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# Gender, genre and politics in the literary work of Sylvia Townsend Warner

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## CHAPTER 4

### Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral 1925 – 1934

Mary Jacobs

What did 'the pastoral' mean to Sylvia Townsend Warner? Between 1925 and 1934 she published three books of poems: *The Espalier* (1925), *Time Importuned* (1928) and *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, the last jointly written and published with Valentine Ackland (1934); three novels: *Lolly Willowes* (1926), *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (1927) and *The True Heart* (1929); a single-volume extended narrative poem, *Opus 7* (1931), and various small-press collections of short stories, grouped together as *The Salutation* in 1932. Although remarkably various in content, style and setting, her writing in this period, whether set in the Chilterns, the Essex marshes, a Dorset valley, Polynesia or South America, shares a preoccupation with the lie of the land and the representation of its common people interacting with - or acted upon by - their masters and 'betters'. These are matters that have found expression in the pastoral mode for more than two millennia; Warner gives them a uniquely wry, graceful and subversive consideration. She looks back to the examples of Crabbe, Clare and Hardy, but also forward, formulating an approach in which class and gender aspects are subtly interrogated by means of stylistic and narrative experiment.

In this essay I shall use the literary paradigm of the pastoral to examine the emerging politics and changing aesthetics of Warner's engagement with 'the country'. In 1935 she and her partner Valentine Ackland joined the Communist

Party of Great Britain, but unlike many others on the Left they did not base their political activity in the city. Rather, they worked to form a 'Dorset Popular Front', active in the Dorset Peace Council, lending the Hammonds' *Village Labourer* and Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* to their neighbours. By 1939 Warner saw moving to and living in the countryside as the essential step in her radicalisation<sup>1</sup>. However, her connection to the pastoral is by no means straightforward. I shall examine how her relationship with a literary form claimed as both conservative and radical, artificial and simple, serves to clarify her status as a writer variously identified as 'Georgian' and 'Modernist'.

During the inter-war period the countryside was the subject of huge ideological investment. Stanley Baldwin's assertion, 'To me, England is the country, and the country is England'<sup>2</sup>, is part of a conservative nostalgic discourse which evokes an idealised pre-war English countryside as it justifies and romanticises post-war Empire and 'Dominion'. Rural writing was perceived to have 'a crucial role in keeping metropolitan, imperial Britain in touch with her roots'<sup>3</sup>, testified in the popularity of Mary Webb's novels and the pastoral lyrics of the Georgian poets. Jan Marsh<sup>4</sup> has demonstrated how a middle-class love of the countryside and a fascination with rural 'lore', folk culture and peasant mentors had developed in Edwardian England. Building on the rhetoric of late-Victorian Christian Socialism and the thought of William Morris, this idealisation of both land and folk was a response to a decline in religious observance and to growth in the cities as agricultural labour was recruited into the factories. Ruralism between the wars drew on this inheritance, but added to it a nostalgia for an idealised, *pre-war*, paradisaical English countryside. 'The country' was thus imbued with patriotism, spirituality and authenticity, attributes sharing a conservative sense of the importance of origins, continuity and tradition. However, a different inflection of the pastoral is evident in the romanticised espousal of vagabondage and the cult of 'the open road', where 'something that the ancients thought divine can be found, and felt there still'<sup>5</sup>. This exemplifies a

strand of ruralism that implies resistance to the efficiencies of modernity: the familiar atavistic relish for the ancient, seen as synonymous with the divine, is here accompanied by a refusal to be confined. This nomadic and playful nuance of ruralism needs to be set alongside the sense of an ordered and productive landscape described above, as an additional aspect of the pastoral. For inter-war writers then, including Mary Webb, the Georgian poets and Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'the country' could suggest positive ascriptions for the fleeting and the feral along with the more familiar comforts of a rural community celebrating harvest home in the Shropshire cornfields.

However, that Victorian flight of labour to the city was the subject of a satirical note in J.B. Priestley's 1934 *English Journey*: 'You do not hurry out of Arcadia to work in a factory twelve hours a day for about eighteenpence'<sup>6</sup>. Priestley's implied critique of living conditions within the countryside that had been invoked as 'the real England' was shared by others. Warner's friend J.W. Robertson-Scott offered a searing account of contemporary rural poverty in *England's Green and Pleasant Land: the Truth Attempted*. Using the documentary approach later employed by Valentine Ackland in her 1936 *Country Conditions* - for which Warner worked out the statistics concerning the Milk Marketing Board - he notes the irony by which the hamlet, 'hovel-housed ... physically, mentally and morally impoverished', has nonetheless been ready to send its 'lads' to death in the Great War. Educated intervention among 'these submerged neighbours and brethren'<sup>7</sup> is, he decides, the moral imperative. Priestley and Robertson-Scott remind us of the other side of the pastoral idyll, as does Warner in her conclusion that 'the English pastoral was a grim and melancholy thing'<sup>8</sup>. In doing so they are, paradoxically, remaining constant to a longstanding aspect of the pastoral mode, its tension between mythical and naturalistic elements.

