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E L I Z A B E T H P O W E R S

A commonplace of criticism of the work of Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893–1978) is the neglect of a writer who deserves to be more widely appreciated. In a 1983 overview in *The Nation* magazine, the poet-critic Richard Howard opened as follows: “She has no critical cachet whatever, this writer.” He had in mind the five books of poetry, seven novels, and nine collections of short stories by the English writer. Probably few people know that her first novel, *Lolly Willows*, was the inaugural selection of the Book of the Month Club in 1926, but American readers of an earlier generation might have read one of her short stories in *The New Yorker*, which for forty years, beginning in 1936, published over 150 of them. During World War II, these stories provided something of a conduit of information about British domestic life. Warner’s editor at *The New Yorker*, William Maxwell, was himself an author, as well as a legendary editor, and was responsible for an edition of their correspondence and for shepherding the publication of several collections of her short stories.

When the feminist publisher Virago began reprinting Warner’s novels in the late 1970s – the short and whimsical tales that would make up *Kingdoms of Elfin* were just then appearing in *The New*

*Yorker*—none of her novels remained in print in the United States. Only in 1989, with the appearance of *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, by Claire Harman, did Warner's neglect begin to be reversed. (A new edition appeared in 2015.) In the same period, Warner was recuperated as a “woman writer” and, latterly, her work has found a place in gender studies. Attention has been paid to her long-term relationship with the poet Valentine Ackland (1908–1969). The back cover of Susanna Pinney's collection of the Warner-Ackland letters, *I'll Stand by You*, calls it “the most detailed personal account of a lesbian relationship [in] this century.”

In recent years Marxist and postcolonial scholarship has discovered a rich mine in two of Warner's novels, *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* (1927) and *Summer Will Show* (1936). The first concerns a conflicted missionary to a South Sea island who falls in love with a native boy and loses his faith. The second, a historical novel set during the 1848 revolution in France, is about (among other things) a love affair between two women that ends with one of its heroines taking in hand Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. But what is one to make, for instance, of the 1948 novel *The Corner That Held Them*, which takes place in a twelfth-century convent in Norfolk? With her novels ranging magpie-like over time and terrain, it seems difficult to situate Warner as a writer, and scholarly interest perforce focuses on individual works rather than her entire corpus.

Warner's life also exhibits a magpie quality. She grew up home-schooled on the grounds of Harrow School, where her father was a master. During World War I she worked in a munitions factory. It is often repeated, although not proven, that she had hoped to study music composition with Arnold Schoenberg in Germany, a plan that was thwarted because of the outbreak of World War I. For the next decade, she was part of the editorial team that produced Oxford University Press's ten-volume collection *Tudor Church Music*. For this project, she made solitary trips to village chapels and churches in search of long-forgotten manuscripts. It was during this period that her writing career began with two volumes of poetry, in the Georgian mode, followed by *Lolly Willows* in 1926. In the 1920s she contributed to many periodicals, including the New York *Herald-Tribune*. In the 1930s she became a committed Communist, venturing to Spain to assist the Republican cause.

Further novels, along with those mentioned above, are *After the Death of Don Juan* (1938) and *The Flint Anchor* (1954). She translated Proust's *Contre Saint-Beuve* (1954) and wrote a biography of T. H. White, author of *The Book of Merlin*. (In its 1968 review of the latter, *The New York Times* called the biography "a small masterpiece which may well be read long after the writings of its subject have been forgotten.") Thus, alongside the inconsistent publishing history of her oeuvre, the difficulty in situating Warner has much to do with the sheer variety of her interests. She defended this variety in the 1939 essay "The Way by Which I Have Come": "I do not believe in becoming fast-rooted. I am ready, I hope I am able, to move anywhere and remain myself."

For the literary scholars among us, however, Warner's posthumous fate brings up an important issue: Why do some writers have a long shelf life, while the repute of very popular, even critically well received, contemporaries goes into eclipse even in their lifetime?

Certainly, a requisite for literary durability is the continuous reprinting of an author's works. In this respect, Warner's claim on our attention is now stronger than that of certain prolific writers in her cohort who made their reputation in the years in which she, too, came of age literarily, between the two world wars. To name only a few, in no particular order: Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1973), Warwick Deeping (1877–1950), Stella Gibbons (1902–1989), Walter Greenwood (1903–1974), Elizabeth Taylor (1912–1975), and the oddly named Dornford Yates (1885–1960). Gibbons wrote (by my count) twenty-four novels, of which only *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) remains in print; like *Sorrel and Son* (1925), one of the almost uncountable number of novels written by Deeping, its survival owes much to film or television adaptations. Bowen gives some evidence of experiencing a comeback, but Taylor, described by Kingsley Amis as "one of the best English novelists born in the [twentieth] century," has the ignominious fate of being confused with the actress. (*Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont* had a fine film adaptation, with Joan Plowright in the title role.) Yates would seem to be a special case, with a reputation grounded in the popularity of crime fiction. His thrillers featuring an Oxford man named Richard Chandos remain in print. Interestingly, Yates, whose real

name was Cecil William Mercer, was at Harrow from 1899 until 1903 and might have known Warner.

