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## The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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### 'All across Europe it had come': The Black Death and Fascism in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Corner That Held Them*

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# 'All across Europe it had come': The Black Death and Fascism in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Corner That Held Them*

Adam Piette

## Abstract

Sylvia Townsend Warner's wartime novel *The Corner that Held Them* (1948), about a nunnery during the Black Death, reflects on female community and bonding in a period of male fascist violence. The novel explores the shift from pacifism to acceptance of the need for anti-fascist war which characterised Warner's intellectual beliefs from the 1930s into wartime, probing the arts of peace in compositional practice. Such a dialectic of war and peace is considered in relation to what Maud Ellmann has described as the outward turn to collective choral consciousness in mid-century modernism. This article explores both the staging of fascism as plague and the feminist daring and limits that Warner saw as operative in female witnessing and withstanding of Nazi ideology and menace. It closely reads key scenes from the panorama of a novel (notably Alianor's stillness as her husband is killed, Alicia's plans to withstand the economic impact of the Black Death and the cure of Ralph's plague symptoms) to register the satirical and allegorical substance of Warner's rescripting of Woolfian notions of resistance to warmongering misogyny by a society of outsiders.

The readings seek to consolidate a varied and multiple sense of the book as a Marxist historical novel that gives voice to the ruled. In doing so Warner analyses the Black Death as a moment in history that saw the emergence of early modern capitalism and labour relations out of the feudal system,

even as the religious framework that had structured medieval Europe gave way to more secular beliefs in autonomy, self-determination, citizen and collective dreams, projects and affects. At the same time the plague as a political trope, rooted in anti-fascist rhetoric that turns Nazi anti-Semitic uses of the Black Death motif on their head, triggers readings that bring those historical scenes into allegorical relation with the ways in which the Second World War was experienced by marginalised female communities.

**Keywords** Black Death; fascism; feminism; patriarchy; female community; Virginia Woolf; wartime; propaganda.

Written during the war and published in 1948 (a year after Albert Camus' *La Peste*), *The Corner That Held Them* is a historical fiction telling the story of Oby, a Benedictine convent in medieval Norfolk. It traces Oby's history from its founding in the twelfth century through its encounter with the Black Death that struck England in 1348 and the collapse of its spire to the convent's experience of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. The narrative moves through a variety of minds, patterning passages of free indirect style against a clipped and colourful commentary of great style and stamina. Its net effect is of a community thinking through and across its generations: reflecting upon its own stories – spiritual, emotional, psychosexual, economic and political – within the convent walls, and upon the turbulent and strange plotlines generated by its contacts with history and the peoples that surround and invade Oby, their comings and goings.

The novel's wit and lucid gaze are aimed at exploring the potential of a women's community existing under severe and fearful patriarchal conditions.<sup>1</sup> Employing all the candour and accuracy of a trained cultural historian (an expert in Tudor music, Warner was one of editors of the Clarendon Press editions of *Tudor Church Music*), it details the ways in which women followed the Rule of the Benedictine order, particularly regarding the humility that the order made its principal demand on novitiates, monks and nuns. Humility under the Rule of Law is the most constant focus of the novel's drift across history. We see the prioresses struggle to sustain the convent's spiritual and economic independence without sacrificing precious freedoms and vows, even as each character, in the *longue durée* diapason of the novel's sustained historical sense,<sup>2</sup> negotiates dreams of escape and transcendence against the grain of the daily materialities of living imprisoned within culture as patriarchally defined.

The novel also explores the features of conventual life more broadly, with meditations and satirical probing of poverty, chastity, obedience. Poverty is explored through the disastrous consequences of the Black Death on the convent's already perilous economy, dependent upon gifts, dowries, spiritualities, aristocratic patronage and on the religious labour obligations of the laity. Chastity is examined with great tenderness and satirical intimacy through the tales of fallen nuns such as Ursula, through the mysticism, visions and renunciations of the house, and through the benefits of escape from the bondage of class subjection and patriarchy. Obedience is humility's protocol. The novel asks what are the costs of such obedience to patriarchy, and in what ways does the internal economy of obligations within the female community enable collective defence against, even defiance of, patriarchal history, violence, scripting of desire and conduct, as it seems to enable escape from the bondage of class and feudal relations.

