SHARING 'A WORLDLINESS OF AUSTERITY': Sylvia Townsend Warner and Jane Austen

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'I suffered too, in my beginnings. I was compared to Jane Austen,' wrote Sylvia Townsend Warner wryly in April 1964. She was consoling William Maxwell, who as a young writer had the misfortune to be compared to 'something that was infinitely better'[1]. The burden of expectation may have been high, but the comparison is apt. Warner's first novel, *Lolly Willowes*, displays its Austenian heritage: the smooth surface of a genteel life; the well-bred, witty protagonist and her dangerously nonsensical foils; and the understated irony. There are also those statements that drop like pebbles into a pond—and reverberate. As with Austen, one reads Warner back-and-forth, skimming the elegant prose and then rifling quickly through the pages as the wake of a sardonic observation laps against the shoreline of consciousness. 'The amusement she had drawn from [her family's] disapproval was a slavish remnant, a derisive dance on the north bank of the Ohio,' writes Warner, explaining Lolly's transformation in Great Mop. A few pages later, the connection between 'slavish' and 'Ohio' clicks, and fingertips seek restlessly for that inconspicuous appositive: did she really write *that*?

Yes, she did. As Warner's posthumous reputation grows, critics tout *Lolly Willowes* as an indicator of Warner's claims to popular notice by explaining that the novel was the inaugural selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. Unfortunately, Warner's novel also provided an early lesson

in marketing for the Club's editors. Four thousand-odd subscribers received the book, but 'the partners [at Book-of-the-Month] were distressed to find themselves swamped soon thereafter with returned copies' which 'had to be scrapped at a significant financial loss'[2]. This circumstance, combined with that deft reference to the American South's peculiar institution, indicates that Warner was up to more on her 'little bit (two Inches long) of Ivory' than her blurb-writers may have suggested[3]. Indeed, Warner's novels expand rapidly from her early studies of gently radical misfits to works of historical sweep such as *Summer Will Show* (1936) and *The Corner That Held Them* (1947).

These later works seem a far cry from Austen, but Warner and Austen remain closely allied in style, despite Warner's more obvious lean to the historical. Warner's 1951 study *Jane Austen* might, in fact, almost qualify as aesthetic autobiography. Warner describes Austen's 'unwearied attachment to a sameness of material,' the 'clear, undramatized lighting' in which characters disport themselves, and the achievement of 'untrammelled technical amiability by an underlying austerity of choice'[4]. *The Corner That Held Them*, Warner's meticulous chronicle of fourteenth-century convent life, leaps to mind because the brilliance of the novel lies in the narrative and stylistic sameness Warner deploys to delineate both feast and folly without fanfare. Will anything ever happen? students sometimes ask about Austen's novels. The same question can be put to *Corner*, but that is the point.

Warner gives us convent life not as melodrama or as hagiography, but as a material negotiation with human nature and history. Plague, false priests, financial difficulties, family politics, meddling abbots, ambitious building projects —each makes an appearance, but Warner maintains a studiously anti-climactic approach to her plot. The false priest—a plot event waiting to happen if ever there was one—lives and dies at the abbey without public exposure. In Warner's hands, the convent is simply worldly, part of the world, as the abbey's founder discovers: 'Negotiations with the house in France which was to supply his first batch of nuns

enlarged his notions of what holy women desire'[5]. This refusal to sanctify or to vilify the nuns imbues *The Corner That Held Them* with an everyday feminism, so that this community of women achieves its importance within and as a complex network of personal and communal ties.

Despite these serious themes, 'technical amiability' proved an Achilles heel for Warner, as it has for Austen. 'It was her fate to be thought of as a stylist,' Claire Harman notes in the biography, citing Warner's frustration at never being taken quite seriously enough for her breadth of ideas[6]. Her relief at William Maxwell's fine distinction between 'moral tone,' which he thought Warner shared with Austen, and 'moral purpose' is palpable: 'you have set my mind beautifully at rest. I would not have liked to think of myself going about with a latent moral purpose—that is so horribly contagious'[7]. To Warner, a moral purpose hints of didacticism. She sought instead a moral tone: the sensitive, ethical engagement wuth complex social issues that is sometimes overlooked in Austen's work.