Two writers of this era whose work is truly long lived can throw light on the issue of literary survival: Rebecca West (1892–1983) and George Orwell (1903–1950). Besides being novelists and prolific essayists, they were, like Warner, known for their intellectual engagement with the between-the-wars struggle against fascism.

George Orwell seems to tower over his contemporaries so much that one tends to forget that there were other big thinkers in the 1930s and 1940s. Certainly Arthur Koestler, a very profound thinker, told the same story as George Orwell and, Joseph Conrad-like, in an adopted language. Koestler's 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon* is not an allegory (*Animal Farm*) or a futuristic dystopia (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*) but instead a searing account of the effects of totalitarianism on a real life. While *Darkness at Noon* remains in print, one would be hard pressed to name any of Koestler's many other works. It is Orwell whose books are constantly reprinted and whose name has become a byword for the political destruction of individual freedom and thought.

Some of Rebecca West's novels continue in print, but, like Orwell, West remains best known for her political writing, with a number of considerable literary achievements to her credit, including her prescient 1941 study of the Balkans, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. This work, like Orwell's *Nineteen Eight-Four* and *Animal Farm*, had a large aim: to be "her means of preserving democracy," as Susan Hertog has written in her biography of West, in the face of "the poison of fascism." While Warner also wrote from firsthand experience about Spain during the Civil War (seven articles appear in the 2012 essay collection *With the Hunted*), her political writing is not characterized by the intellectual ferocity of the work of West and Orwell.

Continuing interest in West, however, not only for the work but also for the life, has been favored by the rise of feminist and gender studies. West had a ten-year liaison with H. G. Wells, beginning in 1913, which led to a period of social isolation, just as she was taking her place as a major literary figure: she had a child out of wedlock, a circumstance she spent the rest of her life trying to keep from becoming public. The feminist focus is especially

relevant in the case of another contemporary, Virginia Woolf, whose posthumous reputation has been coincident with the rise of feminist literary theory and women's studies. *A Room of One's Own*, practically a founding document of those fields, has also boosted attention to Woolf's novels: from her earliest (*The Voyage Out*, 1915) to the last (*Between the Acts*, 1941), all are in print and are constantly reprinted, with much of the demand the result of classroom adoption.

If there be a feminist literary canon, however, Warner's novel *Lolly Willowes* would certainly qualify. The story concerns Laura Willowes, a middle-aged spinster in Georgian England, competent at needlework and in her role as live-in aunt. A persistent inner voice, however, leads her to escape the expectations of her family and the surrounding society by taking up residence in a country village, where she enjoys solitary walks. On one such walk, seeking to avoid the importunities of her visiting nephew, she enters into a pact with the devil and, in short order, becomes a witch. At the appearance of *Lolly Willowes* in 1926, Warner had already published two books of poetry. As a writer, she could be said to be "on her way."

It was also in the early 1920s that Woolf got her literary footing with two experimental novels: *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). The initial print runs for Woolf's two novels were modest: respectively, 1,200 and 2,000 (English edition) and 1,500 and 2,100 (American edition). It was only with the appearance of *To the Lighthouse* in 1927 — one year after the Book of the Month Club chose *Lolly Willowes* for its inaugural selection — that Woolf's reputation began to take off in the English-speaking literary world. Warner did not lag behind. In the same year as *To the Lighthouse*, her novel *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* appeared, followed in 1929 by *The True Heart*.

Among the factors that account for their different positions in the literary firmament, Woolf's inherited advantages should not be given too much weight. It is true that, despite her complaints about female disadvantage, the daughter of the Victorian man-of-letters Leslie Stephen doubtless had privileged access to publication, thereby allowing her to impose her distinctive voice on the literary public, producing over three hundred reviews between 1904 (the first appearing in *The Guardian*) and 1941 (the last in

*The New Statesman*). This in no way underrates Woolf's brilliance: her sister Vanessa Bell, although a painter of some merit, exemplifies the limits of inheritance.