In 2015 Peter Swaab, the editor of *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, published a historical note Warner herself added 'after the conclusion of the novel itself, in the Viking Press American edition but not the Chatto & Windus British one';<sup>3</sup> he noted that it has not been reprinted in subsequent reprintings of the novel by Chatto & Windus or by Virago Press.<sup>4</sup> It is this note with which this article wishes to engage, since it foregrounds the importance of the Black Death as an economic catastrophe:

The Black Death – that epidemic of bubonic plague which sent the storytellers of Boccaccio's Decameron to lodge in the country, away from plague-stricken Florence – came into Europe along the trade route from Constantinople in 1347 and reached England in the late summer of 1348. It is estimated that in the next eighteen months it killed one-third of the English population ... The economic consequences of this catastrophe were intensified by the structure of society. A minority – court, nobles, the great clerics, scholars, friars, and outlaws – were so footloose that they can be classed as nomadic; but the base of that society was the manorial serf, who was tied to the place of his birth. For such, and for the monastic communities, there was no running away from infection. (9–10)

The note tracks the economic consequences of the depopulation caused by the mass death, with lords of the manor forced to hire their serfs:

The old cumbrous sleepy bargain of the manorial system, in which the serf was tied to his lord's land while reciprocally part of that

land was tied to the serf – the common field supplying his bread, the common grazing his meat and fuel – was replaced by the supplier but more cut-throat bargain of capital and labour. (10)

The next generation was to change all that as the population recovered, but with an entirely new form of agricultural economy – notably because of the transformation of much arable land to sheep-farming pastures which the Black Death had triggered. This was, Warner notes, accompanied by ‘wage-fixing and price-fixing’ and cruel indifference to the plight of the agricultural poor. The result was revolutionary feelings of anger at disparities of wealth and exposure of the Church’s hypocrisy, with the contradiction between its wealth and its supposed foundation in evangelical poverty. The period is thus a time of radical change, seeing the birth of what Warner understood to be the emergence of modern capitalism and labour relations out of the feudal system and the elaboration, for the first time, of a proto-socialist sense of the economics of class oppression. Even as this occurred, the religious framework that had structured medieval Europe gave way to more secular beliefs in autonomy, self-determination, citizen and collective dreams, projects and affects. With this evolution in mind, monastic life was governed, Warner remarks, by its finances: it is ‘a strictly capitalist story’.<sup>5</sup>

This Marxist reading of the Black Death as prelude to the Peasants’ Revolt does not entirely explain Warner’s zooming in on this period, however. A diary entry in June 1940 gives some potential background. She is wondering at the oddly low-key reaction to the Fall of Paris; she had heard an ‘onlooker’ on the radio urging hearers not to be ‘too over-awed’ by the event, as it is less important than ‘the steadfast courage of people in this country’ (104). Warner speculates that this is the courage ‘of incomprehension’, because ‘the direct military effect of war, just being killed or maimed, does not yet have any meaning for them; and other aspects, hunger, poverty, famine, slow ruin, are not shown them by propaganda’:

‘Look out for parachutists’, say the official spokesmen; and the bulk and blackness of the cloud *behind* the parachutists are – it is hoped – to pass unperceived by people looking out for parachutists. I suppose if a government were to stress the long-term effects of war no country would undertake a war. Actually, I think people here would be much more frightened if the Germans were the Black Death. Then the news – the Black Death is in Rouen, in the Channel

ports, has appeared in Paris, would set people to thinking: soon I may catch it, and die.

But also, I think, the giving of news by wireless, which is *non-geographical*, has tended to give the war-news something of the quality of news of a pestilence. It has made it, in a fashion, an atmospheric rather than a territorial phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

The Black Death is a useful analogy here because it gathers together the blackness of the ideology ‘behind’ the parachutists (not only its evil, but also the colour elected by Nazi Germany for the SS uniforms) and the species of invisibility encouraged by government propaganda, keen to control morale. The black cloud is a recessive background that adds focus to the parachutists, thereby diverting the eye from the real existential threat. It acts namelessly in the present moment, therefore does not trigger the response that is really needed: fear of its toxicity. The analogy also works because Nazi ideology is non-material in its mode of transmission as propaganda. Nazi fascism as a pestilential lethal atmosphere is radiophonic; radio propaganda and radio war news were its means of dissemination and production, through Goebbels’ Ministry for Propaganda. He made this clear himself in his 1933 speech to radio station representatives:

radio belongs to us and to no one else. And we will place the radio in the service of our ideology, and no other ideology will find expression here ... The Ministry for Propaganda has the task of effecting a spiritual mobilization in Germany ... I am placing a major responsibility in your hands, for you have in your possession the most modern instrument in existence for influencing the masses.<sup>7</sup>

