

THE CORNERS THAT HELD HER  
The Importance of Place in the Writings of  
Sylvia Townsend Warner  
*Gill Davies*

(Introductory essay to *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2006)

Across the wide range of Warner's writing there is a recurring preoccupation with place and how place (whether geographical locations or domestic space) determines and reflects consciousness. There has been some important critical work on Warner as a feminist and as a Marxist historical novelist. I see her concern for places as another important aspect of her broadly political engagement as a writer. Place is as central to the major novels as her concern for history; it is a constant reference in her life and autobiographical writing; and it even forms the structural basis for her biography of T H White. Despite the inevitable requirements of visits to London in her developing career, Warner remained a strongly non-metropolitan, largely non-urban writer. She lived away from the city throughout her life but nevertheless avoided the stigma of being considered a 'regional' or a 'ruralist' writer. Her spatial subject matter is most frequently concerned with margins and borders, with the periphery rather than the centre (just as she is concerned with marginal or exploited social groups and individuals). Laura Willowes leaves London for Great Mop; Timothy Fortune goes from London to St Fabien then on to the even more remote island of Fanua; Sophia Willoughby leaves England

for a hitherto unknown Paris, socially mixed and far away from familiar bourgeois spaces; the grandes of Seville are forced to encounter the neglected wastes of Andalusia; and a group of French nuns are shocked to find themselves in the backwater of Oby. The setting of *The Flint Anchor* is Loseby, literally on the edge of England, a place of profound provinciality, far from the metropolitan centre.

As a writer with a feminist understanding of the importance of the concrete and the everyday, Warner also used place to emphasise the importance of frequently marginalised domestic space. Her understanding of class and gender politics is rooted in the knowledge derived from place. She is interested in locations with a history that incorporates the lives of ordinary people and their everyday things. In fiction and non-fiction she celebrates simple and ordinary places (Dorset villages, household interiors, simple objects and domestic pleasures). Warner's account of her developing understanding of country living and its politics (for a series in *The Countryman* appropriately called 'The Way by Which I Have Come'<sup>1</sup>) is a detailed realisation of the history and materiality of place in people's lives, contesting the sentimental, urban middle class idealisation of country life. She dates her ceasing to be a 'townee' to the time when, rather like Lolly Willowes, she found an isolated place on an ordnance survey map and went to live there.

The collection of letters and autobiographical narrative, *I'll Stand by You*, begins with a house and continues to foreground the various houses and moves she made throughout her life with Valentine Ackland. The centrality to a relationship of houses and making a home is perhaps a particularly female perspective, but it was also bound up with the need to have somewhere to write - the importance of a good place. She emphasises the importance of living in a community, acknowledging the lives of the working people around them, and has a strong sense of the responsibilities of the 'stewardship' of a particular place. She writes of the pleasure she and Valentine take in their house and garden, their cats, and the work involved in this life. This description of 'Miss Green' (the first house they lived

in together) is typical:

And there, at the end of the journey, was the late Miss Green: her windows open, her walls milk-white, the coral-pink paint on her woodwork and Mr. Miller the carpenter at that moment putting up shelves. There was the garden, cleaned and dug and raked smooth, and looking twice as large for it. There was old Mrs. Moxon with a bunch of flowers, waiting to tell me how well Valentine had dug and what a great heap of bindweed and couch-grass roots had been burned to wholesome ashes. And there was Valentine....<sup>2</sup>

Frances Bingham's essay 'The Practice of the Presence of Valentine' underlines the importance of place in the imagination of both writers. She discusses Warner's and Ackland's shared 'country of the mind' and in a section full of spatial imagery argues that they had a 'shared intellectual landscape' and,

certain images ... are used repeatedly by both writers - the river, the moon, the all-important landscape, gardens and growing things, animals, especially cats. Warner makes these motifs reappear in her stories with the familiarity of home.<sup>3</sup>

While space and place are important in the rather general senses outlined above, it is also the case that place has a function in the novels that is crucial to the realisation of Warner's vision. Her representation of place makes ideas concrete, exposes reality and its contradictions, and helps to provide a vivid sense of change and movement in society. In particular place informs her major fiction where it is combined with a detailed and materialist understanding of history to produce very powerful insights. Wendy Mulford says that Warner 'went beyond character and individual relationships as the motive force in her later novels, influenced by the Marxist aspiration of making "society itself, rather than the individual, the subject"'<sup>4</sup> and it is partly as a result of her intense realisation of place that this de-individualising process can nevertheless not seem arid or de-humanising. Warner, perhaps in contrast to more traditional Marxist historical or realist novelists<sup>5</sup>, fused time and place in a way which is interestingly close to Bakhtin's theoretical

model of the chronotope in fiction. Bakhtin explains it in the following way:

