

SHELF LIVES: 11  
SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER

*Peter Scupham*

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People whom I never knew  
In the house below the hill  
That so many years ago  
I looked down on through the bushes  
Live, and prune their roses still,  
Live, and brush the new year snow  
Off their doorstep, live, and strew  
Crumbs for robins, tits and thrushes,

Live, and watch the blossom falling  
On the grass-plat newly mown,  
And the swallows reinstated;  
Safe from living and from dying,  
Never and forever known,  
Not begotten but created,  
*Tea-time, Luke*, forever calling -  
*Coming, Lucy*, still replying.

A slight haunting, but haunt me it does, this invention from a poet who has a razor-sharp sense of fictive life and the theatre of habitat: I think of guesswork lives cradled to the grave behind television-silvered curtains or tall yellow cut-out windows clipped by laburnums, of ghosts locked up in little Cabinets of Curiosity and Tombs in the Valley of Dead Literary Lions - Vita Sackville-West's shabby book-lined

peep-show in the tower at Sissinghurst. the embalmed fun of Charleston . . .

Here, in the Norfolk badlands there's still more than a clutch of tumbledowns: Tudor gables with blocked windows facing down concrete yards, falling barns and fert bags. There's a lot of unbothered-about past, and a maze of lanes through empty skies and fields to get to it. So, thinking of Sylvia Townsend Warner, I remember the day we tried to hunt down Frankfort Manor, discovered by Sylvia and her lover, Valentine Ackland, in 1933, and lived in with a plague of cats, the cats themselves plagued by a mysterious disease, for some sixteen months. It was a time and place Sylvia's biographer, Claire Harman, calls 'the embodiment of all that was good and happy in their relationship'. We asked a stranger for directions, and found that she belonged to the family that had leased, and finally sold the house; soon we were staring at its enigmatic bricks-and-mortar and trying to put salt on the tail of that ramshackle kind of happiness which had occupied my birth-year, as we had similarly stared at the house in Edingthorpe where Sassoon had spent a holiday-idyll in 1897. Back for a late tea.

The poem which heads this article was occasioned by a Reynolds Stone engraving, part of a sequence, *Boxwood*, originally published in 1957 - and Sylvia was born in 1893. In a sequence I am particularly fond of, inhabited by an owl whose

. . . quiet feathers  
Sit duteously around him  
Like good scholars

and by Dr. Johnson's cat, listening to Johnson pray:

O Jesu pie, salvum me fac!  
Whether that same Jesu heard him or no,  
My ears attended to his woe.

Though these poems are avowedly written to order, they reveal, as does everything she wrote, an unillusioned way of seeing, feeling, and thinking demonstrated in plain style - her poetic vocabulary never mines the more outré veins of the

dictionary - her deceptive simplicities and occasional archaisms made enticing by a sure and strange fitness of cadence. - she was herself executant, composer and musicologist. Her concerns, ostensibly rural, haunted, balladic, were never modified to suit the exigencies of passing fashion; the literary assaults of the century no more modified her concept of how her poems should comport themselves when they went out into the world than they did the work of such writers as Robert Graves, Ruth Pitter or Stevie Smith. She remained essentially faithful to the programme set out in about 1930 and quoted by Claire Harman, in which she expressed her distaste of poems which 'express soul-states', are 'verbally rich' and 'go on for a long time'. These attractive strictures are set against a preference for poems which, inter alia, are 'formally tight in thought and construction', 'look neat', 'use few images', and 'mention death'. Ah, death, that hunter hunted in poem after poem of hers and Stevie Smith's. The programme has an air of the faux-naïf, but Sylvia, daughter of a distinguished Housemaster and teacher of history at Harrow, was anything but that. Complex people like to tease themselves with simple prescripts; trail their coats with a rustic air.