Yet Warner, in drawing out the resemblances between pestilence and the enemy’s ideology, is also alluding to familiar communist propaganda which had long identified fascism as a plague. The communist resistance to the Nazis in Germany referred to their enemy as the ‘brown murder-plague’,<sup>8</sup> and it was common for communist and socialist journalists to record German fascism in similar terms. Daniel Guérin used the phrase ‘*peste brune*’ in articles written in 1932–3, for instance, to warn the French against the Nazi threat. The communist term deliberately directs the racist language of the Nazis (‘pest’ was used routinely to describe Marxism and the Jewish population) against the fascists themselves.

Warner may also have been influenced by Wilhelm Reich. As Jennifer Cooke argues in her *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*, Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) speaks about the 'fascist plague':

The masses of people who work and bear the burden of social existence on their shoulders neither are conscious of their social responsibility nor are they capable of assuming the responsibility for their own freedom. This is the result of the century-long suppression of rational thinking, the natural functions of love, and the scientific comprehension of living. Everything related to the emotional plague in social life can be traced back to this incapacity and lack of consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

In Cooke's terms, this 'passive and complacent acceptance of ... political irrationalism' is the chief symptom of the plague; such an acceptance is defined by Reich as submission to 'the plaguelike nature of the illusory gratification fostered by political irrationalism ... the emotional plague of politics'.<sup>10</sup> Reich uses the plague metaphor against the fascists specifically to subvert Nazi propaganda against the Jews.<sup>11</sup> And it is Hitler's use of the Black Death as a racist and anti-Semitic trope that most occasions Warner's act of subversion. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler writes: '[Judaism] was pestilence, spiritual pestilence, worse than the Black Death, with which the nation was being inoculated.'<sup>7</sup>

The use of the Black Death theme, then, is an anti-fascist gesture partly built on the quiet assumption of the analogy of the convent to wartime Britain. As Jenny Hartley argues, Oby as threatened community takes some of its meaning from the propaganda of the time which represented England as a 'beleaguered fortress ... simultaneously sanctuary and prison'.<sup>12</sup> However, this familiar compound of anti-fascist rhetoric is transformed, not only by the care and meticulous satirical focus of Warner's historical consciousness in *The Corner That Held Them*, but also by the extraordinary boldness of its feminist reading of fascism and the radiophonic Black Death of toxic ideology. Warner combines a Woolfian sense of the Nazi creed as ultra-patriarchal with a communitarian-comedic intimacy of understanding of the various difficult ways in which women collectively, in the fourteenth century even as in the Second World War, have had to struggle with internalised patriarchal states of mind and material being.<sup>13</sup>

The novel scopes out women's collectivity as a set of very varied, marginalised subject positions being worked at and through by what one



might call backwater war-communitarians: that is, provincially based and dissentient citizens with a belief (fostered by the radical changes brought on by the war) in the power of groups and communities to experiment with new forms of being and society. The novel's comic force lies in the scope and candour of its staging of the variety of ways in which such communities might live out such an experiment. Warner's writing is marked by tolerance of the contradictory ways in which the community lives out the experiment and the quiet attention it enables to unattested modes of defiance.<sup>14</sup>

The very founding of Oby is based on one such odd and unexpected form of defiance. Alianor de Retteville is caught lying naked with her lover by her husband and his men; after witnessing the butchery of her lover she just escapes being killed because of her immobility. Alianor lies still because, she thinks, 'what would be the point of moving? She could not save Giles and in a little while would be dead herself'.<sup>15</sup>

It was this immobility which now saved her life. Turning to the bedside Brian de Retteville supposed that now he would kill the woman too. But seeing her lie there, so calm, so arrogantly still, his anger was arrested by the horror a man feels at a woman's immodest individuality. (2)

Though beaten on the day, and then mocked till her death, she is worshipped by de Retteville after her death, though why this should be remains ambiguous in a way very specific to the novel:

What followed astonished everyone – perhaps even Brian himself, who had become the astonishment. Whether it was he dreaded Alianor's ghost, or whether in some dull crevice of his heart he still loved the woman who had once dishonoured and always despised him, or whether her death released him from the bondage of feeling and acting like a dolt, no one could say; but suddenly he was a different man. Alianor's funeral was a nine days' wonder. (4)

