

‘ENTER IF YOU WILL’:
Echoes from a Haunted House
Janet Montefiore

Enter if you will.
The door will not gainsay;
The dancing hooves are still,
The riders ridden away.
Mare, gelding, stallion,
The black, the roan, the bay, the flea-bitten grey,
All are gone.

The house beyond the wall,
The lighted long array
Of windows great and small
On rowdy Christmas Day,
Groom, gardener, scullion,
Gallants and ladies gay, children at play,
All are gone.

At morning and nightfall
The henwife comes this way,
But she has nothing to tell;
It was before her day.
Crest, motto and scutcheon,
The glory and decay, are only hearsay:
All is gone.

The wood engraving about which this poem was written for *Boxwood*,¹ Sylvia Townsend Warner’s collaboration with Reynolds Stone, reproduced on the cover of this journal, shows three hens enjoying dust-baths in front of an old stone stable-yard converted into a chicken-run. A lean-to hen-house stands next to a half-ruined Palladian portico guarding a dilapidated wall of fine carved stone partly destroyed by

ivy; within the portico's high arches can be glimpsed an empty doorway opening on to the darkness of an overgrown park or garden, deserted for at least a century to judge by the dead branch over the crumbling demesne wall. The landscape is melancholy, and yet the effect of the small lively hens pecking and fluttering in the dust and sunshine, oblivious of the shadowy ruined magnificence around them, is almost comical.

Sylvia Townsend Warner might in another mood have focused on those pecking hens, but not here. The invitation 'Enter if you will' takes the reader from the sunlit stable-yard of the present through the narrow darkness of a door just visible within the shadowed archway, into a vanished past that like the destroyed or crumbling mansion behind the wall, cannot be shown in Stone's engraving. Her poem makes no mention of his picture's main features—the darkly shadowing trees, the ruined walls, the hens—dwelling instead on the vanished horses who once occupied the stables, the ghostly crowd of workers whose labour maintained the house's life, the long-ago family who enjoyed its pleasures, festivities and lighted windows, and lastly the absent woman who must come to let out the birds in the morning and shut them in at night. The language of her invocation is generic, naming not individuals but types of horses, servants, masters and heraldic emblems. This elegiac listing is quite different from the way she wrote of places she knew, for instance in the poem 'Death of Miss Green's House' written after the house where she and Valentine Ackland first discovered their mutual love was destroyed by bombing in the spring of 1944, which mourns the individual details of a beloved dwelling-place: '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' (*Collected Poems* p.58). There are no such details here: the 'gallants and ladies gay' belong to the formulaic language of folk-ballad, while the paradoxically lively 'The dancing hooves are still/The riders ridden away' enchants not as an image of moving horses and riders but by the trotting lilt of its rhythm.

'Enter if you will', then, invokes an unseen, unknowable past through the rhythm and melody of its three intricately patterned, identically rhymed stanzas. Their metrical form—a seven-line stanza consisting of a rhymed quatrain followed by a three-line refrain with a long internally rhymed penultimate line—was presumably invented by the poet herself. The first four trimeter (i.e. three-beat) lines rhyme monosyllabically, using the familiar ballad pattern abab. The fifth line and first of the refrain, also a trimeter, ends with a new rhyme-sound, the dactylic trisyllables of 'stallion', 'scullion' and 'scutcheon' whose falling rhythm leads to the crescendo of the long pentameter sixth line. Here the ghosts of the past come most vividly to life in a doubled internal rhyme that reiterates the already strong rhyming of the second and fourth, to be dismissed in the abrupt dying fall of the brief two-beat ending that cancels them both in sense and sound by the final tolling 'gone', whose sound chimes with the first word 'all' while its heavy stress falls jarringly against the light last syllable of the fifth line. This tune persists unaltered through all three stanzas. There are slight sound-variations in the vowels and half-rhymes of the first and third lines in 'will/still' . . . 'wall/small', 'fall/tell' and in the assonance 'scullion/ scutcheon' in the fifth, but the dominant sound 'ay' which ends the quatrain's more heavily weighted second and fourth lines and is repeated and doubled in the sixth, does not change; nor do the last words 'all . . . gone'.

