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The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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How to cite: Harman, C. 'The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Lecture 2023: "The True Voice of the Heart": Capture and Evasiveness in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Life and Work'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2024(1), pp. 3–24 • DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/STW.24.1.02.

Published: 31 December 2024

Peer review:

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's single-blind peer-review process, where the reviewers are anonymised during review.

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The Sylvia Townsend Warner Lecture 2023: 'The True Voice of the Heart': Capture and Evasiveness in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Life and Work

Claire Harman

Abstract

This article looks at examples of Sylvia Townsend Warner's obliquity and fondness for diversion, both in life and writing, beginning with examples of 'capture' in reminiscences, interviews and photographs of her, and broadening out to consider the question of self-presentation and self-consciousness in her writing. It considers what purposes are served by the digressions and evasions of her style and discusses her sophisticated self-consciousness, with reference to her diary writing and her essay 'The Difficulties of Autobiography'. The article goes on to look at the possible influence on her of Marcel Proust's ideas about biography, as set out in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, a text that Warner translated in the 1950s, at how she dealt with the concealment – or not – of sensitive material in her life of T. H. White and with attempts to censor her own work.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; autobiography; self-consciousness; biography; Marcel Proust; T. H. White.

Editor's note: Claire Harman delivered the 2023 Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Lecture at UCL on Thursday 18 October 2023. It is also available to view on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-mwV444uZ0&t=1s.

What was it like to meet Sylvia Townsend Warner? David Garnett remembered

> an alarming lady with a clear and minatory voice, dark, dripping with tassels – like a black and slender Barb caparisoned for war – with jingling ear-rings, swinging fox-tails, black silk acorn hanging to umbrella, black tasselled gloves, dog-chains, key-rings, tripped lightly in, and speaking to me in sentences like scissors told me – It was you, dearest Sylvia.[1]

That was in 1927, recalling their meeting five years earlier. William Maxwell's first encounter with Warner left him equally bowled over:

> I met her for the first time when she came to the *New Yorker* office in the fall of 1939. She was dressed in black. Her voice had a slightly husky, intimate quality. Her conversation was so charming it made my head swim. I didn't want to let her out of my sight. Ever.[2]

But her impact wasn't always so positively experienced; Stephen Spender, for instance, disliked Warner so much, when they met during the Civil War in Spain, that he referred to her in his memoirs not by name, but as the

> Communist lady writer [who] looked like, and behaved like, a vicar's wife presiding over a tea party given on a vicarage lawn as large as the whole of Republican Spain. Her extensory smiling mouth and her secretly superior eyes under a shovel hat made her graciously forbidding.[3]

These personal reminiscences constitute one type of capture. We get fuller and more nuanced impressions from the surviving interviews with Warner, where, along with her 'graciously forbidding' presence, I think you can sense a person who doesn't necessarily relish being the object of attention, being asked to talk about her own books and explain things about herself,[4] though she was willing to oblige. The interview which Louise Morgan conducted in 1930 at Sylvia's flat in Inverness Terrace, and which was published in the book *Writers at Work*, is remarkably full of deflections and digressions – in fact, it was re-reading that interview recently that made me start thinking of Sylvia's wider habits of evasion. Morgan described Sylvia's personal style and the décor of the flat, but

kept the interview at a fairly superficial level – what is your writing routine, where do you get your ideas from and that sort of thing – and Sylvia replied in kind in a light, breezy, quite facetious tone. Even a straightforward, practical question got a not entirely enlightening reply. 'Have you any special secret in cooking that you don't mind giving away?' asks Morgan. 'One should always use butter,' comes the response; a singularly unhelpful piece of advice.[5] Morgan's first impression was of Sylvia's powerful self-possession, but she also noted the quality of her voice, and that she was using it consciously as an instrument: 'She sets one chuckling at once. She rarely laughs herself, however. All her expression is put into her voice, which is like a viola with harp accompaniment.'[6] A slightly precious description, but I think we get the idea. Also during that interview, which Morgan seems to have captured in close detail (presumably through shorthand; it would have been exceptionally early for recording equipment), the phone keeps ringing – Sylvia herself is distracted, as well as distracting. And as Morgan says, 'she herself has that same quality of unexpectedness. It is part of her great personal charm that she keeps her listener constantly on the alert, and never by any chance gives him what he is prepared for',[7] an interesting observation of Sylvia, both as a person and a writer.