Critical accounts of the pastoral have wrestled with the form's difficulty of definition and with the ideological implications of its various manifestations from

Hesiod writing in the eighth century B.C. to the present-day eco-feminism of Ursula Le Guin (an enthusiast for Sylvia Townsend Warner, incidentally<sup>9</sup>). To trace Warner's use of the pastoral and her development of a style which I shall characterise as 'fantastic ruralism', I will use four features of the pastoral mode - the Golden Age and its implied return in the Georgic; the 'beautiful relation' between rich and poor; the pastoral turn; and the celebration of the 'humble thing' - to discuss the politics and aesthetics of their varying manifestations in Warner's writing between 1925 and 1934.

In the Golden Age, first known to western classical tradition through Hesiod, men lived like gods, ('without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief ... the fruitful earth unforced bore them fruit abundantly and without stint'), in contrast to a present 'when men never rest from labour and sorrow'<sup>10</sup>. 'The Golden Age is portrayed normally as a series of negations of the world produced by history ... shadowing the real world as an undisposible "other", the world of desire'<sup>11</sup>. However, this vision, later identified with Arcadia, has the potential to return, as described in the rapturous prophecy of Virgil's *Eclogue IV*, 'The Golden Age Returns', with radical implications, both aesthetically and politically. The pastoral's conflation of place (Arcadia) and time (the Golden Age) and its derivation from a classical notion of history as cyclic, offer hope as well as nostalgia: 'the notion of making time pause, even stop, or circle back to the beginning (stretching duration, in other words) is basic to the pastoral instinct for enclosure'<sup>12</sup>. The pastoral mode's experiments with duration and sequence have engendered some astonishing literary effects, including the reversal, cancellation or writing out of time itself. Such challenging narrative experiment is an enduring characteristic of Warner's aesthetic, most often associated with the landscape. Politically, the Golden Age becomes a radical exemplar: Warner's use of this aspect of the pastoral between the wars incorporates aspects of Virgil's later work, the *Georgics*. The *Georgics* contain practical advice on vine-pruning and bee-keeping; Nature is regarded in terms of necessary labour rather than harmonious

idleness, and this is not a matter for post-lapsarian regret but for some celebration. The vision is that of an organic community characterised by free labour, an image later valued by the English Radical tradition and to which Warner alludes in her account of the political education that the countryside gave her.

The concept of the 'beautiful relation' comes from William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*. His discussion of the pastoral - 'a puzzling form which looks proletarian but isn't' - emphasises the political from the outset, differentiating between fairy stories and ballads produced *by* and *for* the people but mostly not *about* them, and the pastoral which though *about* is not *by* or *for* them. He notes the pastoral's interaction between courtiers and shepherds as seeming to imply 'a beautiful relation between rich and poor'<sup>13</sup>. Whereas Empson identifies its conservative potential, the idea is echoed more sympathetically in Robertson-Scott's recommendations for working as a Tolstoyan missionary in the depressed hamlet, which Warner applauded, although she treated it ironically in her account of another missionary, Mr Timothy Fortune.

The pastoral turn is exemplified in the form's constitutionally interrogative nature, founded as it is on oppositional ironies. From the beginning, Arcadia has been 'other'. For some, the pastoral encourages a political analysis which should lead to change; for others, it underwrites the status quo by encouraging us to feel 'that we ought to accept the injustice of society as we do the inevitability of death'<sup>14</sup>. Whatever our conclusion, it is the pastoral turn that has prompted it: the representation of a simple and sequestered life is contrasted with an implied complex urban world; or the evocation of a rich and free past offers a counterpoint to a straitened and oppressed present. In addition to the pastoral's fruitful opposition with an unpastoral world, the form itself has its own 'other side of the landscape' in the anti-pastoral, in which the idyll of the literary convention is juxtaposed with the bitter reality of life on the land. Warner's description of the genesis of her 1931 *Opus 7* acknowledges her debt to that aspect of the pastoral turn: 'It was towards the end of this decade that I bethought me that it was about

time to try to do for this date what Crabbe had done for his: write a truthful pastoral in the jog-trot English couplet'<sup>15</sup>. Writing a 'truthful pastoral' could mean letting the poor speak out about their troubles, but the representation in writing of those who do not write has always been problematic, as Empson's consideration of 'the humble thing' reveals.

For Empson, pastoral protagonists do not have to be shepherds or even farmers. *Some Versions of Pastoral* also considers childhood as a pastoral space and goes further in widening the potential pastoral category to an identification of pastoral as 'the humble thing, with mystical respect for poor men, fools and children', citing the old saying that 'the fool sees true' as having 'a touch of the pastoral'<sup>16</sup>. These concepts recall the world of Warner's 1929 *The True Heart*, whose chief protagonists are a poor girl and a holy fool in a Georgic setting. That novel tellingly links the positioning of those 'humble' people, othered by the powerful as primitive types, to the parallel assumptions and contradictions of the imperialist project. The discourses of cultural primitivism in the twentieth century include both derogation of the primitive as unregenerate beast and idealisation as pre-lapsarian man, 'such as live after the manner of the Golden Age', antithetical categories which Warner explores in her treatment of 'the humble thing'.