This lovely, complex and skilfully maintained sound-pattern does more than please the ear; it alludes to earlier poets' lyrical laments, playing variations on both intellectual and musical themes. In its invocation of a ruined house, use of refrain and its rhyming, Warner's lyric echoes Yeats' poem 'The Curse of Cromwell' which like hers laments the lost glory of a great house filled with life and light that is now a ruin, its high civilization taken over by domestic animals:

I came on a great house in the middle of the night,
 Its open lighted doorway and its windows all alight,
 And all my friends were there and made me welcome too

But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled through;
 And when I pay attention I must out and walk
 Among the dogs and horses that understand my talk:
O what of that, O what of that
*What is there left to say?*²

Yeats' angry, melancholy refrain is echoed both in the sense of Warner's 'All is gone' and in the sound-patterns of her stanza with its repeated rhyme 'ay'. Her evocations of the 'gallants and ladies' that parallel his *ubi sunt* lament 'The lovers and the dancers are beaten into the clay/And the tall men and the swordsmen and the horsemen, where are they?'³ (which itself invokes Frank O'Connor's poem 'Kil-cash', a translation of the Gaelic folk-song 'Cill Chais' mourning the ruined great house of the Butlers: 'The courtyard's filled with water/And the great earls where are they?/The earls, the lady, the people/Beaten into the clay.'⁴). But an obvious difference between Warner and the Irish poets whom she echoes is that for them, unlike her, the ruined houses which they mourn represent the death of their national traditions. The Gaelic song translated by Frank O'Connor laments both the dispossession of the Irish by the English invaders and the destruction or at best marginalizing of an indigenous civilization. For Yeats, more complicatedly, the ruined house represents both the past dispossession and slaughter of the Irish by 'Cromwell's murderous crew' and the present dying out in the Irish Free State (as it was when he wrote) of the great seventeenth- and eighteenth-century mansions of the Protestant Ascendancy planter class whose life 'where passion and precision have been one/time out of mind'⁵ he had passionately proclaimed in earlier poems as central to Ireland's civilization. Although 'Enter if you will' is certainly 'about' the passing of a great house and tradition and its 'glory and decay' out of knowledge and memory, it is not clear that the poem eulogises a comparable rupture of tradition and meaning. Such a reading is certainly possible: Rosemary Sykes has argued ingeniously and on the whole convincingly in 'The Willows Pattern' (*Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2001) that in *Lolly Willowses*

'Warner exposes tradition as a strategic device for the bourgeoisie, showing how the English tradition represented by the furniture and the "canons of behaviour" inherited by the Willowes family is really a fictional construct that creates and naturalises "the semblance of a continuum" '6. Since the life of a great house representing tradition and civility is a potent symbol in English literature, from Jonson's poem 'Penshurst' to Austen's *Mansfield Park* or Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, one could read Warner's elegy for a vanished house as an epitaph for a deservedly outworn and discarded tradition of Englishness, analogous to Derek Walcott's famous 'Ruins of a Great House' where the allusions to Thomas Browne, Donne, Milton, Blake, Tennyson, Kipling and T.S. Eliot represent a post-colonial critique of the great tradition of English literature as profoundly complicit with the great evils of imperialism and slavery.

The difficulty with such a reading of Warner's poem is that the latter seems to regret rather than deplore the lost hierarchical world of horses, grooms, 'gallants and ladies gay' and heraldic emblems. Although she was almost always⁷ on the side of the oppressed, it would be naïve to think that Sylvia Townsend Warner invariably disapproved of great houses and aristocratic splendour. She always admired the aristocratic aloofness of her lover Valentine, and the two spent their happiest years in the shabbily elegant Frankfort Manor. She wrote of old houses with tenderness, as in the short story 'The Music at Long Verney' where the great house has grace and beauty even though the owners are unworthy of it. And the poems she wrote in the 1920s about the breakdown of traditional Englishness do not seem to welcome the new world of urban modernity with much enthusiasm. A poem in *The Espalier* (1925) pities a 'Squire England' grown old and dispossessed, anxious for the fate of his 'house, meadows, walks and trees . . . He prays that none may flout/The things so dear to him'; while in the ironical Hardy-esque 'Eclogue' (1928) we overhear country folk rejecting such traditional Christmas festivities as going to church, hearing mummers at the inn or carol singing with neighbours as out of date and unrefined, deciding instead to

go to the cinema: 'Neighbour, let us to the pictures go/This Christmas Eve,/And see a lady her garters show,/And a cunning thief deceive,/And the townsfolk sitting by well-pleased.'⁸ Though the irony of 'Eclogue' is certainly directed at its own conventionally pastoral title, it hardly represents the death of traditional merriment as a happy thing. And finally, the poems and engravings of Boxwood conform to familiar, recognizable forms of Englishness. Both the stanzaic pattern of 'Enter if you will', its diction and most of all the picture it accompanies are very traditional in form. The style of Reynolds Stone's engravings of country landscapes, old houses, churchyards and hens in an old stableyard belongs to a pastoral tradition of English wood engraving that descends in unbroken line from Thomas Bewick's eighteenth-century woodcuts depicting rural life. The mode in which the forgetful present appears in both poem and picture is gently pastoral: oblivion is represented by a chicken-run and a 'henwife' (herself an archaism), not a battery farm and a car park.