There are aspects of Sylvia Townsend Warner's work which I am not attuned to. Perhaps that is because I have always been immune to the welter of character, mystification and rurality in Powys-land; I am a child of the sharp East, not the declining West. There is a concealed pride in saying 'The loss is mine, no doubt', but I still cannot finish John Cowper Powys's *A Glastonbury Romance*, and the T.F. Powys element - they became close friends - does not really enter my imagination. Sylvia's long poem, 'Opus 7', with its visionary alcoholic heroine Rebecca Random of Love Green is not for me - I find it too much a conflation of Powysery and the Georgian trudge of such a poem as 'Miss Thompson Goes Shopping', by Martin Armstrong. 'To get rid of Pan', I think Pound said, 'that was the first heave' - but Arthur Machen, the intense and visionary author of *The Great God Pan* and *The Hill of Dreams*, was Sylvia's uncle. The second heave was to get

rid of that infestation of Mr. Oddities and Mystic Megs who seem to have populated the countryside in the 1920's. Barbara Cushion, who 'weeps in the lane', Mrs Summerbee and Peeping Tom - these live in fables from the 1925 Collection, *The Espalier*, but don't seem to move happily to the more abrasive airs Sylvia was so much at home in. What I respond to most emphatically is the lack of sprawl; the incision, the unblinking quality with which she faces the business of living, and the airy, exact lyricism in the opening stanzas of, say:

*Vale*

When I was young  
I wore a reefer coat,  
A sailor's bonnet.  
It had a ribbon on it  
Saying *Antigone* or *Inflexible*.

As a mariner  
I took my inland walks.  
The long south-wester  
Bowled my hoop the faster,  
The north wind blew down acorns and chestnuts.

Roxeth and Kenton,  
Greenford and Mutton Lane,  
The gasworks and the canal:  
These were my ports of call  
Between the autumnal and the vernal equinox.

There's a special pleasure in the taste, the saying of a poem like this: the tongue's lilt lightening the head, creasing out a smile.

Her places, those houses and gardens have an especial hold on my imagination. Perhaps the ruins and vanishings to be found in her poems have a greater desolation now, when so much of the physicality of rural living has changed out of recognition. Sexton, parson, gipsy, haymaker . . . the dramatis personae have become a game of cherrystones, names from an old tale. It's a great strength, though, in Sylvia's writing

that the physicality of the natural world is never far away; neither is the considering, intelligence of the educated one - or a sly humour, as in that brief companionship in 'The Visit', where the ghost

. . . conversed  
 As one in England's decent topics versed -  
 Birds, beasts, the Royal Family, this and that;  
 But nothing told  
 Me of the dead, save that they feel the cold.

Birds, beasts, the Royal Family . . . I like it. As an appendix to the Carcanet *Collected Poems*, 1982, edited by Claire Harman, there's a Lecture, *Women as Writers*, given by Sylvia in 1959. Period stuff, maybe, but her comments on women entering literature with a gift for the immediacy of the 'pantry window' or the 'Tradesman's Door' have a pertinence to her work: her feeling is that women writers have often shown that 'willing ear for the native tongue, for turns of phrase used by carpenters, gardeners, sailors, milliners, tinkers, old nurses, and that oldest nurse of all, ballad and folklore'. Though her balladic style and subject matter has much in common with that of the early Robert Graves, it seems capable of more seriously disturbing frissons, as in the extraordinary second poem in her terrifying trio *Triumphs of Sensibility* - and in the titling lies an ironic and literary piece of jesting:

There is a fiend called Hug Me Tight  
 Who watches round me day and night.  
 Waxing and waning like a coal  
 His eyes look darkness into my soul.

I hear his loud and casual tread  
 Stalk through the disinhabited  
 House of my mind where he alone  
 Goes up and down, goes up and down.

The following eight stanzas do nothing to relieve the pressure.

But back to those tumbledowns. The *Collected Poems*, Carcanet 1982, edited by Claire Harman, is strewn with their wreckage. In 'Squat and Sullen . . .' the left-behind house drowning in its 'rising green' is held together as her own

salt constancy of mind  
Haunts in that constant wind  
Warding anxious and ownerly the freehold left behind.

The poem which follows, *Cottage Mantelshelf*, is almost an oddity in the richness of its bric-a-brac. How well I knew such mantelshelves; how curious and how right seems her half-whimsical, wholly moving recreation of the paired marriages of black, pink-rose-painted vase and vase, flower-basketed dog and dog, stencilled fan and fan - and then the dissonance: the unpaired clock 'rocking its way through time' and the photograph of the dead young soldier. The sentimental Georgian clutter becomes electric: the last stanza with its risky re-write of Lawrence Binyon's 'To the Fallen', holds the scene in that mordant equipoise which is her trade-mark:

Uncomely and unespoused amid the espousals of beauty,  
The cats with their plighted noses, the vases pledging their roses,  
The scapegoat of the mantelpiece he stands and may not even cleave  
To the other unpaired heart that beats beside him and apart;  
For the pale-faced clock has heard, as he did, the voice of duty  
And disowns him whom time has disowned, whom age cannot  
succour nor the years relieve.