However, as we have noted, when Warner began to write poetry and fiction in the 1920s, 'the country' despite being the site of poverty, depopulation and exploitation was simultaneously being celebrated as the apotheosis of patriotism, spirituality and authenticity. As already suggested, the pastoral has been claimed by both radical and conservative traditions; while having the power to reassure or at least to promote an acceptance of 'inevitability', the pastoral turn has been equally able to facilitate social criticism as far back as Virgil's *Eclogue I*, 'The Dispossessed'. However, the question of whether or not the *representation* of radical rural content can be equally iconoclastic is more problematic, though particularly interesting in Warner's case in terms of her

development of 'fantastic ruralism' from elements of the pastoral form and the popular rural writing of the period, to which I will now turn.

Commenting on the popularity of 'rural writing' between the wars, Anthea Trodd contrasts the appropriation of such material by Tory forces with the more subversive views of some women writers themselves. Whereas Stanley Baldwin's famous preface to Mary Webb's 1929 *Precious Bane* emphasised the nation's continuity with its rural past and Woman's special relationship with Nature, Webb herself stressed the tragically 'lost-and-forgotten lives' of working rural women, and the countryside as a 'secret treasurable resource for working people'<sup>17</sup>. Today, Webb is probably best known of the inter-war ruralist writers, partly through her satirical commentator Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm*. Equally a target for Gibbons' satire was T. F. Powys, of great importance for Warner's writing in this period. Although located in the Dorset countryside to which he introduced Warner, his novels lack the biting satire of inter-war rural conditions that Warner brings to bear in *Opus 7*. Rather, Powys' largely malicious peasants grapple within a dark cosmogony, devoid of historical or social analysis. Despite their differences, the rural setting is vital to Webb, Powys, Gibbons and Warner for what are seen as its elemental qualities and their inter-relationship with the religious impulse. The relationship between the land and the people is depicted with varying emphases on sacred and social factors, revealing a range of ideological positions.

The shifts within Warner's fusing of the land with a sense of the numinous and the fleeting relationship of that sense to Christianity in this early period are evident in 'Peeping Tom' from *The Espalier*<sup>18</sup>; the paean to Spring and the contrapuntal reproach to Nature in *Opus 7*<sup>19</sup>; and the invocation of an earth-goddess in the Grannie Moxon poem 'Wintry is this April' from *Whether a Dove or Seagull*<sup>20</sup>. Each demonstrates aspects of the elements contributing to Warner's adaptation of the pastoral and rural writing into fantastic ruralism.



'Peeping Tom', dedicated to Powys and developed from a Holy Fool character in his 1923 novella *The Left Leg*, initially shows a politicised response to rural poverty: landless Tom longs, like John Clare, for a half-acre 'To be my land/And mine alone'. Granted his wish, Tom struggles fruitlessly against the elements until he receives a vision: 'Nature, hidden under her dark veils of Time and Space and Causation' invites him to learn her secret. The secret revealed by the spirit of place in *Lolly Willows* is Laura's vocation as a witch, a wise woman with a fund of folk knowledge; in the Powysian 'Peeping Tom', it is the land's beauty rather than its usefulness. Tom's efforts at 'resolution and independence' are abandoned as he becomes a contemplative nature mystic. The poem ends with its narrator visiting Tom's patch but failing to recognise him in 'one old man/Scarcely more human' than the gulls, who stares intently at a weed, 'and then/Throwing it down,/Limped on again'. This final haunting image is an early example of a trope in Warner's work of the enduring poor man, a type who persists across time and space, representing the common folk. The idea, not unrelated to primitivist assumptions about those who live outside time and history, and current in those aspects of popular rural writing that are satirised by Stella Gibbons, owes something more to the romantic socialism of Edward Thomas' 'Lob'. In Thomas' poem rural knowledge, craft and regional specificities are stressed; the tramp who helps Sukey in *The True Heart* is more Lob-like than Peeping Tom, having a history which demonstrates the roots of poverty in specific social circumstances. 'Lob' ends with an image remarkably similar to the close of 'Peeping Tom': the narrator sees 'one glimpse of his back' as the enduring man continues on his wandering way. Whereas Thomas' rural-romantic socialism is evident in Lob's claim for rambler's rights to the common ground – 'Nobody can't stop 'ee. It's/A footpath, right enough' – the politics of Warner's poem move away from protest at rural dispossession to nature mysticism. But it is the disquieting final image of poverty and discontent that lingers. 'Nature' in 'Peeping Tom' is feminised, remote and beautifully useless, but not the subject of

reproach for these non-Georgic qualities. Rather, this representation of Nature illustrates that resistant aspect of early twentieth-century ruralism noted earlier, its distaste for the social utility of the modernising project: 'the cult of nature celebrated forms of redundancy, eccentricity and sheer uselessness'<sup>21</sup>. The impulse is attractive to a range of political positions; in Warner's case, even as early as 'Peeping Tom', she demonstrates unease with the aestheticising of rural poverty, leaving her reader troubled, gazing after the limping, ragged man.