Another diverting interview was the one Warner gave to Michael Schmidt and Val Warner in 1975. Sylvia was surprised as well as pleased to discover that Val Warner (a poet and the editor of a selection of Charlotte Mew's poems) knew her work well, and the conversation ranges widely, from her poems and novels to her politics and the reception of her work. She gives out a lot of information and seems ready to tackle any subject, but never stays long on any one of them, changing tack mid-answer with a tangential remark or anecdote, quite frustrating to listen to. It is here that she tells the story of being expelled from kindergarten because she was a disruptive influence, always, like Mary's little lamb, wanting 'to make the children laugh and play',[8] and you see the same thing going on in the interview itself, an impulse to be amusing and lively, and digressive, to entertain herself, if no-one else. The old reel-to-reel tape upon which the encounter was recorded has only survived in a very distorted form; it captures Sylvia's voice and her presence in scratchy snatches that you have to strain to hear.[9] But the interpersonal dynamics of the interview come through clearly enough and there's a strong sense of how difficult it must have been for either of the interviewers to get past Warner's charm and controlling presence to a straight answer.

I'd like to look today at this fondness for diversion, and how characteristic it is of Warner's writing style as much as of her social style. How much of it was temperamental, how much defensive, self-conscious, artful? Are her evasions always evasive, or do they serve some other purposes?

She was certainly someone who did not want to be pinned down, or captured, and she seldom revealed her quieter side. David Garnett observed two quite different modes on an outing they took together to the Essex Marshes in the early 1920s. On the way out, 'Sylvia gave an extraordinary display of verbal fireworks. Ideas, epigrams and paradoxes raced through her mind and poured from her mouth as though she were delirious.' A challenging spectacle, as he describes it, although on the way back, he saw another side altogether. Exhausted by the long walk, Sylvia, for the first time in Garnett's company, fell silent; 'brilliance and shyness were alike forgotten, our hearts were warm to each other and have remained so ever since'.[10]

Unknown to Garnett at that date, Sylvia had as strong a taste for solitude as for company, and wrote a witty, truthful poem in the summer of 1929 on the occasion of her then lover, Percy Buck, being away on an extended trip to Africa. It's called 'The Absence':

How happy I can be with my love away!
No care comes all day;
Like a dapple of clouds the hours pass by,
Time stares from the sky
But does not see me where I lie in the hay,
So still do I lie.

Like points of dew the stars well in the skies;
Taller the trees rise.
Dis-shadowed, unselved, I wander slow,
My thoughts flow and flow
But whither they tend I know not, nor need to surmise,
So softly I go;

Till to my quiet bed I must undress –
Then I say, Alas!
That he whom, too anxious or too gay,
I torment all day
Can never know me in my harmlessness
While he is away.[11]

'Too anxious, or too gay' – Sylvia was aware of, and interested in, her own self-consciousness and how greatly it might work against the interests of the creative self whose thoughts 'flow and flow', but are not shared in talk. Appearing too anxious or too gay was a preoccupation of these years when she was at the peak of her fame, but possibly least confident about her personal relationships. After having supper with her friend and publisher, Charles Prentice, in 1928, she wrote this in her diary:

> He knows me very well, I think, and perhaps I scarcely know him at all […] That extreme gentleness excites me, and I find myself behaving with him as though I were alone out of doors. It is almost unnerving to be so freed of self-consciousness. What he thinks of me I cannot imagine, because I know myself apart from my books, I do not see them as integrally part of myself; but he, I fancy, is giving the peach to Lueli, taking Mr Fortune in the taxi, picking up Nelly Trim's handkerchief. Yes, I feel sure of this; that accounts for my lack of self-consciousness. As an artist I am not self-conscious, and when I am with him my mind flows as though I were my full artist-self, not the naked Sylvia that wears clothes, and is met by people. Suddenly I do something clumsy or idiotic and Sylvia is in torment. But I soon forget her again, she is no more to me than the woman reflected in the mirror opposite.[12]

The person who had begun observing Sylvia most closely at this date and who, in the spring and summer of 1930, was becoming fascinated by her – at a distance – was Valentine Ackland, the young poet living in Mrs Way's Cottage in Chaldon who had been befriended by T. F. Powys and his wife Violet. Valentine talked about Sylvia to their mutual acquaintance in Chaldon and took a photograph surreptitiously while Sylvia was sitting writing in a deckchair in the garden of the Powys's house, Beth Car. Snapping Sylvia unaware allowed Valentine to pore over the image at leisure; her gaze could then linger over what she had 'caught' and increasingly lover-like thoughts developed. In a later covert sighting of Sylvia in London (one that led indirectly to them living together), Valentine was driving along Inverness Terrace and saw Sylvia with a 'haunted and despairing' look on her face, which Valentine interpreted as repressed sadness. Was this unguarded Sylvia the true one? She had begun to dream about Sylvia, too, a different character again from the one she knew in company, this time displaying an 'eager and loving look',[13] as yet unwitnessed in real life.

Figure 1. Sylvia photographed by Valentine in the garden of Beth Car, East Chaldon, 1930 (Source: Reproduced with permission of the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive at the Dorset History Centre; item 2142, STW.2012.125.2708, D/TWA/A48, STW/alone/13).