Things lie in wait, as in 'The Story of a Garden', where the new neighbours hack out a garden, which starts to come to fruition in the third year - but so does war: the neighbours become Adam and Eve:

In careful and few  
Words (for time is short) he counsels her what she must do  
As summer comes on.  
She nods and stares at his boots, and promises that all

shall be done.  
 With babbled cries  
 Answering back the thrushes, the two-year child trots  
 about Paradise.

The stanza has many of the marks of her style: the just-askew rhymes, the stresses which make artfully memorable cadences by setting up a threatening tremor in the heart-beat, the spare, unmetaphorical diction, the habit of ending a poem by introducing a cloud no bigger than a man's hand . . . A photograph, reasonably, unreasonably, comes to mind. It's reproduced in George Thomas's *Edward Thomas: A Portrait*, Oxford, 1985, and is captioned: 'The author of *Horae Solitariae* with Merfyn at Rose Acre Cottage, winter 1902-3.' Merfyn is two, staring over the top-bar of the gate. Edward is standing bleakly beside him. The cottage gauntly belies its name. Edward's digging doesn't seem to have done much for the place. I think, too, of my own wartime childhood semi, raw and cold, on the edge of a Cambridgeshire village, and of water-colours by Michael Rothenstein of hens, blown washing, blocky unidyllic houses. There is not much security in the poems of the author of *Lolly Willows* and *Kingdoms of Elfin* and not much security in houses and gardens. Take this complete poem:

*Recognition*

But this child was not of wax.  
 Life was under the mute skin  
 And still showed through the cracks.  
 It is well known that the children of Spain  
  
 Were carved cheaply out of wood,  
 The children of China but yellow leaves on the wind:  
 This was an English child that lay in the road.  
 They told me to weep once more, but I found  
  
 No tears, and though the mourners then  
 Threw stones at me in grief's and God's name  
 I had no blood to quicken for God or man.  
 For I remembered how my childhood had come

Hearsay of Justice. Now, overhead,  
 Rang the inflexible music of her sword;  
 Blindfold she went over with sure tread.  
 I knew, and acknowledged her, and adored.

Now *there* is a poem with a strange formality, more stony and as moving as the formalities of John Crowe Ransome's 'Dead Boy'.

Oh, and though one can find Frankfort Manor and pretend that certain voices are still calling 'Teatime' and 'Coming', Miss Green's Cottage at Chaldon in Dorset, which Sylvia bought, and from which she and Valentine moved to Frankfort Manor, will be harder. It looks about the same size as Rose Acre in the photograph reproduced in Clare Harman's biography: two upstairs windows, picket-fence, scrubby air - Claire Harman quotes the 1930 surveyor's report: 'This is a small undesirable property situated in an out of the way place and with no attractions whatever'. *Rose Acre Papers*, Sylvia's poem 'Death of Miss Green's Cottage'? We must teach the past we were happy somewhere:

The white iris, the scented lupins, the flocks of narcissus,  
 The shadow of the new-fledged ash tree like a caress  
 Fingering the shining garden and the little house.

And on the night of the same day it was gone.  
 Those who ran to the place stumbled on stones,  
 Trampled a chimney, tripped on unaccountable rocks  
 Of masonry scattered like chips from the blow of an axe;  
 Only by a thicker dust could they know they were there,  
 And the sighing ash-boughs embraced their thighs where there had  
 been a door.

In May 1944, one of a stick of bombs had annihilated Miss Green's cottage, leaving the other houses in the village untouched. People love and make love in odd spaces; play their 'Coming' and 'Teatime' on castles of thin air. Let love and habitat come together again in this poem from Sylvia's last book of verse: *King Duffus and Other Poems*, 1968:



*'On This Plain House . . .*

On this plain house where I  
Dwell and shall doubtless die  
As did my plain forefathers in time past  
I see the willow's light-limbed shadow cast.

I watch in solitude  
Its flying attitude  
Laid on that brick and mortar soberness  
Like the sharp imprint of a fleeting kiss.

Just so, I think, your shade,  
Alien and clear, was laid  
Briefly on this plain heart which now plods on  
In this plain house where progeny is none.



One of Valentine's bookplates used in *Hamlet's Divinity* by Christopher Devlin, 1963, from Valentine's library.