In *Opus 7* the rapturous and elegiac paean to Spring (ll. 403 – 459) is immediately succeeded by an antithetical account of 'Nature' (ll. 460 – 495). Such juxtaposition is typical of the approach of this extended narrative poem which establishes a technique of jarring but productive disorientation from its first few lines. Warner contrasts a specific post-war historical setting with an archaic vocabulary which is further out of kilter both with its formal debt to Clare and Crabbe and additionally in its references to phenomena specific to the time of its composition (1929-30). The paean to Spring, 'most dear,/most dolorous virgin-mother of the year' is a rare passage of autobiographical first-person narration in which the poet reflects on Spring as a symbol for renaissance in both art and life. She refers to its signs in America where she'd been a guest critic on the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1929 – 'myself watching a redskin river flow/eastward to the Atlantic' – and, in a Metaphysical trope, employs it as a self-referential image of artistic renewal followed by necessary disillusion. The account of Nature which then follows juxtaposes town and country in traditional pastoral/anti-pastoral style: whereas a glimpse of her 'green kerchief' delights her devotees in town, in the country the goddess 'a more real tribute entertains', as Warner describes the struggles of shepherds, hoers and smallholders against the whims of Nature, now figured as a fickle 'immortal doxy'. Dependent on her caprice is the impoverished Rebecca Random who determinedly grows flowers to buy gin, becoming a 'sorceress', 'priestess' and 'mystic' in her drinking rites. In *Opus 7* then, Warner combines political analysis of inter-war rural poverty with attitudes to nature

varying from the mystical to the satirical, but significantly couples these with a Modernist self-conscious commentary on artistic production and with elaboration of the concept of the rural witch-woman's struggle for independence, self-expression and social power.

'Wintry is this April', about 'Grannie' Moxon, a villager in East Chaldon, emphasises the difficulty and duration of her labour and invests her with a trans-historical significance as 'Gardener long-lineaged'. This not only twins her as 'wise woman' with the trope of the 'enduring man' already mentioned, but also scandalously incorporates a particular old Dorset woman into the Judaeo-Christian mythology of Eden. Grannie is thus simultaneously symbolic and affectionately particularised. Having used Christian references transgressively – 'And with Christ aloft on cross and combed out our sin/Potatoes in' – the poem moves towards an ecstatic nature vision: 'Some brief and lovely phrase in a language unknown:/A chance-cast net as idly trawled over flesh/As the bright mesh/Of birdsong'. Warner figures this ecstasy in relation to the female body and the landscape. The poem concludes with an invocation to this vision, embodied as a pagan nature goddess, to beatify her poor servant, the implication being that the patriarch Jehovah won't. Mother-goddess and old working woman seem to merge as Grannie is celebrated, rewarded and transfigured in a mystical finale both theological and agricultural, which, valorising the maternal body, avoids the satire of *Opus 7* entirely: 'Not she, not she, but earth's very spirit/Rose to inherit/Light everlasting, the manifested coronal/Of long darkness, of long-ploughed patience/Long acquiescence/Of the nourishing breast, of the receiving lap'.

Investing nature, the land and its people with near-mystical significance in this way was characteristic of much 'stock' ruralism of the period, exemplified in Powys and Webb, satirised in Gibbons and used in both ways by Warner. In *The True Heart* there are elements which border on the primitivism of Webb but like Gibbons veer towards comedy (though Sukey, the 'true heart' herself, is usually distanced from such satirical treatment). 'The old man never speaks, and no more

don't his sons. Young Eric's a ninny. As for Zeph, he's Peculiar...'22 remarks Prue: we feel ourselves to be at Cold Comfort. However, the passage in which Sukey is required to kill a cockerel by 'sticking' it (the pig-killing episode from *Jude the Obscure* is evoked) is transformed from the conventionalised rural violence of Powys and parts of Webb into a far more subtle psychological exploration appropriately expressed in an unorthodox narration in which time is suspended. Sukey's long internal monologue 'I am like a ghost ... I am like a dream...' (p.68) explores her present disorientation and resentment at Eric's inability to uphold a stereotypical gender role, while presaging the birth of her new subjectivity and politicisation in the subsequent part of the novel. Here we have moved far from the decorum of the later Georgians' country matters: Modernist elements – the representation of a fractured consciousness – are linked to gender and class politics, emerging from a transformative inter-relationship with popular ruralism. Similarly Warner's remarkable and little-known novella of this period, 'Elinor Barley' (collected in *The Salutation* of 1932)<sup>23</sup>, enhances and complicates the spare dimensions of its folk-song starting-point, 'The Brisk Young Widow'. Extraordinarily subtle in its detailed study of abjection, surprisingly anticipative of aspects of feminist theory in its use of the mirror to explore the split self, Modernist in its self-conscious commentary on its own narrative which must end with its narrator's execution for her husband's murder, this text, while making use of pastoral and Georgic elements, transforms the standard properties of ruralism. Here is a ballad which deeply unsettles the decorous Georgian use of folk song and - *pace* Empson - is *about* the people. By means of its formal innovation as well as its gendered analysis it indicates the development of Warner's fantastic ruralism.