This passage is characteristic of the wry aporia entertained by the narrator, who sets her bounds by the amusing, often tenaciously misinformed, collective gossipy story-telling and prejudices of the Oby community. Taken from a different point of view, however, if we read this rather arbitrary set of random circumstances in a more abstract way, a pattern emerges that is crucial to the novel's dynamics and to its storytelling logic. Alianor's immobility is both a mimicry of the death she expects and

of the death-like insignificance and immobility patriarchal codes force upon women in medieval spaces – as well as being a simple frozen repetition of the posture assumed in a private moment of defiance of those codes.<sup>16</sup> For Alianor, the narrator wryly and seductively remarks,

stayed as she was, the braid of hair lying across her breast, her long arms and narrow hands spread out on either side as she had laid them for coolness, for the air, cooled with rain, to refresh her ribs and flanks. Even her seaweed-coloured eyes were motionless, attentively watching her lover's death. (2)

The motionlessness displays freaky indifference and astonishing coolness (note the repetition of 'coolness' and 'cooled') as though with a goddess-like calm, distant from the male violence – yet perhaps, who can know, relishing it nevertheless as spectacle from her still corner of the world. The unmoved gaze and the naked pose may be pure symptoms of the patriarchy that has held Alianor in its grip: she is, after all, as still as the death of the spirit wished upon her kind by men of power and violence. Yet her gaze and pose register a deeper and no less tranquil defiance as well as a relishing of the killing of man by man, arresting Brian de Retteville's murderousness, coded by him, through his doltish haze of a mind, as 'so calm, so arrogantly still', and as a display of 'a woman's immodest individuality' such that *he* is stilled; and, when her death does bring about Alianor's ultimate immobility, occasioning a desire to preserve that stillness for ever.

The convent is built and dedicated to St Leonard, saint of prisoners, and Alianor's tomb sculpted with her effigy in stone. Her salvational immobility becomes the model, a little allegory almost, for the seclusion and *stabilitas* of the nuns at Oby<sup>17</sup> – a complex immobility combining an internalised, self-stilled acceptance of the patriarchy as culture, threat and devotional code; a quirky defiance of that same patriarchy through a 'private' though frozen set of free desires; and a dreamy and distant spectatorial and unconscious relishing of death and war's violence as potential harm done to the masculinist figures running history.

That sequence, from the immobile female witnessing that is triple – a symptom and defiance of patriarchy and a secret relishing of the violence done to patriarchy – to its obliquely transformative effect on a wider culture, is repeated at key moments throughout the novel. I will mainly be looking at the early Black Death section, in particular the association of the pestilence with the intrusion into the convent of the fake

priest, Ralph Kello. The Black Death comes to Oby in 1349, a time when the prioress is erecting a spire to the convent to fulfil a vow made during the death of the previous prioress as she was choking on a plum-stone. The convent is in a corner of England and on the periphery of history; it signifies the ways in which women are existentially cornered into back-water consciousness, oblique to the forces of change and power. Yet that very marginality makes for good spectatorship. As the rather sarcastic narrator remarks, 'A good convent should have no history' (7); such retirement from the world, as prescribed by St Benedict in his Rule, may be good for men with their inexhaustible interest in themselves, but 'the shallower egoism of women demands some nourishment from the outer world, and preferably in the form of danger or disaster' (8). Such spectatorial relish in danger or disaster bears bitter fruit with the onset of the pestilence, however. And the narrator takes care to indicate some of the resemblances that Warner's diary had intuited between the Black Death and fascist ideology and threat.

In prioress Alicia de Foley's head, we register the Black Death as it strikes England and the environs of Oby. The pestilence stops the building of the spire dead and threatens even the prayers she had vowed to make for the previous prioress Isabella's soul: 'The pestilence might stop her mouth' (13). The plague also makes the economy of the convent very difficult indeed. Alicia lists the consequences: the convent has to stock food, goods and medicines 'as though to stand a siege'; cash flow needs to be ensured with tough measures 'for in times of calamity people will do nothing unless they are paid on the nail for it'; there will be more poor and needy 'troop[ing] to the wicket, crying out for food, for medicine, for old rags for their sores', bringing 'the pestilence to the very gate, and yet they could not be denied, Christ's poor and the plague's pursuivants'. And the convent will lose money too, as families come to take their novices away, 'having heard that the pestilence was already at Oby' (13).