I would also not put too much weight on the advantage of having not only one's own room, but also one's own publishing company, the Hogarth Press, which, after the first two novels, published all Woolf's writings. Its effect in cultivating Woolf's reputation is a large topic. Alongside the numerous reviews that Woolf wrote, their republication by Hogarth in revised and edited volumes certainly played a role in securing her reputation. Two were published in her lifetime: *The Common Reader I* (1925) and *The Common Reader II* (1932). Nevertheless, in the same years, Warner's own short stories began to be republished: *Some World Far from Ours* (1929) and *A Moral Ending and Other Stories* (1931).

But the Hogarth was not simply Woolf's publishing company. It was a joint partnership with her husband, Leonard Woolf, and this leads to a consideration of what I believe to be the essential factor in creating a writer's staying power – namely, the continued nurturing of an author's legacy. Here we can see a major contrast between Virginia Woolf and George Orwell on the one hand and Sylvia Townsend Warner on the other. Whatever his status among his contemporaries, Orwell has been fortunate in his editors, who faithfully shepherded publication of his works after his death and thereby allowed his reputation to rise above the hot button issues of his own time. One can't help thinking that some writers have outlived their reputation because no one remains to tend the flame.

First among the flame tenders was Sonia Brownell, Orwell's widow, who with Ian Angus published the four-volume *Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters* in 1968, almost two decades after his death. Brownell was successful, as per Orwell's own wishes, in keeping biographers at bay until 1980 by obstructing indiscriminate pilfering in the archives. (Arthur Koestler suffers in this respect, as his wife committed suicide with him. Indeed, his work's afterlife is a cautionary tale: his immense archive in Scotland remains, with one exception, untapped by serious scholars, and this has resulted in at least one very tendentious biography and, several years ago, allegations of rape against the womanizing

Koestler.) Peter Davidson, a professor and bibliographer, has worked for almost two decades producing the twenty-volume complete works of Orwell, its supplement, *The Lost Orwell*, and several years ago *George Orwell: Diaries*. His one-volume *George Orwell: A Life in Letters* appeared in 2013.

Virginia Woolf was fortunate in this respect even before she became a feminist foremother. Posthumous volumes of essays published by Hogarth under Leonard Woolf's direction include *The Death of the Moth* (1942), *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947), *The Captain's Bed and Other Essays* (1950), and *Granite and Rainbow* (1958). Equally important, as with Orwell, have been posthumous publications that are the product of immense editorial labor. The first public access to Woolf's diaries was in 1953, with a heavily edited selection by Leonard Woolf that was restricted to her reflections on writing. Five volumes of diaries, published between 1977 and 1984, were edited by Anne Oliver Bell, wife of Woolf's nephew Quentin. Six volumes of letters, appearing between 1975 and 1980, were edited by Nigel Nicolson, son of Woolf's friend Vita Sackville-West, in collaboration with the American writer Joanne Trautmann.

Warner has not been so fortunate. It was only in 1962, when she was almost seventy, that she asked William Maxwell to be her literary executor. Her failure to consider her literary remains earlier, she wrote, was "partly from inattention," and she quickly reassured him that not "much execution would be involved." Warner was thinking of posterity when she archived her correspondence with Valentine Ackland, but no true scholarly apparatus exists concerning her works. *Lolly Willowes* has in recent years penetrated U.S. classrooms, but the lack of a scholarly edition makes it difficult to place the novel in its historical context. Not even the acclaimed Twayne's Authors Series, which includes titles on nearly nine hundred writers, has a volume on Warner.

Warner's insouciance about her literary legacy stands in strong contrast to Woolf, who seems, from earlier on, to have been aware of and, indeed, cultivated hers. The opening of her essay on the seventeenth-century poet John Donne, which appeared in 1932 in *Common Reader II*, underlines this awareness: "When we think how many millions of words have been written and printed in

England in the past three hundred years, and how the vast majority have died out without leaving any trace, it is tempting to wonder what quality the words of Donne possess that we should still hear them distinctly today.”

One can't help feeling that Woolf is thinking of herself, something that is especially evident in her essays on Jane Austen, a figure whose rise to classic status has been well documented. Warner also wrote at least two essays on Austen. A comparison of those essays with Woolf's allows a preliminary evaluation of a heretofore unexplored aspect of Warner's oeuvre. Such a comparison would not have been possible even a decade ago, but in 2012 Peter Tolhurst published the first collection of Warner's non-fiction writings, *With the Hunted: Selected Writings*.

