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The Corner that Held Them: 'A Note on the Historical Background'

Sylvia Townsend Warner

(New York: The Viking Press, 1948, pp. 363–7)

Editor's Note: Warner added this 'Note on the Historical Background' at the end of The Corner That Held Them after the conclusion of the novel itself, in the Viking Press American edition but not the Chatto & Windus British one. It has not been reprinted in subsequent reprintings of the novel by Chatto & Windus or by Virago Press, though it is included in William Maxwell's edition of four Warner novels as Four in Hand: A Quartet of Novels (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986). This means it has been little attended to; it is not cited, for instance, in valuable discussions of the novel by Maroula Joannou, Rosemary Sykes, Chris Hopkins, Philip Hensher and Rachel Willcock.¹ But the 'Note' is an unusually important gloss by Warner on her own work, a paratext at a fascinating angle to the novel with which it appeared. It also sheds an interesting light on the way her works were sometimes presented differently on different sides of the Atlantic, and gives us a rare instance of Warner herself practising the historical writing in which her father had been a distinguished figure.

The Black Death – that epidemic of bubonic plague which sent the storytellers of Boccaccio's *Decameron* to lodge in the country, away from plague-stricken Florence – came into Europe along the trade route from Constantinople in 1347 and reached England in the late summer of 1348. It is estimated that in the next eighteen months it killed one-third of the English population. The contemporary estimate was one-half; and for some thriving and well-populated districts such an estimate may be the true one; in any case, as many of those who had the plague and recovered from it were disabled by sores and weakness, it is reasonable to assume that the working population was halved.

The economic consequences of this catastrophe were intensified by the structure of society. A minority – court, nobles, the great clerics,

scholars, friars, and outlaws – were so footloose that they can be classed as nomadic; but the base of that society was the manorial serf, who was tied to the place of his birth. For such, and for the monastic communities, there was no running away from infection.² Thus the system designed to provide a regular supply of labour for the manors now prevented redistribution of a greatly diminished labour force. The lord of a depopulated manor saw his land untilled, his crops ungathered, and himself on the brink of ruin; for he, at a remove, was as much dependent on his land as the serfs it carried, whether the feudal due was paid him in actual labour or in commutation fees. Such lords were driven to hire labour, which they could do only by bribing men to come to them off other manors; at the same time the lords of manors who still commanded a sufficiency of labourers could keep it only by counter-bribing. The old cumbrous sleepy bargain of the manorial system, in which the serf was tied to his lord's land while reciprocally part of that land was tied to the serf – the common field supplying his bread, the common grazing his meat and fuel – was replaced by the suppler but more cut-throat bargain of capital and labour.

In the years immediately following the Black Death the labourer had the best of it. By the next generation the situation had changed. The population was rising again. Many landowners had adjusted themselves to the labour shortage by converting their acres from arable (which needs many hands) to sheep-rearing for the woollen trade (which needs few), and in so doing had made over common fields and grazings into sheep-walks. And though wages had risen, the cost of living had risen more. Serfs who had welcomed the opportunity to move about and strike their own bargain found themselves at a disadvantage, and Parliament, which had disapprovingly watched the crack spreading through the old feudal structure, now applied a plastering legislation of wage-fixing and price-fixing (the former, as always, more adhesive than the latter), and pressed for a reversion to the *status quo ante*. Yet the crack had been made and was kept open by a pressure of dissatisfied thinking.

In practice, the Church had always accepted the feudal obligation to hold landed property. St. Peter had his fief, bishops had their manors, a provision of land and labourers must support any monastic foundation, whatever the personal austerities of the order. Gifts and legacies, charged with a burden of masses to be offered for the dead, accrued to the monastic houses, and an establishment that allowed itself to become insolvent could be, and sometimes was, dissolved. But this massive body of common sense contained, like an element

of quicksilver, the doctrine of Evangelical Poverty, and as the Church grew richer this doctrine shone out in more sparkling contrast. Where it displayed itself in a single mind, as with St. Francis, it might be tolerated; where it formed part of the teaching of a sect, as with the Albigenses, the Lollards, or St. Francis's strictest followers, it was cast out as heresy (the doctrine that Christ and his Apostles possessed no property was denounced as heretical by Pope John XXII in 1323). Side by side with Evangelical Poverty went the doctrine of Natural Right (the *ius naturale* of the Stoics, which had passed into christian theology through the patristic writers) that the material gifts of God, being given to all men, should be held in common. Logically, these two opinions are incompatible, for if all men are to share alike there should be no especial poverty to be especially evangelical: Langland, in his *Piers Plowman*, is vehement for Evangelical Poverty, but very wary about Natural Right; but both opinions, like the cat and the rat in La Fontaine's fable, had ears of the same shape, and were often treated as being complementary.