When writing her study of Austen, Warner carefully gives her predecessor full marks for both style and theme. Thus Warner's remarks on *Mansfield Park* are declarative: 'Hate is a serious passion; and *Mansfield Park* is a serious novel'[8]. There is no sugarcoating such a judgment, and Warner's description of the novel reminds us to beware *Mansfield Park's* smooth surface:

> Even at their most innocent or most frivolous, its characters recall certain Conversation Piece figures, strolling, or drinking tea on a sunlit lawn; behind them is the family mansion; and behind the family mansion hangs the purplish dusk of an impending storm.[9]

The forces brewing this storm include slavery, adultery, addiction (possibly), and sodomy. All these themes appear in the novel, despite the 'modest loathing' the morally purposeful Edmund expresses[10] and the novel's determined effort to expunge all trace of them from the concluding chapter.

This 'impending storm' also hearkens to Virginia Woolf's description, in *Orlando*, of the arrival of the

Victorian Age, a passage Warner deftly referenced in a 1959 speech, 'Women as Writers.' Warner differentiated Austen from her Victorian successors by noting that 'The barometer had fallen, the skies had darkened' by the time the Brontës' work emerged from the provincial parsonage[11]. With *Mansfield Park*, one wonders: what would Jane Austen have written, had she lived and written into Victoria's reign?

She might have liked to write something like *The Flint Anchor*, Sylvia Townsend Warner's final novel, published in 1954, the year Warner turned sixty. A family chronicle set in nineteenth-century Norfolk, England, the novel takes the central dyad of Victorian fiction—the innocent *ingenue* and the imposing patriarch—and lays bare the hypocrisy and oppression required to maintain their predominance. In *The Flint Anchor*, Mansfield's purplish dusk has become an angry storm of doubt, fear, sexual repression, social tension, and class struggle. The brooding stone walls of Anchor House symbolize the force required to contain the emotional cyclones churning within; one thinks, by the end of the novel, that exposing the house to the salty wind and spray of the North Sea might have been salutary.

The novel begins in 1811 and takes us through to 1863, ample time for the centripetal force of John Barnard's Puritanical character to send his family into the mælstrom. Reading the novel, William Maxwell told Warner, 'What I also feel is that I have been reading George Eliot and Thackerey rewritten'[12]. Indeed. John Barnard, merchant and *paterfamilias*, is faced down by sodomy, miscegenation, alcoholism, birth defects, water closets, and his daughter Mary. *The Flint Anchor* is not a charming novel, and reviewers' comparisons to Jane Austen were few[13].

And yet Austen's achievements and themes must have been in Warner's mind as she bent herself to the writing of this novel. After completing the 1951 piece on Austen, she contemplated a longer project on the novelist, to be called *Sixfold Screen*. She called the published study 'a neat piece of work, but nothing to what the *Sixfold Screen* will be, if I get round to it'[14]. She did not write the envisioned study, but *The Flint Anchor* bears all the signs of taking Austen, and

particularly the themes of *Mansfield Park*, very seriously. Both novels chronicle the effects of a patriarch's unreflective mastery, and both feature unprepossessing heroines (if we can call Euphemia a heroine). Warner's novel transforms the slight but evocative discussion of slavery in *Mansfield* into the unseemly and parentally unsanctioned success of John Barnard's eldest son Joseph in the West Indies. Lady Bertram's inexplicable lassitude reappears, ruthlessly explained, as the alcoholism of Julia Barnard. Mary Crawford's joking reference to 'Rears and Vices'[15] recurs in the sailor Crusoe's passion for Thomas Kettle, and the scandal that ensues. Fanny Price becomes Euphemia, repressed eldest daughter and housekeeper, observing much and saying little. Mary—the Victorian young lady as whited sepulchre—evinces the selfishness and vapidity that results, as Warner put it, when a society believes women have 'an innate moral superiority' that 'should be protected, protected from men, protected from life, protected from being talked about, protected from Euclid . . .'[16].