In terms of numbers there is no comparison, of course: Woolf's 345 literary reviews, compared to the 75 in *With the Hunted*. We are fortunate, however, that this volume contains several literary subjects on which Woolf also wrote: Daniel Defoe, Gilbert White, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Katherine Mansfield, and Jane Austen. I sense (and I am not the only one to do so) that both writers “channeled” Austen, but the difference between the two again draws attention to Woolf's concern with the matter of an author's literary survival.

Warner's two pieces on Austen are a free-standing essay that appeared in *British Book News* in 1951 and the introduction to the Limited Editions Club edition of *Northanger Abbey* in 1971. Let me begin with the opening of the latter:

She [Jane Austen is meant here] grew on the sunny side of the wall – as it might be, one of those solid cob walls, white-washed and roofed with thatch, such as still enclose Hampshire kitchen-gardens. On such walls, in her day, Moor Park apricots, Bon Chretien and Jargonelle pears, Blue Perdrigon plums were trained and tended and brought forth their fruit in due season. The Rector of Steventon's daughter, growing on the sunny side of the rectory wall, produced in her early twenties *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Northanger Abbey*.

Contrast this richly detailed passage with Woolf's portrayal of Austen's surroundings in 1925 in *The Common Reader* (an essay that reworked her earlier reviews of Austen):

Humbly and gaily she collected the twigs and straws out of which the nest was to be made and placed them neatly together. The twigs and straws were a little dry and a little dusty in themselves. There was the big house and the little house; a tea party, a dinner party, and an occasional picnic; life was hedged in by valuable connections and adequate incomes; by muddy roads, wet feet, and a tendency on the part of the ladies to get tired; a little principle supported it, a little consequence, and the education commonly enjoyed by upper middle-class families living in the country.

“Humbly and gaily”? Perhaps, but not very evocative adverbs. And likewise the dry and dusty twigs and straws. Very abstract, these homely products, as is what Woolf calls Jane Austen’s “natural subject”: “the trivialities of day-to-day existence, of parties, picnics, and country dances.” It is Warner, however, who can actually make this world come alive to the imagination. Take another instance, from the same essay by Warner, which opens with a quotation from the novel – Mrs. Allen recommending that Catherine Morland wear white to visit Miss Tilney: “Go by all means, my dear; only put on a white gown; Miss Tilney always wears white.” In writing “Miss Tilney always wears white,” says Warner, Austen presents us not with “the park or the stables, but the laundry-court of Northanger Abbey, the family wash-tubs and the laundry-maids.” The five words do more than that:

They illuminate Miss Tilney also. Not only is Miss Tilney so fortunately circumstanced that she can afford always to wear white, she does so from an inherent elegance of mind. At the lodgings in Milsom Street (for the conversation takes place in Bath) where Catherine will presently go to call on her, at the concerts and assemblies, Miss Tilney, unvexed by considerations of how the lawns and muslins will be washed and clear-starched and goffered, unassaulted by temptations to appear in pink, will always wear white. . . . The gist has been said. We know Miss Tilney.

Such a picture suggests that Warner was above all a clear-eyed observer of the surrounding English world and its inhabitants and conscious of English history. Can one say the same of Woolf, even

when she was writing of nature? Consider the following description of a park in bloom, the opening of “Kew Gardens,” from the 1919 story collection *Monday or Tuesday*:

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour.

If Woolf, in contrast to Warner, seems less interested in conveying naturalistic detail or representing the material world, she was acutely sensitive to Jane Austen’s staying power. Of the unfinished early novel *The Watsons*, Woolf writes (in *Common Reader I*): “Here, indeed, in this unfinished and in the main inferior story, are all the elements of Jane Austen’s greatness. It has the permanent quality of literature.” Woolf even considers what Austen did not write: “Let us take *Persuasion*, the last completed novel, and look by its light at the books she might have written had she lived.” And then she notes: “Had she lived a few more years only, all that [i.e., her obscurity] would have been altered. She would have stayed in London, dined out, lunched out, met famous people, made new friends, read, travelled, and carried back to the quiet country cottage a hoard of observations to feast upon at leisure.”

In fairness to Woolf, she means here manners, in the sense of offering a larger society for Austen’s observations of human behavior. (It might also be pointed out that what Woolf describes in this essay as Austen’s subject matter – “the trivialities of day-to-day existence” – makes up the subject matter of Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*.) The comment about access to a larger society also suggests, however, the role that publicity plays in securing an author’s reputation in the modern era. In this connection, she and Leonard Woolf, via Hogarth Press, were part of an intensive and,

indeed international, self-aware literary culture. As publishers they introduced Rilke and other German poets to English readers and also made translations of Russian literature. Virginia seems to have been rather programmatic. According to Nicola Luckhurst, writing of Woolf's literary reception in Europe, Woolf visited France in 1927 and was interviewed by the painter and writer Jacques Émile Blanche for *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*. The central section of *To the Lighthouse* appeared in a French translation before publication of the completed novel in English. Again, according to Luckhurst, the French reading public apparently saw in Woolf "the English Proust." (The French publishers, however, were uninterested in the feminist writing, finding it "untranslatable in cultural terms.")