I shall now turn to Warner's use of the Golden Age as modified by the Georgic vision of the English Radical tradition. In the post-lapsarian world of Christian mythology, two possibilities inform the pastoral's depiction of the people on the land: a starveling peasant's pinched and oppressed existence under

feudalism, or a Georgic-inflected return to a modified Golden Age in an organic community characterised by free labour. This contrast has been of vital importance for the English Radical tradition to which Warner alludes, citing the Hammonds' *The Village Labourer*, *Piers Plowman*, Cobbett's *Rural Rides*, Crabbe, Clare, Bunyan, Burns and Robertson-Scott<sup>24</sup>. The social relations implied within the organic community, recalling Langland's 'fair field full of folk ... Of all manner of men', while harmonious, depend upon recognition by its leaders of their responsibilities; equally important is the celebration of what Empson called 'a pastoral feeling about the dignity of labour'. Such rural labour is configured as skilled craft (recalling William Morris' 1885 *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*) rather than embodying the repressive notion of work as necessary for the moral discipline of the poor. This vision (to use Langland's term) of social relations, labour and the land has been called 'Merry England', a term likely today to suggest a nostalgic conservatism. But this is rather the Merry England of Edward Thomas' 'The Manor Farm'. This poem which itself exemplifies the conflation of past time and pastoral place describes the awakening of a frozen farm landscape to the arrival of Spring in terms that suggest the potential for a corresponding social awakening to a revived Golden Age:

But 'twas not Winter –  
 Rather a season of bliss unchangeable  
 Awakened from farm and church where it had lain  
 Safe under tile and thatch for ages since  
 This England, Old already, was called Merry.<sup>25</sup>

How then are the Golden Age and its modified return in the Georgic vision represented in Warner's works from this period, and with what political and aesthetic implications? It is the *lack* of a Georgic vision that is delineated in the sharply particularised poverty of the village Love Green in *Opus 7*: Rebecca Random, while a priestess and witch woman like Laura Willows is, unlike her, grindingly poor; Love Green, unlike Great Mop, is pinchpenny and suspicious.

*Lolly Willowes*<sup>26</sup> contains elements of a Georgic vision in its references to brewing and farming, subtly coloured by the novel's gender politics and fantastic qualities. Although religion of a charitable kind generally supports the economy of any village represented in the Georgic mode, its foremother, magic, is singularly lacking. However, the vision which ends Lolly's constrained London life is a magical as well as a Georgic one: she imagines the 'lean wiry old woman' who grows fruit and flowers, 'as though she were a tree herself, growing out of the long grass, with arms stretched up like branches' (83). It is in the wild woods rather than the farmland that the spirit of the place and Satan reside; indeed when Titus' appearance in the village compromises Laura's vocation and 'the spirit of the place withdrew itself further from her', Great Mop threatens to become merely 'a pastoral landscape where an aunt walked with her nephew' (161). 'Pastoral' here then seems to stand against magic and 'the wild zone', signifying a settled landscape under masculine authority as Laura imagines Titus' possession of the land: 'He could walk in the greenest meadow and have dominion over it like a bull' (155). Nonetheless there are Georgic elements in the depictions of individuals engaged in rural work - Mr Saunter's poultry-keeping, Laura's knowledge of herbs - which tellingly is figured here as craft rather than labour. However, although the villagers are an organic community, Satan rather than a charitable priest of the Georgic tradition (Goldsmith's and Clare's 'good old vicar') is their spiritual exemplar; the text's fantastic elements serve to valorise an alternative world rather than a politically reformed one.

Warner's Georgic vision finds its most unambiguous expression in the idyllic conclusion of *The True Heart* when Sukey's fidelity and industry find their reward with the 'simple' Eric Seaborn in 'a country life ... a settled life' (287). Warner specifically acknowledges Virgil's *Georgics* in the bee-keeping which will become Eric's peaceful occupation, and the politics of the Georgic vision are suggested in Mr Warburton's meditation on bees' social organisation: 'For bees are in an especial manner dear to Jove, who in gratitude for that first sweetness

taught them a policy and ordered living by which above all beasts and even man they exemplify majestic law: Virgil says so...' (291). However, *The True Heart* closes with a sense of the limitations as well as the satisfactions of the Georgic life. Sukey, labouring to give birth to her daughter Joy, is visited with a sense of loss: the clarity of her 'maiden' self is departing as Mrs Lucy the midwife replaces the sphinx, '[w]ild, proud, mournful and steadfast ... inscrutably sisterly' (258) who has been her totem. The sphinx, along with much else in this novel, belongs to a symbolic economy which, like the shifting and liminal marsh landscape in which it is largely set, eludes containment by the fruitfulness and order of the Georgic vision. Those aspects of the text's representation of the rural imply a different politics in which gendered analysis and narrative experiment produce a fantastic ruralism at odds with a Georgic aesthetic.

Warner's investigation of the pastoral mode and its Georgic aspect was of course itself the product of how the form was understood and employed in the 1920s and early 1930s and therefore implicated in the politics of the 'beautiful relation': her investment in Robertson-Scott's model of educated intervention is evident in her account of visits to his 'Simple Life' community at Idbury. (It is less attractively shown in her patronising portrait in 'Love Green' of Jimmy, the 'enlightened man' of the village 'who enjoys as he said himself, "books of any nature, poetical, historical, historilolical, or Scriptural"' <sup>27</sup> and to whom she lends her copy of Lecky's *History of European Morals* (p.220). A comic primitivism seems to be at play here; the mocking treatment of the risible autodidact cannot be denied.) Just as the full title of Phillip Gibbs' 1935 *England Speaks*, published to celebrate George V's Silver Jubilee, ran: *Being Talks with Roadsweepers, Barbers, Statesmen, Lords and Ladies, Beggars, Farming Folk, Actors, Artists, Literary Gentlemen, Tramps, Down-and-outs, Miners, Steelworkers, Blacksmiths, The-Man-in-the-Street, Highbrows, Lowbrows and all manner of folk of humble and exalted rank. With a panorama of the English scene in this year of grace, 1935*<sup>28</sup>, so Warner's delineation of the 'workaday democracy' shared by women