These similarities do not seem to have been conscious for Warner, or at least she did not mention them. She was simply delighted that she was writing so well and so quickly. In December 1951, Warner reported to Maxwell the ease with which she had begun the novel:

> I got out of my bath and began writing it about the middle of October, and have gone on at a canter ever since. While I was in my bath I had been speculating about my great-great-grandfather, who stayed in a pious East Anglian family just long enough to beget my great-grandfather, and was swept off to die on a voyage to the West Indies, while the pious family constructed a sort of inscrutable grotto round his memory, alleging that he was a *mauvais sujet* and never supplying any evidence for it. But except for the date, any resemblance to the facts stayed in the bath.
>
> I have never written at anything like this rate before—but I shall be able to spend my usual years and years on revising, I daresay.[17]

In addition to fearing that her days of prolixity were numbered, Warner was also concerned about maintaining what might be identified as an 'austerity of worldliness' in

the novel. She wrote in her diary that some tempering of events and characters would be necessary as she revised. 'I have seen so much wrong with it . . .' she wrote. 'The wine-cellar, for instance, must be a much subtler hypocrisy—and Jemima [Euphemia] and Debenham must not become like characters in a novel. He had better regret his impulses of kindness, and she must think him patronising, or mistrust him'[18].

Warner achieved a subtlety rivaling Austen's, but coupled with a bolder critique than Austen, at her most daring, might have attempted. Like Austen, she betrays neither 'snobbishness or social anxiety' in her depiction of the middle classes, and she turns an 'alert, but cool' eye on her subjects. Euphemia, like her predecessor Fanny Price, is so repressed that she hardly seems novel material, but her critical spirit is strong and sure. Austen's Fanny observes accurately without trusting herself:

> . . . had her confidence in her own judgment been equal to her exercise of it in every other respect, . . . she would probably have made some important communications to her usual confidant. As it was, however, she only hazarded a hint, and the hint was lost.[19]

Fanny, however, questions only the behaviour, not the ends of courtship rituals. Done right, Fanny is quite willing to participate, and thus become 'the daughter that [Sir Thomas] wanted'[20].

Euphemia, by contrast, is quite sure what her position is, and why it rankles: 'If I were to behave about Marmaduke Debenham as Mary is behaving about Thomas Kettle, Euphemia thought, I wonder what Papa would do'[21]. And yet she also understands that, married or not, her fate would be the same. As she works with the cook in the storeroom, Euphemia thinks, 'If I were to marry . . . I should still be doing this sort of thing. There is really no escape'[22]. Her rejection of Debenham's proposal is thus rooted in more than fear of her father's reaction, and no wonder that, at

thirty-one, she escapes to a Moravian settlement at Herrnhut, a refuge from the insanity of Victorian family life.

The critique of the paterfamilias is also surer and more direct in *The Flint Anchor*. In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas can choose to avoid knowing too much by not deigning to inquire:

> Sir Thomas saw all the impropriety of such a scheme [the theatre] among such a party, and at such a time, as strongly as his son had ever supposed he must; he felt it too much indeed for many words; and having shaken hands with Edmund, meant to try to lose the disagreeable impression, and forget how much he had been forgotten himself as soon as he could, after the house had been cleared of every object enforcing the remembrance, and restored to its proper state. He did not enter into any remonstrance with his other children: he was more willing to believe they felt their error, than to run the risk of investigation.[23]

His presumption is god-like, making of his willingness to be duped an unanswerable imperative. His thoughts smack of negotiation, except the other parties are not asked to participate.