The plague acts like a war, in other words. Yet it is also a lethal atmosphere and disease, spreading with animal swiftness and ferocity – an immediate, horrifically distorting force:

Though there had been pestilences often enough there had never been, they said, such a pestilence as this. It travelled faster than a horse, it swooped like a falcon, and those whom it seized on were so suddenly corrupted that the victims, still alive and howling in anguish, stank like the dead. The short dusky daylight and the miry

roads and the swollen rivers were no impediment to it, as to other travellers. All across Europe it had come, and now it would traverse England, and nothing could stop it, wherever there were men living it would seek them out, and turn back, as a wolf does, to snap at the man it had passed by. (13–14)

It is a European disease, causing anguish of the mind, an inward corruption, and its unstoppable speed is analagous to *Blitzkrieg*: as such it is diametrically opposed to the immobility of the nuns' vocations, but equally makes them victims who cannot move to avoid its infection. Warner is thinking here of the vulnerability of civilians to the German bombs and tank warfare; and also of the stoical and sullen paralysis of the English, encouraged to register but not understand the black death cloud of Nazi evil approaching, 'the bulk and blackness of the cloud *behind* the parachutists'. However, she is also considering the subject position of women during the Second World War: as witnesses to the male violence of Nazi war-mongering. The habit of secret relish at the deaths of men is hinted at in the nuns' awe at the speed and power of the pestilence, even as their habit of immobile witnessing gives them the capacity, collectively, to judge the pestilence as indeed unprecedented. To the nuns, nevertheless, the deaths witnessed strike them as issuing first and foremost from male violence:

There had never been such a press of men going to the ports to take ship for the wars in France; for it was better to die in battle than to die of the Black Death. But in the ports and in the crammed holds of the ships the Black Death found them and killed them before they could be killed by their fellow-men. (14)

The war analogy begins to associate the plague with a killing machine bigger than anything ever seen by the British. The plague is spiritual but materially so, the plague-spots designed to infiltrate into the body and soul whether you move or not:

People were fools, he said, to go in search of a death which would come in search of them. Better to stay under your own roof. Yet that was dismal, too, to sit waiting with your hands dangling between your knees, not daring to pull off your shirt or handle yourself for fear of seeing the tokens come out on your flesh: sometimes like spots, sometimes gatherings as big as plums, but always black because of the poisoned blood within. (14)

The poisoned blood is black as the Black Death and, if read allegorically as a wartime novel about the infiltration of the war fanaticism of the enemy into Britain, black as Nazi insignia. So the blood signifies a blackly depressive acceptance of fascism as a fatality, as a natural disaster, as death itself.

Some monasteries, Oby hears, have been invaded, and some have been left with only one monk. 'And that was the worst,' Alicia muses, 'that desolate figure on whom the brand of life was scored like an inversion of the brand of death' (16). She imagines being the last one left at Oby – 'If it were I, the prioress thought – if I were alive and alone under my unfinished spire...' (16) – while the nuns around her tell each other this pestilence is 'unlike any other, for it killed men rather than women' (16). Though in the very next paragraph we learn of the convent's first victims, Dame Emily and a novice, the nuns' superstition that the plague is a force of male violence with men as principal victims sticks, insofar as its toxicity has to do with the blackness of a lethal patriarchy. The nuns' very tranquillity and immobility renders them fitting and ironic victims of the Black Death's lethal effect:

Lying far from any city, cut off from the world by marshes and heathland, ... remembrance of Prioress Isabella lasted on and reconciled the nuns to leading a humdrum life, a life stagnant but limpid. So they had lived. So, now, they were dying. For the extravaganza of death that was sweeping their world away suggested no changes to them except the change from being alive to being dead. (32)

The plague stills its victims, and reveals women's true subjection to the death-like statuesque nothingness of patriarchy's scheme for women at the margins. The sixth sense running everything they feel about being forced to accept the conditions of patriarchy is that this pestilence's deeper aim is to materialise as death the subjection of women. The pestilence seeks to 'stop her mouth', Alicia understands, and yet the words we read in this long book are full of voice and making: the beautiful tapestry (*Opus Anglicanum*); the music (*Ars nova*); the spire designed and made by the convent; the poetry hosted by the convent, though all lost to oblivion.<sup>18</sup> Historical fiction, Warner had argued, gives voice to those under subjection: 'It is the ruled who speak';<sup>19</sup> and the nuns under the Rule do speak and are given heart as a community by the recuperative making of the author.