and working class writers 'who have got into literature by the pantry window'<sup>29</sup> refers to their 'ease and appreciativeness in low company' and 'willing ear for the native tongue, for turns of phrase used by carpenters, gardeners, sailors, milliners, tinkers, old nurses, and that oldest nurse of all, ballad and folklore' (p. 272). The romantic socialism of such positions is ironically open to the old radical charge against the pastoral: that it proposes an unhistorical relationship between the ruling class and the workers on the land, obscuring the reality of socio-economic organisation. The semi-comic hyperbole of both Gibbs' and Warner's syntax employs the aesthetic of an underlying Bakhtinian carnivalesque, playfully subverting an urban cultural hegemony while simultaneously dependent on the 'beautiful relation' to underpin their ideological positions.

Treatment of the 'beautiful relation' in *The True Heart* is interestingly double-edged. On her quest to see Queen Victoria, Sukey arrives at dawn in Covent Garden Market where porters, costers and flower-women are already at work: 'Besides these workaday folk Sukey saw with bewilderment a quantity of gentry, all youthful, grand and gay, and dressed as though for a ball. In a proper gentry manner they did not appear to be doing anything except enjoy themselves ... seeming perfectly at home' (236). From this milieu, accompanied by an improbable blue dog, emerges Lord Constantine Melhuish whose sister, a Lady-in-Waiting, will providentially take Sukey to the Queen. Constantine approves Sukey's vision of a England united 'under the dome' of the matriarch; he praises her feral qualities in terms recalling the idealising primitivist aesthetic that links Woman and Nature: 'she is like ... any small feather the wind blows along the ground ... so intent on being a feather, so - ... Oh fairies, Ruskin, anything you like' (247). So far, so cosy then: this is the world in which Phillip Gibbs' 'folk of humble and exalted rank' would later mingle under a benevolent George V. It is also the point at which David Garnett lost faith with *The True Heart*: '[a]fter her arrival in London I don't like it at all ... you invite the reader to feel superior to your heroine ... she's only an aunt sally and a half-wit ... I see you playing with



hellfire the moment that dog arrives in Covent Garden'<sup>30</sup>. But Covent Garden's fantastical panorama is not the novel's only example of class relations and Sukey is no half-wit. Earlier in the novel, her supplication to the Lady Patroness Mrs Seaborn, whose 'idiot' son she loves and whose child she believes she is carrying, has been rewarded by a smashing blow across her mouth from that grand lady. Now, preparing to see the Queen, Sukey knows she cannot share the nature of her plan even with these benevolent aristocrats: she is well aware of the power of the class system and the patriarchal state to punish the poor: 'people could act their disapproval, could clash those iron gates in her face, bid those fixed bayonets level their steel glance at her, send a policeman to take her to prison, a warder to carry Eric to the madhouse ...they disapprove when a servant girl marries a gentleman ...' (250). The kindly Lady Emily, kitting her out for the interview with the Queen, pointedly provides Sukey with new *servant's* garments: 'trimmings were for the glorious, the guarded, the unbeseeking, who kissed the Queen's hand and went away to the ball. She was here upon a workaday errand ...'(259). The novel's Georgic plot resolution in fact depends upon the upper-classes *requiring* Sukey to marry Eric to preserve the family's respectability. Class and gender aspects of a politicised analysis thus intersect with the familiar oppositions of the pastoral impulse and are combined with a knowing use of fantasy.

Gender also tends to subvert those elements of the 'beautiful relation' that are present in *Lolly Willowses*. Laura's comfortable equality with her landlady Mrs Leak in *Great Mop* is interrupted by the arrival of her cousin Titus: 'in conjunction they became gentry' (185). It is Titus who discovers a superficial cultured 'rusticity' in the village which had passed Laura by entirely: 'He congratulated Laura upon having discovered so unspoilt an example of the village community' (159). In fact this 'community' bears the same relation to *Great Mop's* real secrets as the false Satan - 'an impostor, a charlatan, a dummy' - bears to the 'real Satan', the Loving Huntsman who may always be found in the wood

(207). The falsely bucolic 'village community' into which Titus is welcomed typifies the 'beautiful relation' and satirises a Simple Life drained of political engagement:

He passed from the bar-parlour of the Lamb and Flag to the rustic woodwork of the rector's lawn. He subscribed to the bowling-green fund, he joined the cricket club, he engaged himself to give readings at the Institute during the winter evenings. He was invited to become a bell-ringer, and to read the lessons. He burgeoned with projects for Co-operative Blue Beverens, morris-dancing and performing Coriolanus with the Ancient Foresters, getting Henry Wappenshaw to come down and paint a village sign, inviting Pandora Williams and her rebeck for the Barleights Flower Show (159).

Sukey knows how the power of policeman and asylum warder underlies the 'beautiful relation' that disguised the reality of class relations and eugenics; for Laura, patriarchy has the power to cancel out her economic and class privilege: 'Custom, public opinion, law, church and state – all would have ... sent her back to bondage' (220).