The relationship with Valentine, and the steady presence of Valentine's gaze, led to many adjustments, and perhaps less pressure to perform; Terry Castle has gone as far as to say that Valentine 'humanized' Warner's imagination, 'added moral seriousness to Warner's temperament and imbued her writing with much-needed gravitas'.[14] I don't agree that Sylvia suffered any deficit of gravitas before she and Valentine became a couple, nor that the fanciful and whimsical side of her temperament diminished afterwards. But life with Valentine does seem to have encouraged Sylvia to feel freer, and perhaps truer to herself, while being pleasurably 'caught', as this poem from *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, a sort of companion piece, or riposte, to 'The Absence' suggests:

> I, so wary of traps,
> So skilful to outwit
> Springes and pitfalls set
> Am caught now, perhaps.
>
> Though capture, while I am laid
> So still in hold, is but
> The limb's long sigh to admit
> How heavy freedom weighed.[15]

An elegant homage to a lover, with a convoluted wittiness that evokes a sort of stylised struggle, but even here, I think one can detect an element of withholding in the isolation of the word 'perhaps' at the end of the first stanza. It gives only provisional assent to the sort of pleasurable capture that is being celebrated and reflects pretty closely some of the anxieties Valentine herself articulated in 1930–1, worrying that Sylvia might be missing some of her old freedom. Writing from Winterton in January 1931, on one of the couple's rare separations, Valentine looked forward to being in Lavenham with Sylvia for the first time together ('The Barn' at Lavenham having been a valued bolt-hole for Sylvia for several years):

> We will be very happy, of course, and how lovely to be together where you were alone. Will you regret your lost estate, and wish to be solitary again? Perhaps I shall pick up scent of that outworn Sylvia, and track her out from her sleep, and learn what she was like. But I believe that her sleep will slide into death, and that haunted and despairing creature I saw in the street will never come back.[16]

That's a strange thing to say, that the sleep of the 'outworn Sylvia' might slide into death, and that there was an 'outworn' persona at all, to be tracked down in this former solitary lair, whether or not the 'haunted and despairing' side of it – that she had glimpsed from the car – had been chased off by their love. And there were other perhapses, and withholdings, even in this most intimate of Sylvia's relationships. In her diary of 26 July 1931, Sylvia records telling Valentine something about her erstwhile lover, Buck, that reflects closely the occasion of 'The Absence': 'During the night 25–26 Valentine unloosed my iron bridle, and I told her about Teague [Percy Buck], who couldn't, and said he couldn't, endure more than three days on end of my company.'[17] The diary entry goes on to record Valentine applauding this as having been the right thing for Buck to have said, 'very honest and rare, said she', but the most striking thing – to the reader of the diary, not the hearer of the confidence – is that Sylvia felt herself constrained by an 'iron bridle' at all, on this or any subject.

Self-consciousness as a compositional problem hangs over, and under, the diary that Sylvia wrote for almost 50 years. Part of what makes her diary so intimate and natural-sounding is that she understood the peculiarities of the form from the start and strove to accommodate them, especially the problem of address: who is one speaking to in a diary? A future self? Current acquaintances who might be shown, or steal a look at, supposedly unvarnished truths? Posterity? 'Nobody'? As a record of her life, she knew it had inherent flaws, as she articulated neatly in a letter to Alyse Gregory:

> I don't wonder at your mood of self-questioning, if you have been typing out old journals. Of all Pandora boxes, the worst is the box one keeps journals, letters, unfinished manuscripts in. I have mine, too, and merely to open them in search of some specific thing is enough to send me tossed and ship-wrecked into that strange unchartable sea of Time Past […] But one thing I have pulled out with reasonable certainty: the fact that no journal, no record of one's days, conveys the extent of the garment on which these nose-gays and sodality buttons and crepe bands were worn. An old teapot, used daily, can tell me more of my past than anything I recorded of it. Continuity, Alyse, continuity … it is that which we cannot write down, it is that we cannot compass, record or control.[18]

Figure 2. Sylvia asleep with the cat, photographed by Valentine, *ca.* 1930–31 (Source: Reproduced with permission of the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive at the Dorset History Centre; item 2161, STW.2012.125.2725, D/TWA/A48, STW/alone/30).

And yet, of course, Warner uses her diary to do exactly that, to capture the everyday, the fugitive flavour of any particular time, a sight, a conversation, a passing thought. The mute old teapot may be more eloquent, but she is still committed to doing her best with words.