We will give the name chronotope [literally 'time space'] to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.... In the ... chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.<sup>6</sup>

What Warner is doing in her most important novels is realising this kind of social time-space. *After the Death of Don Juan*, *Summer Will Show*, and *The Corner That Held Them*, in particular, provide instances of the Bakhtinian chronotope as a way of focusing on society rather than individuals. Moreover, their focus on societies undergoing significant change and crisis is realised through the representation of place almost as much as through the representation of historical time. In his discussion of the concept of the chronotope, some of Bakhtin's examples are the road, the public square, and the alien miraculous world. In Warner's novels we might identify houses and settlements as key chronotopes. Examples include Blandamer, the English country house, contrasted with the Left Bank house in Paris (in *Summer Will Show*); the convent (in *The Corner That Held Them*); and the tropical island in *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*.

Warner's first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, does not deploy time and space in the way that characterises her later novels. Nevertheless, it is an emerging preoccupation. The novel opens with Laura's forced move from the country to London, contrasting what she hopes London will offer - 'shops, processions of the Royal Family and of the unemployed, the gold tunnel at Whiteley's, and the brilliance of the streets by night'<sup>7</sup> - with a more mundane and restrictive reality. Hers is a tourist's or outsider's view, because she does not belong, cannot be rooted there. Her identity is bound up with place but she does not yet know which one. The revelation of Great Mop, the village in the Chilterns where she decides to live

after reading about it in a guide book, is a contrast both with Lady Place - the family home in the country - and with London. It is a historic but ordinary village where she learns how to live. In some ways, this is quite a traditional, pastoral use of place to situate the parable about Laura's independence, liberty, and self-discovery. However, as Mary Jacobs shows in her essay ('Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral 1925-1934'), Warner's understanding and use of the pastoral in this period is both subtle and complex.

In *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*, Warner continues her subtly ironic use of the pastoral. Timothy Fortune, like Laura, wants to leave his old life to find himself but in changing from a London bank clerk to a missionary in the Pacific, he finds the opposite of what he anticipates. The novel satirises the idea that place itself can be transformative; he imagines signs in nature and thinks in clichés about prelapsarian islanders: 'It would be a beautiful estate to live among them and gather their souls as a child gathers daisies in a field.'<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is through his extensive encounter with that place that Timothy's awakening comes about. After his loss of faith, and his decision to leave a paradise that seemingly exists outside time, he returns to a world dominated by the temporal and spatial crises of European politics and the Great War.

*Summer Will Show* develops Warner's materialist use of time-place. In this novel, her extraordinarily vivid and precise representation of history is frequently expressed through the realisation of place. The novel opens with an evocation of a very specific time and place: Sophia, as a child, is remembering a trip to see the Duke of Wellington. The scene described shows the English gentry glorying in their inherited wealth and power. In a brilliant shift from memory to the present, then into the future, we are shown the child's 'consciousness of being an heiress, the point advancing on the future, as it were, of that magnificent triangle in which Mr. and Mrs. Aspen of Blandamer House, Dorset, England, made up the other two apices.'<sup>9</sup> The memory is followed by an equally concrete emphasis on the present, established through place: the same view, but now 1847 and Sophia is mistress of

a flourishing estate.

Further plantations, an improved breed of cows at the home farm, the lake dredged and a walk of mown grass and willow trees carried round it, the library windows enriched with coloured glass, and a more respectable tenantry... For now the Aspen triangle was reversed, and she, the hind apex, propelled forward its front of Damian and Augusta, even as now she was propelling them towards the lime-kiln.<sup>10</sup>

Place of course enshrines wealth and privilege but, in addition, the recurring spatial metaphor of the triangle of inheritance is repeated, with the irony that this will not come to pass: the children will die, and Sophia will leave England and the house and all it represents. The narrative removes Sophia to places where she is not in control or respected: first, to the lime-kiln, where her children contract their fatal illness, infected by the peasants their family is exploiting. And secondly, to Minna Lemuel's Left Bank house in a part of Paris Sophia has not previously visited except when being 'taken to see something historical'<sup>11</sup>. However, this is where she will undergo her contemporary political education. Just as chapter 1 opens with a memory of the political and cultural history of a place, so chapter 2 also begins with 'the first thing I can remember': Minna's account of her Eastern European Jewish origins.