What can be set against such power seems and is humble: it is 'the humble thing', that subversive notion of the countryside as 'a secret treasurable resource for working people' whose politics and aesthetics help to constitute Warner's 'fantastic ruralism'. Consider Lolly, reborn as Laura Willowes in *Great Mop*: 'She was changed, and knew it. She was humbler, and more simple' (149). Empson's formulation of the pastoral as 'the humble thing, with mystical respect for poor men, fools and children'<sup>31</sup> does not refer to women, though he may have felt that they were embraced within his categories. But it is women in Warner's pastoral writings who are the principal guardians and practitioners of an arcane knowledge about a rural past living on secretly under the present. It has the power through folk magic, rather than Georgic religion, to transform the lives of the dispossessed. Warner's depiction of such power is not sentimental; its avatar Mrs Disbrowe, 'Godmother', is a pub landlady who knows 'The True Secret of

England's Greatness' and is revealed in *The True Heart* as the real Queen of England, rather than Victoria R.I. Warner links her to a specific use of the word 'good' which signals the persisting power of the old ways. 'Goody' was, like 'Grannie', an honorific title for an old country woman; in *The True Heart* the persistence of folk wisdom which will outlast modernity is invoked through objects associated with Mrs Disbrowe which are indeed 'the humble thing': 'having all about her, just as the linen-cupboard, the copper-kettle and the tea-caddy had, the air of being certain to last for a long time ... the air of being Good' (215). When Mrs Disbrowe describes herself as 'old-fashioned', the term signals religious power. 'Godmother ... don't hold with the clergy' (222); she exemplifies a folk magic that precedes and will outlast Anglicanism, an idea depicted without irony or sentiment in Sukey's dream-vision of her visit to London under Godmother's protection: 'Mrs Disbrowe standing where she had left her, standing patient and superb as she had stood in the pasture. Around her the houses of London had dwindled so that they rose no higher than her knees and grass was growing from the pavement' (220—21). Here the pastoral, manifest as fantastic ruralism, has overpowered town, church, monarchy, patriarchy and modernity itself.

Such subversive and demotic imaging of power nevertheless has roots in a primitivist discourse which locates the categories of 'Woman' and 'Nature', like 'natives', as outside time and history. The notion of a secret, unwritten lore can bear the same confining symbolic freight as 'prehistory' in figuring the relations between woman, folk and land. The valorisation of craft objects from a time preceding mass production may betray a conservative anxiety underlying a carnivalesque celebration of folk culture, and can be expressed as regulatory class relations. (Such an element is evident in 'Love Green' where the contemporary villagers' fondness for 'trumpery' from Woolworth's is regrettably contrasted with the objects appreciated by 'a previous generation ... something solid — a marble-topped washstand or a set of grand fire-irons' (224). Here, 'popular' is

urban and meretricious, while 'folk' is rural and 'good'.) The patriotic Tory potential within such a discourse of an ancient folk culture was harnessed in Stanley Baldwin's *On England* (contemporaneous with *Lolly Willowes*), leading to a nationalist analysis. Referring to 'that wood smoke that our ancestors, tens of thousands of years ago, must have caught on the air ... when they were still nomads', Baldwin explains that 'These things strike down into the very depths of our nature, and touch chords that go back to the beginning of time and the human race'.<sup>32</sup>

Warner's textual negotiations with folk culture, prehistory and magic generally avoid the conservative and patriotic implications of such ascriptions. As we have seen, the politics of her 'humble thing' are complicated by anti-clericalism and her radical treatment of gender and class; the aesthetics of its presentation are similarly enhanced by a Modernist awareness of myth and an engagement with ethnography, together with dazzlingly adroit narrative time-shifts. The presence of Polynesia in *Mr Fortune's Maggot* and classical paganism in *The True Heart* militate against appropriation of Warner's pastoral world by little-Englandism or by preoccupations with blood and soil. The narrative framework of *The True Heart*, while working with the properties of folk-tale, ballad and fairy story, derives from the classical myth of Eros and Psyche and, as we have seen, employs Virgilian references to promote a Georgic vision. Within the overall economy of the novel, classical and folk cultures are accorded equal value. In *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, the old wise woman Hina's Polynesian 'legends and fairy-tales' prove to be 'almost word for word the stories of the Old Testament' (152). The politics of this range of cultural references militate against the exclusions of 'othering': cultural phenomena are merely various rather than Other. But this is not to say that the ultimate effect is one of simple equanimity: aesthetically these features draw attention to the provisional and fabricated nature of their own narratives, unsettling any over-easy acceptance of the diegesis as an authorised version. Often they exemplify the feral and erotic 'wild zone', as when