When asked why she didn't want to write an autobiography Warner declared herself temperamentally unsuited to it; she had refused past 'requests' (in the plural), she told Schmidt and Warner, 'because I am too imaginative'.[19] There's an essay, unpublished in her lifetime, called 'The Difficulties of Autobiography', which might well have been written in response to one of those requests, and which demonstrates some of the problems in writing scrupulously about any aspect of one's life, beyond even the problem of being too imaginative. It was submitted to *The New Yorker* in 1945 but was rejected by her then editor, Guy Lobrano, and only published posthumously in the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society's journal in 2020.[20] It's short (just under 1,400 words) and seems closely connected with the series of childhood stories that she wrote in the 1940s and 1950s and which were collected after her death in *Scenes of Childhood*, stories with an irrepressibly comic tone, depicting her parents as very definite 'characters', almost cartoonish at times, and sending up, in a benign and amusing but exhaustingly jolly way, her early life. They are what one might call heavily narrated (if not exactly fictionalised) anecdotes from her youth, a sort of autobiographical fiction that is nothing whatever like 'auto-fiction' and which is interestingly categorised in Janet Montefiore's bibliography of Warner under 'memoir',[21] but I think flagrantly displays all the most 'laugh and play' impulses she marked out as her special weakness.

'The Difficulties of Autobiography' sets out to identify and describe the point at which Sylvia first became excited about words – a very appropriate place, as she remarks, to begin tracing a writer's development. She can identify the moment precisely, an afternoon in the autumn of 1899 (she would have been five, rising six) when she was out with her own nurse and that of another Harrow family and listening in a desultory way to the two women's conversation: 'they were talking about an outbreak of fire in a lunatic asylum, more of their family affairs, I supposed, they both had that kind of family.' But then Sylvia's nurse utters the words 'That's the Shadow of Ashlydiatt':

> For a moment that will last me till my dying day everything became transfixed and transcendent – the speechless blue of the autumn sky, the road to London sloping down before us with its vista of

> dismantling trees, the iron bench which the Town Council or possibly some dead benefactor had caused to be placed just there, and which the nurses scorned to use for to sit upon cold iron brings on you know what, the falling leaves I was scuffing with my feet, the pungent sorrowful smell of autumn in a clay-soil country of fine timber. I received the words, and swallowed them, and became conscious of literature.
>
> Presently I saw a nun flash by on a bicycle.[22]

This memory of becoming 'conscious of literature' involves no written text, and also – at that date – had no actual association with 'literature', since the child didn't recognise the title of the novel by Mrs Henry Wood to which her nurse was referring. She receives the mysterious phrase 'The Shadow of Ashlydiatt'[23] and something kicks in – not because the words are comprehensible, but because they are mysterious and beautiful. The walk changes in its nature, 'everything became fixed and transcendent' – transubstantiated, one could say, to pick up on the language of communion that runs right through the piece. It is a moment of heightened perception, and the nun flashing by on a bicycle is, it seems, an important contribution to the impression 'fixing' so strongly in the child's mind.

But then Warner goes off at quite a tangent to explain about the glimpse of the cycling nun and we're forced away from the shining epiphanic moment described here to some distractingly mundane considerations. The nun turns out not to have been a nun on the road but one in the grounds of a convent they were passing. The property had a cracked fence through which the children had become familiar with the sight of nuns pedalling briskly round the grounds every afternoon, 'floating in and out of the bushes like rooks.'[24] 'This was not a bicycling order,' Warner explains drolly, but an enclosed and contemplative one who had responded to their doctor's suggestion that they should get more exercise by purchasing and frequently using twelve machines. She even digresses onto the specific cause of their poor health – constipation – and introduces into the story her father, a friend of the doctor, opining that all contemplative orders are constipated, 'as though he had lived in dozens of them. He was a historian,' she continues, 'and found an occasional axiom very soothing.'[25] Things seem to be getting sillier and sillier, the writer's tongue moving further and further into her cheek, but at the same time, all along these wayward paths, there's an oblique sort of knitting up going along: Mrs Henry Wood and Mrs Humphrey Ward, wheels of bicycles and wheels of perambulators, the slim, cheerful, agnostic nurse and the

heavy nurse whose very hair declares her religious persuasion. Sylvia receives her 'vocation to literature' while 'swallowing the words' 'The Shadow of Ashlydiatt' and passing a convent; Dr Ruthven is 'a zealot', but only for 'regular evacuations', which is why he wants to get the nuns on wheels. Sometimes this connectedness is at the simple level of puns; the nuns, for instance, are thought to show an unenterprising spirit in their 'faithfulness to cod'.