Sir Thomas will, however, have his revenge obliquely when Maria's scandalous elopement entitles him to 'shut up' his undutiful daughter with Mrs Norris 'in another country —remote and private . . . with little society'[24]. No such vindication for John Barnard, whose subjection to the human condition is ruthlessly exposed:

> Ellen, knowing as well as she [Euphemia] did that Papa was just then in the newly installed water closet with the morning paper, followed her down the passage, clattering a pair of scissors against a buttonhook to imitate the jingle of household keys, and crying out, ...
>
> . . . . 'Mr Debenham's Goody Jog-Trot. That's what you are. It's not Mary. It's you!'
>
> Euphemia heard the newspaper thrown down. He can't come out now, she thought. He can't.
>
> He did not. . . .
>
> . . . . What he had overheard was shocking, and anything like eaves-

dropping was repugnant to him, and he had every reason to be annoyed. And yet he was not. It was Euphemia. It was not Mary. Do as he would, he could not control a disorderly rush of thankfulness that it was not Mary.[25]

The master of the house, caught literally with his pants down, is forced into passivity and to understand that instead of managing, he is managed. Further that phrase, 'disorderly rush of thankfulness' indicates his emotional weakness for Mary as clearly as his position in the water closet suggests his physical subjection to other calls of nature.

His otherwise powerless family duly exploits his obsessive love for Mary. Barnard, a rational man of God, believes that he has 'allowed no one to know that Mary was more to him than any other of his children.' Yet his sister-in-law, on a chance visit, identifies his weakness at once: 'Anyone might suppose that she is his firstborn, and that he gave birth to her himself—out of his hat'[26]. Twenty-five pages into the novel, John Barnard's self-image is doomed by his overweening faith in his position.

His daughter Mary is equally doomed by Victorian ideals for young women. She develops as innocently as Barnard could desire, offering Warner the opportunity to satirize a society that values vanity, selfishness, and ignorance so long as it masquerades as modesty and innocence. The precious scene in which Barnard asks Mary, 'white and dutiful,' to recite from Doctor Watts's *Divine Songs* reveals all the hypocrisy of 'protection': 'Her face was faultlessly serious, faultlessly serene, and yet, he knew, it was considerably harder to balance a book on one's head when one is standing still'[27]. This is virtue rewarded in *The Flint Anchor*.

Mary grows up fully possessed of her own perfection: 'From her earliest recollections poor Brothers and Sisters had been naughty children and often a grief to Papa, and she had been Papa's dear open-hearted child'[28]. John Barnard will thus suffer Sir Thomas's fate, discovering too late that 'he had meant [her] to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition'[29]. Intent on protecting Mary's disposition, he allows

recitation to pass for principle, ignorance for innocence, selfish guile for modesty. In love with Thomas Kettle, Mary possesses no 'modest loathing' to prevent her from trapping him into marriage by allowing herself to be found in his bed. John Barnard will die with the full knowledge that his adulation created the blonde monster who smothers him with insincerity on his deathbed.

The raw material offered by *Mansfield Park* may also have attracted Warner because it spoke to her personal situation in the early 1950s. Her ideas and feelings about Norfolk, an area to which she and Valentine Ackland travelled repeatedly during this time, were undoubtedly flavoured by Ackland's resurgent affair with Elizabeth Wade White. Further, Warner was concerned that Ackland's spiritual journey was leading less to enlightenment than to a self-destructive shame that inevitably affected those around her. Much of this self-doubt and recrimination involved Ackland's alcoholism, which she revealed to Warner in 1949. By all accounts, Warner was completely unaware that Ackland's periodic 'illnesses' were in fact alcohol-related. In the narratives interspersed with their letters, Warner described Ackland's condition: 'she still kept me unaware of it. Dragging herself out of drunken stupors, she would plead a migraine and demand to be left alone. Craving and concealing she would drink wine with me and be festive, and then go off to her grim colloquy with a whiskey bottle'[30]. For Warner, such a perceptive observer the human condition in general, Ackland's revelations must have generated shock and pain, as well as mortification, at her blindness.