Bacchus arrives in Rebecca Random's Love Green cottage with full retinue, including leopards: 'How soft his leopards pad your kitchen floor!-/and with their thick tails buffet you, and thresh/sharp waves of joy along your drowsy flesh'<sup>33</sup>. The margins of space and place are equally fertile sources for Warner's explorations of social constraints. For Lolly Willowes, 'the clue to the secret country of her mind' (135) has always seemed about to reveal itself within physically liminal contexts which rouse 'a kind of ungodly hallowedness': 'her mind walked by lonely sea-bords, in marshes and fens, or came at nightfall to the edge of a wood' (76, 77). Significantly, these 'edges' of the landscape typify those who, like the spinster, are 'of the margins': Lolly's restless London wanderings have taken her to the East End, to the lane beside the Bayswater Synagogue, and to the Jews' Burying Ground. Relocated to Great Mop, aware of the politics of her spinsterhood, Laura comes to equate her position with that of an African American slave (149, 163); her witch's familiar, the Devil's kitten Vinegar, is also a starveling on the edges, 'sent out too young into the world, like a slavey from an Institution' (171-72), an account that exactly describes her next heroine, Sukey Bond. In that novel too, apparently settled systems of social organisation and control will be called into question, just as the shifting and magical attributes of its marsh landscape both disorientate and delight Sukey: 'It was dream-like indeed that she should be washing clothes and baking bread where once the fishes swam ... small wonder that she felt astray from her proper self' (21).

Warner's transhistorical figures of the wise woman and the enduring man remain outsiders. Rather than becoming essentialist, or as Baldwin puts it, 'the things that make England', they are marginalised, deliberately equated, as we have seen, with those literally enslaved under Empire or with those who have been rendered 'like a slavey from an Institution', 'othered' by the constraints of hierarchical class or gender systems. They do not connect Warner's readers with their mythical prehistoric past so much as unsettle our relationship to the historical present. Warner's pastoral landscape is thus perpetually eroded by a sense of the

liminal: whether the boundaries depicted in her writing seek to confine marshland, narrative time, class or gender, they are continually shifting and being remade.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 'The Way by Which I Have Come', *The Countryman* July 1939 pp. 472 - 486
- <sup>2</sup> *On England*, 1926, in Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, *Writing Englishness 1900 – 1950* London: Routledge 1995, p.101
- <sup>3</sup> Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain 1900 -1945* London: Longman 1998, p.104
- <sup>4</sup> Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: the Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England 1880-1914* London: Quartet Books, 1988
- <sup>5</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Amateur Poacher*, 1879, quoted in Jan Marsh, (1988), p. 34.
- <sup>6</sup> Giles and Middleton 1995, p.105
- <sup>7</sup> J. W. Robertson-Scott, *England's Green and Pleasant Land: the Truth Attempted* , Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1925, pp. 157, 158
- <sup>8</sup> Warner 1939, p.478
- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, Ursula Le Guin, 'Brief Encounter: Recollections of Sylvia Townsend Warner' in *The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter* no. 9, Summer 2004
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted by Lerner in Brian Loughrey (ed.) *The Pastoral Mode*, London: Methuen, 1984, p. 145
- <sup>11</sup> Peter Weston, 'The Noble Primitive as Bourgeois Subject' in Loughrey 1984, p.173
- <sup>12</sup> Andrew V. Ettin, *Literature and the Pastoral*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1984, p.142
- <sup>13</sup> William Empson, (1935)*Some Versions of Pastoral*, London: Hogarth Press 1986, pp. 6, 11
- <sup>14</sup> Empson 1986, p. 4
- <sup>15</sup> Warner 1939, p.480
- <sup>16</sup> Empson 1986, pp.21, 10
- <sup>17</sup> Trodd 1998, p.108
- <sup>18</sup> Warner, *The Espalier*, New York: The Dial Press 1925, pp. 92 – 103

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- <sup>19</sup> Warner, *Opus 7* in *Collected Poems*, Manchester: Carcanet New Press Ltd., 1982, lines 403 – 495)
- <sup>20</sup> Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, London: Chatto and Windus 1934, pp. 20 – 26
- <sup>21</sup> William Greenslade, “Pan” and the Open Road: Critical Paganism in R.L.Stevenson, K.Grahame, E.Thomas and E.M.Forster’ in Lynne Hapgood and Nancy L.Paxton (eds.), *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel 1900 – 1930*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, p.145.
- <sup>22</sup> Warner, *The True Heart*, London: Virago 1978, p. 17
- <sup>23</sup> Warner, *The Salutation*, Horam, East Sussex: The Tartarus Press, 2000
- <sup>24</sup> Warner 1939 p. 478; and ‘Women as Writers’, 1959 lecture repr. in *Collected Poems*, pp.265 - 274.
- <sup>25</sup> Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, London: Faber & Faber 1974, p. 25
- <sup>26</sup> Warner, *Lolly Willowses* London: The Women’s Press Ltd., 1978
- <sup>27</sup> Warner, ‘Love Green’ in *The Nineteenth Century and After* August 1932 pp. 220 – 226
- <sup>28</sup> Phillip Gibbs in Giles and Middleton, p.33
- <sup>29</sup> Warner, ‘Women as Writers’, 1959 lecture reprinted in *Collected Poems* pp. 265 – 274
- <sup>30</sup> Richard Garnett (ed.) *Sylvia and David: the Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters* London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994, p.45
- <sup>31</sup> Empson 1986 p.21
- <sup>32</sup> Stanley Baldwin in Giles and Middleton 1995 pp. 101-102
- <sup>33</sup> Sylvia Townsend Warner, ‘Opus 7’ in *Collected Poems* (1982), p.217, ll.940 -943.