It may not be a very effective piece of writing, but that, as the final paragraph makes clear, is rather the point (and I'll come to it in a minute). Remembering the moment is one thing, pinning it down usefully, elegantly or even interestingly, another. What Warner set out to do was describe a Proustian moment of 'involuntary memory', though facing, as it were, the other way, focusing on the point at which the impression is fixed rather than later re-triggerings of it. 'Many people have assured me that this could never have taken place, that I must have dreamed it or invented it,' she says, countering the excessively circumstantial nature of the memory and its purely personal significance. 'Just as I cannot gainsay the fact that it was the Shadow of Ashlydiatt which awoke me to the power of the word I cannot recall that awakening without a flash of wheels and a sweep of black skirts crossing my mind's eye.'[26]

The sort of clustering, or associativeness, at work in 'The Difficulties of Autobiography' is highly characteristic of Warner's writing. In the poetry you see it in an extraordinary skill with half-rhyme and slant rhyme, suggesting other ideas around an initial idea (as if the absent, hinted-at word is also there in ghostly form);[27] in the prose, word play and literary allusions that might seem deployed in oblique or purely fanciful ways can create a dense tapestry of allusion and illusion, a haunting layeredness.[28] Even in her most straightforward-looking writing, there is a lot going on under the surface; impressions that seem to coexist in a spirit of serendipity or coincidence can be unpacked for different purposes, at different times and speeds. The connections may not be immediately perceptible, they may not have any solid significance, but the effect – felt not cumulatively, but in the round – is of something teeming with possibilities.

But of course, it won't do as an autobiographical method; it would, for one thing, drag proceedings out to an intolerable length. She ends 'The Difficulties of Autobiography' thus:

> Unfortunately, a feeling for words is but a minor part of the business of being a writer. The sense of form is more important, and harder to

> come by. In writing fiction one can achieve, at any rate, symmetry; but in autobiography I do not for the life of me see how one can reconcile the claims of truth and the claims of proportion. Nothing is clearer in my memory than how I first began to feel excited about words. What better beginning for an autobiography? And just look what happens next![29]

I've been worrying about veracity in autobiography when there may have been another equally important factor at work – proportion. And here we can do no better than stay with Proust, that master of unpacking the moment – and wrapping it back up again.

Sylvia was acquainted with Proust's works long before she was asked by Chatto & Windus to be the translator of his posthumous essays, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, the publication of which in Paris, 32 years after Proust's death, was a major literary event in 1954. Chatto wanted to produce an English version as promptly as possible and approached Sylvia, who accepted eagerly and worked on the book from January 1955 to April 1956. Her translation, entitled *By Way of Sainte-Beuve*, was published in the spring of 1958. Her title is not a literal rendering of the original, but captures the digressive nature of Proust's work, in which his critique of the nineteenth-century literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve is the jumping-off point for an ambitious and extravagant display of Proust's own critical and creative powers.

Contre Sainte-Beuve has much in common, generically, with contemporary 'auto-fiction'; the author appears in the essays as 'Monsieur Marcel' and narrates his own process of composing the book, introducing along the way a lot of autobiographical and fictional material (much of it revisited or recast in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*). He seems just as interested in the hybridity of his text as in its ostensible subject and establishes 'Marcel's' distinctive voice in the opening passages as an essential tool in his critique. Sainte-Beuve had insisted that one needs to know as much as possible about the circumstances of a writer's life, physical appearance and social exterior, as a means to understanding his works, described thus (in Sylvia's translation):

> [Sainte-Beuve's method] consists, if you would understand a poet or a writer, in greedily catechising those who knew him, who saw quite a lot of him, who can tell us how he conducted himself in regard to women, etc. precisely, that is, at every point where the poet's true self is not involved.[30]

Marcel has other ideas:

> At no time does Sainte-Beuve seem to have understood that there is something special about creative writing and that this makes it different in kind from what busies other men and, at other times, busies writers. He drew no dividing line between the state of being engaged in a piece of writing and the state when in solitude, stopping our ears against those phrases which belong to others as much as to us and which we make use of in our consideration of things whenever we are not truly ourselves, even though we may be alone, we confront ourselves and try to catch the true voice of the heart, and to write down that, and not small-talk. […]
>
> This implication that there is something more superficial and empty in a writer's authorship, something deeper and more contemplative in his private life, is due to nothing else than the special-pleading metaphor of Necessity. In fact, it is the secretion of one's innermost life, written in solitude and for oneself alone, that one gives to the public. What one bestows on private life – in conversation, that is, however refined it may be […] or in those drawing-room essays, whittled down to suit a particular circle and scarcely more than conversation in print, is the product of a quite superficial self, not of the innermost self which one can only recover by putting aside the world and the self that frequents the world; that innermost self which has waited while one was in company, which one feels certain is the only real self, and which artists – and they only – end by living for.[31]

As a literary biographer, I've always found this passage both stirring and sobering; I assent whole-heartedly to the idea that the only way to encounter a writer truly is through their works which, as it were, leap over personal life and circumstance and 'real life', being the product of an inner self that waits patiently while one is in company, and yes, that even then, there are tests of honesty which the author needs to have passed in order to capture 'the true voice of the heart, and to write that down, and not small-talk'. But the animus Proust brings to his low valuation of biographical fact gives one pause for thought – how ingenuous was he being? The critic in me suspects Marcel of being just as concerned about impertinently autobiographical readings of his yet-unwritten novel as he was about Sainte-Beuve.