Thus the Church contributed twice over, on the one hand by canvassing these doctrines, on the other by the exasperating richness of its great establishments and its harshness in manorial administration (Church-land serfs were the last to be freed), to the moral indignation which fired a mass of material grievances into the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Froissart records one of the speeches of John Ball, a priest who led that revolt:

'For what reason have they, whom we call lords, got the better of us? If we are all descended from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve, how can they assert or prove they are more masters than ourselves – except perhaps that they make us work and produce for their spending. They are clothed in velvet, ermine, and furs, while we wear coarse linen. They have wines, spices, and good bread, while we get rye bread, offal, straw, and water. They have mansions and fine manors, and we bear the toil and the trouble, and must endure the wind and the rain out of doors. And it is from us and our labour that they get the wherewithal to keep up their pomp.'

This assertion of *ius naturale* might be within the theological pale, but it was heresy in any monarchical state. The revolt was savagely quelled, and John Ball was put to death.

The art of this period expressed similar impulses of speculation and revolt. In architecture the floridity of Decorated Gothic gave way

to the purely national Perpendicular style, at once more lucid and more ambitious. Literature became more expressive of personality. In music the *Ars nova* discarded a good deal of clutter and long-windedness in favour of ease of movement and euphony. The spiritual informality of Eckhart is echoed in the writings of such mystics as Richard Rolle and John Hilton.³ All these tendencies were apparent before 1350. Even without the shock of the Black Death, fourteenth-century England was concerned with readjustments, but that impact intensified change into conflict.

Some Dates

Edward III reigned 1327–1377. Richard II reigned 1377–1399. Hundred Years War began, 1337. Battle of Crécy, 1346. Battle of Poitiers, 1356. Treaty of Bretigni, 1360. Treaty overthrown, and successes of French forces under Du Guesclin, 1369–1377. Great Papal Schism, 1378.

Lantern of Ely Cathedral, c. 1335. Choir of Gloucester Cathedral, 1337–1357. Chaucer born c. 1340. Richard Rolle died, 1349. *Piers Plowman*, c. 1362. New College, Oxford, founded, 1379.

Notes

The courtesy titles of *Sir* and *Dame* for clerics and nuns carried no significance of noble birth.

A *heriot* was a feudal due taken by the lord of the manor at the death of the eldest male of a manorial family.

Impediment of bastardy. Before a clerk in Lesser Orders could be ordained as a priest he had to satisfy the bishop as to his moral, scholarly, and worldly fitness. Bastardy was considered as a disqualification unless the candidate could produce a patron of good standing who would be responsible for his upkeep so that he would not become a financial burden on the diocese.

Corrodians. A corrodian was something like an annuitant. In return for a payment of a lump sum a lay person was assured of support by a chosen monastic house, without being subject to its discipline. The system was popular, but not smiled on by ecclesiastical authorities.

Visitations. It was part of the duty of a bishop to pay regular visits of inspection to the religious houses in his diocese, when he heard

complaints, inspected account-books, and rebuked errors in conduct and administration.

Spiritualities. It was an act of piety for a lay patron to give a benefice to a religious house, or some other ecclesiastical body, which would then supply the parish with a vicar or curate. Such a gift included the revenues of the benefice and the tithes paid by parishioners. The upkeep of priest and church was a charge on these revenues, but it was allowable for part of the revenues to be appropriated by the new authority. These presented benefices could be farmed or transferred, provided they remained in the possession of the Church.

Periculoso. A Papal Bull of 1300, forbidding nuns to quit their convents.

Notes

- 1 See Maroula Joannou, “Our Time”: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Virginia Woolf and the 1940s’, *Literature Compass* 11 (2014), pp. 732–44; Rosemary Sykes, “This was a Lesson in History”: Sylvia Townsend Warner, George Townsend Warner and the Matter of History’, in *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, English Novelist 1893–1978*, edited by Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simons (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), pp. 103–15; Chris Hopkins, ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Historical Novel 1936–1948’, in *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner*, pp. 117–43; Philip Hensher, ‘Introduction’ to the Virago Press 2012 reprint; Rachel Willcock, ‘Re-Imagining the Middle Ages: Sylvia Townsend Warner and *The Corner That Held Them*’, *Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal* 2006, pp. 39–54. Wendy Mulford discusses the ‘Note on the Historical Background’ helpfully but briefly as ‘an instructive gloss’ in *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, Letters and Politics, 1930–1951* (London: Pandora Press, 1988), p. 198; this is the only attention to it that the editor has been able to find.
- 2 NOTE: The Court Rolls of the time show what happened when the Black Death got to work on a stationary population. At the manor court of Heacham, in Norfolk, for instance, a suit was postponed from February 1349 to the next sitting, two months later; at that sitting the suit had to be postponed *sine die*; during the interval all the witnesses on the one part, and the litigant on the other, had died of the pestilence. (Warner’s note)
- 3 Presumably Warner’s slip for Walter Hilton (c. 1343–96), author of *The Scale of Perfection*.