The disappearance of the great house that can now only exist in the imagination of readers entering Warner's poem seems to me to signify not so much the loss of a traditional aristocratic culture (although that is, I think, one of its ghosts) as the final death of human activities, occupations and hopes: *sic transit gloria mundi*. A late passage from Warner's *Diaries* invoking the image of a deserted house as a metaphor for her own bodily loneliness is illuminating here:

In my bath, looking at my arm, remembering how often she kissed it, I bethought me that I inhabit my body like a grumbling caretaker in a forsaken house. Fine goings-on here in the old days: such scampers up and down stairs, such singing and dancing. All over now; and the mortality of my body suddenly pierced my heart.⁹

The perception of mortality likewise haunts 'Enter if you will', connecting it both in theme and sound with a lyric of loss less well-known than Yeats' 'Curse of Cromwell' but one which, given Warner's wide knowledge of Victorian literature and her interest in women writers, she surely

knew. Christina Rossetti's 'Old and New Year Ditty' muses on the transitoriness of life in an even more virtuoso piece of rhyming than Warner's, the sound 'ay' ending every line of its three stanzas whose refrain is both a sad assent and a dying fall:

Passing away, saith the World, passing away:
 Chances, beauty and youth, sapped day by day:
 Thy life never continueth in one stay.
 Is the eye waxen dim, is the dark hair turning to grey
 That hath won neither laurel nor bay?
 I shall clothe myself in Spring and bud in May:
 Thou, root-stricken, shalt not rebuild thy decay
 On my bosom for aye.
 Then I answered: Yea.¹⁰

As with her echoing of Irish ballads, Warner repeats the earlier poet's music and theme with a difference. In both poems the repeated sound 'ay' is associated with the fleeting presence of beauty and liveliness; but though Warner's poem shares Rossetti's perception of mortality, of humanity outlived by indifferent surroundings, her ghosts invoked are of this world only. Rossetti's otherworldly, religious poem ends by turning its melancholy refrain into a triumphant assent to Christ's promise: 'My love, My sister, My spouse, thou shalt hear me say/Then I answered: Yea'¹¹. 'Enter if you will' ends with no such affirmation. Strangely, its rhyming pattern of 'a' and 'o', in which the past invoked by the 'ay' rhymes is dismissed by the tolling 'All . . . gone' corresponds almost exactly to the 'fort/da' ('gone/here') of the child's game of making his toys and himself disappear and reappear, which Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* saw as a means of mastering absence: a form of that symbolic mastery by which we humans seek to bind our pain and loss in the metaphors of language, within whose endless repetitions of loss we are ourselves bound.¹² The sadness of Warner's lyric allows no consolation beyond the music of its own words.

Notes

1. *Boxwood: Twenty-One Engravings by Reynolds Stone illustrated in verse by Sylvia Townsend Warner*, Chatto & Windus, 1960. The first edition of *Boxwood* containing sixteen engravings and poems was published by the Monotype Press in 1957. The poem and picture discussed here appeared as no. xviii of the second, enlarged edition.
2. 'The Curse of Cromwell' from *Last Poems*, W.B. Yeats, 1939, reprinted in *Collected Poems*, W.B. Yeats, Macmillan, 1969, p.351.
3. *Collected Poems*, W.B. Yeats, p.350.
4. *The Faber Book of Irish Verse*, ed. John Montague, Faber & Faber, 1974, p.185; *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, Séan Ó Tuama & Thomas Kinsella, Dolmen Press, 1981, p. 329.
5. 'On a House Shaken by the Land Agitation', *The Green Helmet*, W.B. Yeats, 1910; *Collected Poems*, p.106.
6. 'The Willows Pattern', Rosemary Sykes, *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2001, p.10.
7. I make the proviso 'almost' because Warner's writing does not seem to me entirely free of the taint of racism when she writes about Africans. See 'Caves of Harmony', in *Collected Poems of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman, Carcanet, 1982, p.90, and her treatment of Caspar in the novel *Summer Will Show*, Chatto & Windus, 1936.
8. 'The Old Squire' and 'Eclogue', in *Collected Poems of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, pp.112 and 117.
9. *Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman, Chatto & Windus 1994, entry for 18th September 1970, p.348.
10. *Selected Poems*, Christina Rossetti, ed. C.L. Sissons, Carcanet, 1984, p.57.
11. *Ibid.* p.58.
12. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, Hogarth Press, 1974, pp.9-11; see also 'The mirror stage' in *Ecrits*, Jacques Lacan, trans. Alan Sheridan, Tavistock Publications, 1977, pp.1-7.