In a fine essay on the book, Maud Ellmann has shown how the novel mimics the weaving polyvocal form of both the tapestry-making and the polyphonic music in order to 'reconstruct a habitus, or collective mode of life, composed of many intersecting forces – social, geographic, and ideological ... [a] collective, "choral" consciousness'.<sup>20</sup> Though in a corner of England, the Norfolk nuns are the first to receive the innovative waves of art coming from the continent; it is not only the Black Death that comes like the Vikings, who in earlier times had invaded at this stretch of coast, but also polyphony, and the spectacular weaving, or 'painting with thread', associated with Opus Anglicanum embroidery.

Warner's conception of the fascist threat to women as ruled and immobilised was first explored in her 1938 novel *After the Death of Don Juan*, which analysed the relationship between male sexuality and fascism. Warner may have found support for her insights in the anti-fascist feminism of Virginia Woolf, who in *Three Guineas* in 1938 analysed the disease of manhood, the 'infantile fixation' on male supremacy and superiority, 'an emotion perhaps below the level of conscious thought but certainly of the utmost violence', a 'non-rational sex-taboo'.<sup>21</sup> Patriarchy is a fatal disease made extreme by the rise of feminist resistance ('the disease had acquired a motive, had connected itself with a right, a conception, which made it still more virulent outside the house than within' [211]). Woolf may also have provided a model for the choice of a convent and a backwater as allegory for the collective experience of English women at war, for *Three Guineas* also conjures into being a Society of Outsiders, the 'daughters of educated men', who should practise indifference, silence and averted gaze to sponsor peace:

they should shut the bright eyes that rain influence, or let those eyes look elsewhere when war is discussed – that is the duty to which outsiders will train themselves in peace before the threat of death inevitably makes reason powerless.<sup>22</sup> (186)

Oby takes Woolf's analysis of fascistic masculinity and her espousal of a policy of silence and indifference by a society of outsiders, then twists both into ambiguous form. Such silent indifference may do nothing to halt the war and may naturalise the ideology as natural disaster, yet still and nevertheless it remains obliquely activist, though non-utopian – as Warner's story of the fake priest implies.

Ralph Kello is a scholar, intellectual and failed priest who never took orders (and could not as he is illegitimate). He wanders to Oby as

a drunken vagrant, and there suddenly and inexplicably pretends to be a priest in order to enter Oby and minister to the nuns during pestilential times. Chance brought him to the convent as a beggar (he was too drunk to warrant being warned that the plague was at Oby); chance too enabled his act of deception, since his baldness induced by ringworm resembles a tonsure. In the novel's characteristically caustic free indirect style, Warner ventriloquises Ralph as he insinuates himself into the convent as their priest through his outright lie to a nun at the gate:

causation tunnels like a mole under the surface of our free will, and because of an attack of ringworm in Toledo I am about to say mass in an English convent where they are dying of a pestilence. (22)

He appeals to the nuns as a priest, but most of all to one of their servants, Ursula. Once a nun, she has borne a child and is caught in a constant tussle between desire and repentance; when she returns to the convent, she returns to Christ her bridegroom 'more mastering than any man', willingly 'cowed, to woo him with abject repentance' (23). Here, Warner suggests, is the extreme type of woman who subjects herself to patriarchy through sexual desire and masochistic yearning for subjection. The third time she returns, the convent refuses to accept her, sentencing her instead to live 'in mortification and obedience' without the veil. As convent cook, she sometimes lets insects into the salad because 'lust and tears and wood-smoke had weakened her appetite'; the lapse is serious as 'in swallowing a live insect one may swallow an evil spirit inhabiting it' (23). Again, lightly, Warner associates Ursula with a form of transmission of spiritual disease, like the pestilence abroad. When the plague comes she splits into her two forms: sexual gift to the masculine world and slave to God the master:

Then news of the pestilence came like a yelling of hounds on a renewed scent. At one moment it seemed to her that she had not repented sufficiently and that death might take her before she had had leisure to win God's mercy (there had never been so much to do, even when the bishop came, as now); an hour later the thought of dying without one more taste of the sweet world drove her frantic. (23)

Caught between men and god, the priests stand in her mind in place of God; if they are not there then 'that place is empty' and 'God steps

into it, God unmitigated and implacable' (23). A priest whom she can love would fuse her two beings. Ursula takes on the form and occasion of a victim of patriarchy in the novel, a willing, self-sacrificial being offering herself as subject to God or to man, or to a fake priest who can signify both.