*After the Death of Don Juan* concerns itself with Spain and with the land, not with the picturesque landscape. Land ownership shapes the lives of the peasants and their physical environment. The novel emphasises the neglected estate, the poverty of the village and the dilapidation of the castle. The landscape itself is vividly presented as historical evidence of exploitation - not just the peasants tending olive trees that are too old and that they cannot afford to replace, but also in the character of Don Saturno, the 'liberal' landowner who plans to introduce irrigation but whose previous 'fads' are manifested in the dilapidated 'English' garden and the neglected sheep. Don Juan's proto-fascist takeover is encapsulated in the conversation with his father about the family estate of Tenorio Viejo. Don Saturno thinks his son will help with the slow

process of reform, but Don Juan replies,

'I hate the past, I hate the old. It is the new place I am interested in.... I have no intention of being a philanthropist. It is my own good that interests me.... I abolish the rents and take over the land again' <sup>12</sup>

The last sight of the landscape the old man has, before being deposed by his son, is of the place moulded by his personal history, but into which the future is now coming, in the shape of soldiers who will defeat both the peasants and the old order. This chronotope summarises the novel's political theme:

He looked at the landscape he had known all his life, at the place he called his. There was the river-bed, the poplar-trees, the speckled olive-yards, the green bands of the maize, the road. He saw something compact that moved at a steady pace along the road. A cloud of dust moved with it, and out of the dust flashed sharp prickles of light.<sup>13</sup>

In her next novel, *The Corner That Held Them*, there is even more detailed description of place used to establish 14th century England and the history of the convent over thirty years. Warner's careful research underpins the fictional details of place fused with history to create a sense of a total world. For example,

With a manor abounding in reeds and supplied with a sufficiency of timber one might think it an easy matter to make a covered way between kitchen and refectory and some makeshift sort of cloister. But the wood was not seasoned, the reeds were not cut or were not dried, the labour was not available, the time of year was not suitable: in short, the newcomers were unwelcome.<sup>14</sup>

The narrative voice at first seems to be setting the scene, at an ironic distance, but it also takes on the moods and views of characters as they pass through the time and place of the novel, establishing a complex structure of feeling. Bakhtin explains this as the conjunction of time and place - 'Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible'. This can be seen in the following example, typical of the way in which the novel builds a subtle sense of history from small

instances. Responses to the Black Death, social hierarchy, women's lives, all emerge through the busy, idiomatic conversation in the dining hall:

Her musing was interrupted by the sound of horses being halted outside the gate-house and a fluster of unfamiliar voices. William de Stoke, whose daughter was a novice in the house, had sent to fetch the girl away, having heard that the pestilence was already at Oby. He had sent a large retinue of servants, and all of them were hungry and required feeding. While the de Stoke people ate they talked. Though there had been pestilences often enough there had never been, they said, such a pestilence as this. It travelled faster than a horse, it swooped like a falcon, and those whom it seized on were so suddenly corrupted that the victims, still alive and howling in anguish, stank like the dead. ...All across Europe it had come, and now it would traverse England; and nothing could stop it, wherever there were men living it would seek them out, and turn back, as a wolf does, to snap at the man it had passed by.<sup>15</sup>

This is the opposite of the 'heritage' reconstruction of history in much popular fiction and film. And it is not simply a result of research, and fidelity to 'the facts', but specifically a combination of those elements with a concrete placing of voice and period detail. Warner's final novel, *The Flint Anchor*, shows no lessening of the author's concern to link place and time in complex and substantial ways. Historical dates are carefully noted, events and their impact on this peripheral place recorded, the shifting customs and fashions and the physical appearance of things lovingly detailed, and the interaction of the human characters with this chronotope delicately and subtly delineated. Houses, streets, local mores, historical and personal events are interwoven here, too, at the end of Warner's novelistic career, as they were at its height.

#### Notes

1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'The Way By Which I Have Come', *The Countryman* Vol.xix (July 1939) pp. 472-486

2 *I'll Stand By You: Selected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*

- and Valentine Ackland with Narrative by Sylvia Townsend Warner*. Ed. Susan Pinney. London: Pimlico, 1998 p.11
- 3 Frances Bingham, 'The Practice of the Presence of Valentine' in *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2006
- 4 Wendy Mulford, 'Introduction' to *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938) London: Virago, 2002 p.x
- 5 Chris Hopkins has a very interesting discussion of this in his essay 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Marxist Historical Novel', *Literature and History* 3rd series Vol.4 no.1 Spring 1995
- 6 M.M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination* ed. Michael Holquist; tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: Univ of Texas Press 1981 p.84
- 7 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes* (1926) reprinted in *Four in Hand: A Quartet of Novels*. Introduction by William Maxwell. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986 p.4
- 8 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* (1927) in Maxwell 1986 p.138
- 9 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Summer Will Show* (1931) in Maxwell 1986 p.267
- 10 *ibid.* p. 268
- 11 *ibid.* p.347
- 12 *After the Death of Don Juan op. cit.* p.256-7
- 13 *ibid.* p.284
- 14 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Corner That Held Them* (1948) in Maxwell 1986 p.577
- 15 *ibid.* p.152

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From Eleanor Perénji's article 'The Good Witch of the West'  
*The New York Review*, July 18th, 1985.