Just as Proust evolved his aesthetic through analysing and challenging that of Sainte-Beuve, Sylvia refined hers through the prism

of Proust; the form of collaboration she enjoyed as his translator thrilled her, and you can certainly see the importance of this specific text when she turned biographer herself a few years later, writing about the novelist T. H. White. There she had to resolve first-hand the issues of how to represent a subject, write about their work and deal with their most private secrets, and also at a more basic level, to grapple with the question of how truthful biography can ever be and its essential value.

The invitation to write the book on White came just months after his sudden death in 1964 and was the initiative of friends (including David Garnett) who were trying to stop the literary agent David Higham taking charge of the project himself. At this date, Warner had read none of White's works except his poems and felt hesitant about the idea of writing a biography at all, but visiting White's house in Alderney, which had been left virtually untouched since he departed for his last voyage, changed her mind. Rather in the manner of Valentine catching sight of an unguarded Sylvia on Inverness Terrace all those years before, being among White's things in his empty house gave Sylvia a sense of privileged (illicit) insight and tipped her towards feeling 'a human obligation' towards the dead stranger:

> his clothes were on hangers. His sewing-basket with an unfinished hawk-hood; his litter of fishing-flies, his books, his *awful* ornaments […] his neat rows of books about flagellation – everything was there, defenceless as a corpse. And so was he; morose, suspicious, intensely watchful and determined to despair. [32]

White's friends had chosen Sylvia as biographer because of her broadmindedness and sympathetic imagination (as well, of course, as on account of her writing skills), but there's little doubt that she and White would not have got on in real life; White's individualist politics, his fear of women, his thoroughgoing approach to tax evasion and even his '*awful* ornaments'[33] are just some of the things which would have nipped any sort of friendship in the bud, and the flagellation library was hardly of mutual interest. Her attitude towards him appears, in the finished book, detached, astute and penetrating; her method was to allow him to speak for himself as often as possible (by the inclusion of long passages of hitherto unpublished letters and diaries) and for the best and worst of him to be presented to a large extent in his own words. But though detached, hers was not an uncritical biographical presence; there are one or two barbs in the text and off-record remarks in letters to friends that show she felt a significant distance between her mindset and his. And yet Warner

did end up *loving* him, the unpeeled him of her private understanding, gained through reading his books, letters and diaries. The predicament of being Tim White had both appalled and intrigued her, and she strove to do it justice.

The challenge intensified as she became more and more aware of White's secrets and when, already halfway through the book, she read diaries that he had kept under lock and key in which he wrote obsessively about his paedophiliac urges and sadism. Reading them was like going 'deeper into dungeons',[34] she told her own diary, yet she saw the pathos in them, 'so puny in fact, so overwhelming in feeling'. And in some sense, the sensational revelations she found there did not surprise her at all, for when details of the Moors Murders were made public in the spring of 1966 (months before she read the diaries), she had noted, chillingly, that 'it was this, exactly this sort of thing […] that waited round every corner for White. This I must both grasp *and STATE*.'[35]

But how does one do this grasping and stating? Not necessarily by being explicit. In the finished book, the subject of White's sadism (and its origins) turns up again and again, but without explicit reference to his fantasies. Today, those fantasies would probably be the focus of a biography, but Warner was not interested in making a sensational case against White – or a sanitised one. She was interested in showing what his mind and character were like. 'I won't cheat,' she told Garnett at the start of the project, 'and [I] have a beginning idea of what I can't do, which is a bottomless pit. It is a sad reflection, darling David, that after all the years intelligent people like ourselves have been illuminating English society it is still totally impossible to be honest.'[36] But she did manage to be honest – or perhaps one should say *true* – and when her biography of White appeared in 1967, the year in which homosexuality was decriminalised, it was widely admired for pushing hard at the existing conventions. 'Law, morality and all the rest of it'[37] had never impressed her as having any business with people's private lives or sexual preferences; her boldness in *T. H. White* was the way she wrote about his sexuality without prurience or apology and with no attempt to moralise.

So no evasion there. But White was a concealer, and Warner was not. Warner was a celebratory, defiant, private lesbian; a virtuoso of the eloquent silence, who lived by one of her father's favourite maxims: 'Never apologise; never explain'. Any elements of evasiveness you find in her work have nothing to do with an unwillingness to be explicit on moral grounds; and about her own politics and sexuality, she felt she had nothing whatever to apologise for. Perhaps the White book, being a work

of non-fiction, showed this up more clearly than her fiction did, but a habit of hiding in plain sight had been a factor in her work all along. Truths are present, but not paraded, and are arguably all the stronger for it, as one can see from the powerful handling of the incest story in 'A Love Match' and things like the treatment of witchcraft in *Lolly Willowes* and the anti-clericalism of *The Corner that Held Them* to the naturally occurring homosexual themes in *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, *Summer Will Show*, *The Flint Anchor* and many of the short stories. The secret was in the tone, 'which must be flat as flat, and dry as dry – and WITH NO FRISKS OR QUIPS, my old girl',[38] she warned herself, when starting out on 'A Love Match'.