In contrast, while Warner was as "lettered" as Woolf, indeed, associated with many of the same people, her rich imagination was not nourished by dining out, luncheoning in London, and meeting famous people. Her inspiration seems to have drawn from a limited English world – but how richly rendered in her works – somewhat in the manner of Jane Austen. A diary entry of 5 May 1928, for instance, notes that she had been writing about the character of Sukey in her novel *The True Heart*: "In the evening I walked through a long after sunset to the Machens. Every house I passed was a story, and in the streets near the canal there was a smell of water and a sound of trees. Shall I ever be able to write in London?" And after mentioning, on 26 June 1929, the departure of her lover Percy Buck for South Africa, she writes, "How sorry I am for people who must leave England."

The difference in the literary durability of Woolf and Warner reveals a lot about how an author's works, in a market-driven age, become "classics." As Mark van Doren is supposed to have said: "A classic is any book that stays in print." By being accessible in reader-friendly editions, a work constantly generates what Italo Calvino (in *Why Read the Classics?*) called "a pulviscular cloud of critical discourse around it." It hardly needs pointing out that Woolf's oeuvre has created such a discourse, which itself continues, as Calvino writes, to "shake off particles." Those definitions do not address the issue of literary "quality." Nor does Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's formulation, which Woolf's work would

certainly exemplify: “The idea of a classic implies something that has continuance and consistence, and which produces unity and tradition, fashions and transmits itself, and endures.”

Indeed, Woolf’s case illustrates that, no matter how excellent the writing or the power of ideas expressed in a literary work, it cannot stand simply on its own. We have to know how to situate a writer, know where she comes from. (Obviously, a prerequisite is a reading community that cares about such things, perhaps “the common reader,” in Woolf’s sense.) In this connection, it has been noted that Austen’s literary survival was not a given at her death. Austen’s excellence is so obvious to modern readers that it is hard to credit Mrs. Oliphant’s opinion, in 1870, that “it is scarcely to be expected that books so calm and cold and keen, and making so little claim upon their sympathy [i.e., that of the general public], would ever be popular.” As Warner’s biographer Claire Harman tells the story in *Jane’s Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World*, Austen moved only slowly from being a “niche” author – somewhat in the manner of Warner – to being a “canonical” one. It was Virginia Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, who wrote the first account of Austen’s life and career, a “brief and brisk” one, for the *Dictionary of National Biography* in 1885. Woolf, in an unsigned review in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1913, noted the gathering reputation of Austen: “Unlike other great writers in almost every way, she is unlike them, too, in the very slow and very steady rise of her reputation.” And then in 1923 came Robert William Chapman’s Clarendon edition of Austen’s novels, which, according to Harman, were “the first complete scholarly edition of any English novelist, employing techniques transposed wholesale from the editing of Greek and Latin texts.” Virginia Woolf was present, one might say, at the birth of Austen’s canonicity, and her own present canonical status has been established by such scholarly methods.

A phrase Woolf employs in connection with Austen’s *The Watsons* underlines the importance of scholarly documentation. While acknowledging “the stiffness and the bareness of the first chapters,” Woolf writes that “the dull history of fourteen years of family life [described in that novel] would have been converted into another of those exquisite and apparently effortless introductions; and we should never have guessed what pages of prelimi-

nary drudgery Jane Austen forced her pen to go through.” Preliminary drudgery, indeed. But we do have evidence of such drudgery in Austen’s earliest writing attempts: the so-called *Juvenilia* are extant – and have been diligently edited. So, too, with the young Virginia Woolf’s diaries (from 1897, when she was fifteen), but it seems like happenstance that Warner started a diary at the age of thirty-three, after the gift of a notebook from her friend David Garnett. She was then in the midst of her third novel, *The True Heart*.

Tolhurst’s edition of a portion of Warner’s nonfiction writings was certainly a work of scholarly labor. If long-lasting interest in Warner is to be secured, it will only be through such editions: if not of the drafts of writings, which may not be extant, but certainly a full publication of the diaries and letters, with extensive editorial introduction and notes. Perhaps then, as with Austen, will the ball start rolling and the sheer pleasure of Warner’s writings become evident.