewing it in positive terms, which Linett suggests was her only option if she were to remain true to her political beliefs and counter the anti-semitic feeling which was such a strong - and ominous - feature of the 1930s.

Linett highlights two problems within *Summer Will Show*. The first concerns Warner's strategy of subverting the stereotype of the Jew, for the subversion itself depend on the stereotype which she cannot therefore eliminate, which leads to what Linett calls a 'palimpsestic effect . . . hard to ignore' (p.43) The second problem Linnet confronts is the death of Minna which could be taken to imply that once Jewishness has served its purpose it can be dismissed, or seen as a form of internalized homophobia. In her useful discussion of this event, Linett rejects both these possibilities, instead seeing Minna's death as a contribution to a 'critique, in the midst of Warner's affirmation of Socialist ideals, of single-minded, ruthless Communism that leaves no room for art' (pp.103-104).

Some problems remain in *Modernism, Feminism and Jewishness*. In particular, there is a tendency to accept as

a given a claim that requires discussion, and here the identification of Warner as a modernist comes to mind. Alongside this, there are occasions where statements are made, but not made good by the production of evidence. The claim that women felt more shame at 'entering the writerly market' than did men (p.35), for example, requires more evidence than it is given, for although writing for publication can be seen as transgressive, it doesn't follow that transgression provokes shame in all of the writers under discussion.

However, Linett's arguments are stronger when it comes to readings of individual texts, and what her analysis of *Summer Will Show* demonstrates overall is the seriousness with which Warner viewed the political situation at large in the 1930s, her own political commitment to the Communist Party as a way of forging a more equitable society, and the rigor of her political thinking.

*Helen Sutherland*