As such she is counterpart to Ralph as he indulges in his whim to act the priest through perjury, imposture, sacrilege. As he reflects on the act, he splits in two, as Ursula had fractured into sexual offering and divine subject – in his case into a split consciousness divided between facts of the material world as known to the mind and glozing thoughts that flow in indifference over them: 'between him and the facts ran this glassy process of thinking, this flow of apprehending how it had all come about' (25). For what reason had he lied and said he was a priest? There was no reason: 'He had just said it – out of complaisance, as one soothes a squalling child, not even troubling to ask what it squalls for' (26).

Ralph's thinking equates women with animals, so 'soulless and without either sin or merit' that it becomes 'a simple matter for the devil to go in and out of them whenever he pleases' (26): his lie to the nun at the gate was a patronising display of fiction as fake patriarch. As we as readers register the full extent of the misogyny, it is then that Ursula sees pestilence in his face. The nuns' collective recognition of his sickness reveals Ralph as a maddened creature:

their recognition of his sickness had in an instant changed him from a man in his senses to a madman. His knees gave way, he had grovelled on the floor, tearing at his bosom and shuddering. Worst of all, he had seemed incapable of understanding anything they said to him, tossing their words out of his ears like a wounded animal. (27)

The misogyny is the madness, Warner suggests, and the pestilence is that mad misogyny. Magnified by religious frenzy and satanic promptings, the symptoms of the disease materialise the virulent rhetoric of the misogyny. If he thinks women are animals, he becomes as a beast himself; if he believes the devil can enter as he pleases, then the plague enters his bloodstream as easily as that, infecting him with the masculinist frenzy of the Nazi war cult. He roars at them that no one is to come near him – not to save them from plague, but because he hates all women, blaming them



for his own sins and glassy process of thinking: 'It was through them that he had damned himself and lay dying' (27). Looked after by Ursula and her son, he lives with 'the black man', Death, in the corner (28): the man in black like a dark enemy in the mind. It is important to acknowledge that Ralph is aware of the disease he is struggling from, for he self-isolates and puts himself through self-punishing routines, knowing he must somehow free himself of the blight.

How he is cured, however, is most telling. Dame Beatrix suggest that to cure Ralph of his madness, a traditional remedy be tried: the attachment of a dead black cockerel to his head to conjure away the evil spirits.<sup>23</sup> The cure works, insofar as Ralph does recover and lives through the rest of the novel as a man without qualities, a centre-less witness and unmotivated spectator, subject to Ursula as if they were a pseudo-couple, man and wife. He becomes as close to a nuns' priest as he can, taking on their indifference, their calm gaze, their affectless experiencing, their satirical impulses at a distance, their immobility and *stabilitas*. Yet it is the image of the raving scholar and fake priest, with a black cock tied to his head, that survives the book, a shocking image of a fascist-infected and -inflected English imagination. The black cock suggests black for war-crazed fascist, the cock for the phallic mania of the infantile fixation and irrational sex-taboo. Together they conjure a carnivalesque grotesque, a radical voodoo cure for that same fascist pestilence. With the cock tied to his head as the women are held in their corner of patriarchal England, he is forced to endure the stillness they suffer, the subjection and abjection by which they are ruled, the blood-cult and death-cult of the worst excesses of the gender ideology he had glozed over and so complaisantly adopted as his why-not creed.

Ralph is thus satirised not only as a fake priest, but also as a fake man subject to the fixations of the enemy force. Once cured, in more ordinary and human ways he becomes a scholar (captivated by the Lay of Mamillion), friend (to Henry Yellowlees) and lover (of Widow Figg). In their quiet way, and from their backwater point of view, the nuns of Oby exact a just, if eccentric, revenge on patriarchy's courses, its war clouds and pestilential effects. The potential fascist in their midst is tamed and emptied of content so that they can live and gaze and muddle through another day, as a community and a collective and a womanly zone at the edges of history – a zone where counter-history is dreamt and produced and made to happen and endure, for a while at least, through sustaining some kind of radical peace.