Her skill at not apologising led to difficulties with publishers on a number of occasions. When Sylvia delivered the manuscript of *The Flint Anchor* to Chatto & Windus in 1954, her editor Ian Parsons had to pass on the news that certain managers wanted to take out the entire conversation with the fisherman Crusoe in which he declares his love for Thomas Kettle. 'I felt sorry for Ian, breathed on by all this howdydo about homosexuality,' Sylvia wrote in her diary,

> (though my heart laughed him to scorn when he said so artlessly that no one could call it provocative, and it was a period story – like *Forever Amber*, no doubt). However, I said merely that if they liked they could hold up the English printing till the storm blew over, and that I could not take out the Crusoe conversation.[39]

When the book containing 'A Love Match'[40] was proscribed for indecency by Dorset County Library, she wrote to Garnett, speculating what it was that had caused such offence; 'I suppose it is the incest story, though it could as well be several of the others.'[41]

You can hear there the glee of an author whose stealth tactics have worked to perfection. Caution? Control, more like. I'm reminded once again of that poem in which the speaker seems to be at bay, but of course isn't:

> I, so wary of traps,
> So skilful to outwit
> Springes and pitfalls set
> Am caught now, perhaps.[42]

As a coda to these thoughts on capture, I'd like to add a few words on my own experience of trying to write about this protean woman. With

her remarkable wit, vitality and, as Terry Castle has said, her 'ineffable self-possession',[43] Warner presents a challenging subject for biography, and when I set out to research her life, both the inner and outer person were pretty much hidden from view. My first impression of her work was, rather like Garnett's and Maxwell's responses to her physical presence, predominantly of its charm and a highly distinctive 'voice', over which she seemed to have effortless control; a bravura voice and an intimate, plangent one; a frivolous voice that modulates into seriousness; fantasy that abuts realism and all her bemusing diversity and inconsistency. I could see that she was going to be impossible to categorise, and that she had probably intended as much.

I had to hunt down almost all the data; the chronology of her life was unclear, and there had been no previous gathering together of information about herself and her family. There was no bibliography of any kind and only three books in print; finding copies of the others was no easy task, nor was trawling for material by or about her in the printed library catalogues and periodicals indexes of those pre-internet days. In the attic room of the Dorset County Museum where the Warner/Ackland papers were stored, there were manuscripts, published and unpublished, to be deciphered and made sense of; reading the diaries alone took two years, and seemed at one point to be taking over the entire project. And of course, on top of that, there were friends and relations to meet and interview, to find out more about 'the naked Sylvia that wears clothes, and is met by people';[44] in other words, plenty of that 'greedy catechising' that Proust sounded off about in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

But the fact that it took eight years to write gave me plenty of time to realise that my personal judgement of Warner was always going to be highly subjective and partisan; there was an open-endedness to go with her open-mindedness, an acknowledgement of any subject's essential unknowability. As she remarked to François Gallix some years after completing her book on White, 'Sometimes I feel I know him very well indeed, but then I remember all I know is my own White, I am just another of the people who have their own White.'[45] Other people would always have their own Warners.

My basic view of her hasn't changed a bit in 30 years, but the steady accumulation of further information about her life and works (and those of Valentine) and the very significant growth in Warner studies, as well as in her readership generally, has been a source of enormous interest and pleasure. I wouldn't want to rewrite my 1989 book, but I would very much like to augment it with all the extra material I have come across in those years, many diversions and digressions which have their own

uncontainable interest and value. Unlike any of the other people I've written about, I definitely think of Warner as a 'live' subject.

Meanwhile, she is always there to be met and re-met in her works, where she is ready, as she said of Katherine Mansfield, to 'annihilate the space between her and their reader',[46] to capture and captivate more than you'd expect – which is what all great literature succeeds in doing.

Note on contributor

Claire Harman is Professor Emerita of Durham University. She edited Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Collected Poems* (1982), *Diaries* (1994) and *New Collected Poems* (2008), and wrote Warner's biography (1989). She has written six other literary biographies, the most recent of which is *All Sorts of Lives: Katherine Mansfield and the Art of Risking Everything*, published in 2023.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the reviewers during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

1 David Garnett and Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Sylvia and David: The Townsend Warner/Garnett letters*, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), pp. 35–6; *ca.* 24 November 1927.