In outlining some of these events, I wade into the perilous waters of biographical criticism. However, what interests here is the alchemy by which personal experience becomes art. In *The Flint Anchor*, for example, the passage describing Euphemia's consciousness of her mother's drinking is both rational without sarcasm, and empathetic without pathos:

> Euphemia knew all about drunkenness, both in the abstract and in real life. . . . As Julia's variety of drunkenness resembled neither the

drunkenness of tracts nor the drunkenness of real life, it had never occurred to Euphemia that her mother might be the worse for drink. . . . If it had not been for the interval during which Julia was trying to do herself justice, Euphemia might have gone on for a long time before putting two and two together. But recently Mamma had taken to being poorly again, and poorly in a new way, combative instead of comatose, suspicious and exacting instead of vaguely grateful for attentions. For Julia, gone back to her bottle, was drinking differently—not more, but harder; not complacently, but harshly and secretly. It was the secret that caught Euphemia's eyes and wrenched them open.[31]

The verb 'wrench', hunching like a toad at the end of a smooth, rational exposition, exposes Euphemia's pain almost without effort. Warner condenses in this word Euphemia's belated feelings of idiocy, her class-consciousness—how did I not see what even the servants saw?—and her youthful shock and confusion. The early part of the paragraph is pure narration, the narrator's efforts to account, in historical and cultural terms, for Euphemia's blindness. The presentation is worldly and austere; the tone is moral, yet it neither patronizes nor excuses. Whatever personal experience Warner may have brought to this passage, she has rendered it artistically, and emotionally, ethically compelling.

This evocative moment echoes backwards through the nineteenth century to Austen's world, and resounds off that famous cipher, Lady Bertram. What else, among her many observations of the Bertram family, might Fanny have understood? What did she and the other children know (or ignore) about Lady Bertram? What about Sir Thomas? Would there ever be a scene, as there is in *The Flint Anchor*, when Lady Bertram declared something like, 'I drink. I am a drunkard. I have been a drunkard for the last twenty years'[32]?

Austen gives hints enough that we are justified in wondering what else might have been going on at Mansfield Park. The self-consciously tidy foreclosure of *Mansfield Park* calls attention to much that is left unresolved. In *The Flint Anchor*, these loose ends become tentacles that strangle the

Victorian age. Taking *Mansfield Park's* implications seriously, Warner thought them forward, with outrage, in time. Evoking Austen in both style and substance, Warner remade Austen's 'worldliness of austerity,' daring us to consign either writer to the dustbin of charm.

Notes

1. *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell*, ed. Michael Steinman, Counterpoint, Washington, 2001. pp.137-138.
2. *A Feeling for Books*, Janice Radway, Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997, p.195.
3. in *Jane Austen*, Sylvia Townsend Warner, British Council, New York, 1951, p.27.
4. Ibid., p.7.
5. *The Corner that Held Them*, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Viking, New York, 1948, p.9.
6. *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, Claire Harman, Chatto & Windus, London, 1991, p.218.
7. *The Element of Lavishness*, p.122.
8. *Jane Austen*, p.21.
9. Ibid., pp.21-22.
10. *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen, ed. Claudia L. Johnson, Norton, New York, 1998, p.308.
11. 'Women as Writers' in *Collected Poems*, Sylvia Townsend Warner, ed. Claire Harman, Carcanet, Manchester, 1982, p.267.
12. *The Element of Lavishness*, p.54.
13. Charles J. Rolo of *The Flint Anchor* in *Atlantic Monthly*, No. 420, October 1954.
14. in *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p.245.
15. *Mansfield Park*, p.44.
16. 'Women as Writers', p.267.
17. *The Element of Lavishness*, p.25.
18. *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman, Virago, London, 1995, p.183.
19. *Mansfield Park*, p.82.

20. Ibid., p.320.
21. *The Flint Anchor*, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Viking, New York, 1954, p.99.
22. Ibid., p.89.
23. *Mansfield Park*, p.129.
24. *Mansfield Park*, p.315.
25. *The Flint Anchor*, pp.88-89.
26. Ibid., p.26.
27. Ibid., p.26.
28. Ibid., p.23.
29. *Mansfield Park*, p.314.
30. *'I'll Stand By You': The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland*, ed. Susanna Pinney, Pimlico, London, 1998, p.230.
31. *The Flint Anchor*, p.101.
32. *The Flint Anchor*, p.239.