## Note on Contributor

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## Declaration and Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

## Notes

1. Jenny Hartley remarks that the novel's controlling emotion is fear and quotes the epigraph 'For neither might the corner that held them keep them from fear' – taken, she writes, 'from a passage in the Apocryphal "Wisdom of Solomon" which elaborates an extended metaphor of fear as the prison of "unnurtured souls ... fettered within the bonds of a long night": *Millions Like Us: British women's fiction and the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1997), 46.
2. 'This peculiar historical novel, with its slow, circular, sometimes stalled temporal structure': Micir, 'Not of national importance: Sylvia Townsend Warner, women's work, and the mid-century historical novel', in *Literature, Citizenship, Rights*, ed. Allan Hepburn (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 79.
3. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2015, 9–13.
4. Though it is included, he adds, in William Maxwell's edition of four Warner novels as *Four in Hand: A quartet of novels* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986).
5. 1975 interview with Val Warner and Michael Schmidt, *PN Review* 23 8, no. 3 (January–February 1982), quoted in Wendy Mulford, *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, letters and politics, 1930–1951* (London: Pandora, 1988), 197.
6. Entry for June 1940, para. 14, *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 104.
7. Keith Somerville, *Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred: Historical development and definitions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 113.
8. Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 61 and 109.
9. Reich, quoted Jennifer Cooke, *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 65.
10. Quoted in Cooke, *Legacies*, 65–6.
11. This is an act of 'subversion', according to Cooke, *Legacies*, 66.
12. Hartley, *Millions Like Us*, 47.
13. I take the equivalence of fascism and extreme forms of patriarchy from Woolf's *Three Guineas* which explores women's 'struggle with fathers in general, with

the patriarchy itself' (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1938]), 146) as key to the ways in which 'the daughters' of female emancipation might have been inspired 'by the principles of anti-Fascism', despite her unease with the modish jargon this might imply ('the fashionable and hideous jargon of the moment') (Woolf, *Room of One's Own*, 210). Warner herself had previously experimented with anti-fascist allegory in *After the Death of Don Juan*, described by her in a letter to Nancy Cunard as concerned with 'the political chemistry of the Spanish War, with the Don Juan – more of Molière than of Mozart – developing as the Fascist of the piece' (Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), 51 n. 1). See also Maud Ellmann, 'After the death of Don Juan: Sylvia Townsend Warner's Spanish novel', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2017, 17(2), 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2017.07>.

14. Compare Marina McKay's view of the novel as raising questions of 'subordination and rebellion': 'The novel and thirty years of war', in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 682.
15. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Corner That Held Them* (1948) (London: Virago, 1988), 2. Subsequent references to the novel are given in the main text by page number alone.
16. There is a class dynamic at work here too: the episode could be taken simply as a story about aristocratic adultery, a troubadour joke about the sexual secrets governing the feudal upper class. Yet, despite the tussle between gender and class in Warner's writing, here gender is uppermost – as can be registered in Brian de Retteville's reference to her as 'the woman'.
17. *Stabilitas* is St Benedict's term for the vow of those entering the order to remain with the monastery or convent for life.
18. The nuns weave a beautiful altar hanging which is stolen away by a nun driven insane by rumours about the Peasants' Revolt. The Lay of Mamillion is a chivalric epic that is preserved for a while at the convent. The Second World War as a British campaign was felt by Warner early on in the war as itself patriarchal: 'It is like a great sprawling paterfamilias with all the young running errands' (Warner to Steven Clark, *Letters*, 59).
19. 'The Historical Novel', 1939 lecture, quoted in Micir, 'Not of national importance', 77.
20. Maud Ellmann, 'Everyday war: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf in World War II', *Novel* 50, no. 1 (2017), 85. Jenny Hartley agrees: 'The narrator's individual voice blurs with the choric voice which peppers the commentary with proverbial sayings, and what persists is the life of the community' (*Millions Like Us*, 50).
21. Woolf, *Room of One's Own*, 211. Further references to *Three Guineas* in this paragraph are given by page number alone.
22. For Woolf's importance to Warner, see Maroula Joannou, "'Our Time": Sylvia Townsend Warner, Virginia Woolf and the 1940s', *Literature Compass* 11/12 (2014), 732–44.
23. This was a common 'cure' for bubonic plague in the medieval period. The chicken was believed to breathe through its anus, and doctors prescribed placing live chickens rump-down on buboes to draw off the poison. See Erik A. Heinrichs, 'The live chicken treatment for buboes: Trying a plague cure in medieval and early modern Europe', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 91, no. 2 (Summer 2017), 210–32. DOI: 10.1353/bhm.2017.0025.

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