2 William Maxwell, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and *The New Yorker*', *PN Review* 23 (1981), p. 44.
3 Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), p. 244.
4 An exception might be the interview that she gave to François Gallix in 1974 on the subject of T. H. White; see François Gallix, 'François Gallix interviews Sylvia Townsend Warner about T. H. White (1974)', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 17, no. 2 (2017), pp. 56–70. Gallix was someone she wanted to help – he was studying White – and with whom she could talk at length on a mutually interesting subject; consequently, she sounds much more relaxed in the interview with him than in any of the others.
5 Louise Morgan, *Writers at Work* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p. 30.
6 Morgan, *Writers at Work*, p. 27.
7 Morgan, *Writers at Work*, p. 27.
8 Sylvia Townsend Warner and M. Schmidt, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in conversation', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 3, no. 1 (2002), pp. 43–52.
9 In the spoken lecture, I played a section from the tape here.
10 David Garnett, *The Familiar Faces* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), p. 8.
11 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), p. 150.
12 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Diaries*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), entry for 20 January 1928, pp. 12–13.
13 Valentine's diary, 5 August 1930, quoted in Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 108.
14 Terry Castle, 'The will to whimsy', in *Boss Ladies, Watch Out! Essays on women, sex, and writing* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 240.
15 Warner, *New Collected Poems*, p. 217.
16 Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner, *I'll Stand by You: Selected letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland*, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 35.
17 Warner, *Diaries*, entry for 26 July 1931, pp. 86–7.
18 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 140; to Alyse Gregory, 26 May 1953.
19 Warner, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in conversation', p. 51.
20 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'The difficulties of autobiography', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 19, nos. 1–2 (2020), pp. 103–6.
21 Janet Montefiore, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner Scholarship 1978–2013: An annotated bibliography with introduction', *Literature Compass* 11 (2014), pp. 786–811.
22 Warner, 'The difficulties of autobiography', p. 103.
23 The spelling of the actual title of Mrs Henry Wood's 1863 bestseller is *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*.
24 Warner, 'The difficulties of autobiography', p. 105.
25 Warner, 'The difficulties of autobiography', p. 104.
26 Warner, 'The difficulties of autobiography', pp. 105–6.
27 See my remarks, in the introduction to *New Collected Poems*, on how the change from 'saying' to 'sighing' in Warner's poem 'The birds are muted in the bosom of midsummer' 'in some way […] contains the idea – almost the memory – of the word it is displacing': Warner, *New Collected Poems*, p. 10.
28 Walter Allen, in his chapter on Warner in *The Short Story in English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), cites Warner's brilliant, frivolous story 'A view of Exmoor' as one that, for this very reason, 'lingers in the mind with the resonance of a lyric poem' (p. 252). He points out some of the images of flight and cagedness that underpin the story, but there are also endless small jokes

about 'fine feathers', owlishness, 'bare ruined legs' (recalling Shakespeare's 'choirs where late the sweet birds sang' in Sonnet 73) and echoes of James Hogg's 'The skylark'; the thing is a dense tapestry of allusion and illusion, a complex, flitting imaginative spree.

29 Warner, 'The difficulties of autobiography', p. 106.

30 Marcel Proust, *By Way of Sainte-Beuve (Contre Sainte-Beuve)*, tr. Sylvia Townsend Warner (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), p. 81.

31 Proust, *By Way of Sainte-Beuve*, pp. 78–9.

32 Warner, *Letters*, p. 226; Warner to William Maxwell, 22 July 1967.

33 Warner, *Letters*, p. 226; Warner to William Maxwell, 22 July 1967.

34 Warner, *Diaries*, entry for 9 August 1966, p. 305.

35 Warner, *Diaries*, entry for 21 April 1966, p. 303.

36 Garnett and Warner, *Sylvia and David*, p. 73; Warner to Garnett, 8 June 1964.

37 This remark comes in a letter to Garnett about a play he had written, or was intending to write (which I can't identify): 'I am in two minds about incest, and the question of your play. I think people should have some elements of private life they keep dark, and that incest could well be one of them. But I also think it a very bad plan that law, morality and all the rest of it should compel them to keep it dark. And I don't see how this can be amended till the world has grown better manners.' Garnett and Warner, *Sylvia and David*, pp. 126–7; Warner to Garnett, 23 October 1967.

38 Warner, *Diaries*, entry for 26 April 1964, p. 291.

39 Warner, *Diaries*, entry for 8 January 1954, pp. 205–6.

40 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *A Stranger with a Bag* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966).

41 Garnett and Warner, *Sylvia and David*, p. 131; Warner to Garnett, 29 October 1967.

42 Warner, *New Collected Poems*, p. 217.

43 Castle, 'The will to whimsy', p. 237.

44 Warner, *Diaries*, entry for 20 January 1928, pp. 12–13.

45 Gallix, 'François Gallix interviews Sylvia Townend Warner', p. 68.

46 'Death and the lady', in Sylvia Townsend Warner, *With the Hunted: Selected writings*, ed. Peter Tolhurst (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), p. 279.

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