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Bridging the Gap Between Manner and Matter : The Friction of Reticence and Resistance in Sylvia Townsend Warner's Intimate Poems

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Abstract

This thesis works to question the peculiar relationship between form and subject in the intimate poems of the undeservedly forgotten voice of Sylvia Townsend Warner. We will engage with feminist, lesbian, and modernist criticism to help explain why a writer placed so richly in the prime of modernism and with a revolutionary Communist spirit sometimes depicts in her verse a conservative, domestically repressed female speaker who is often silenced, subdued, and controlled by her female lover—and why Warner chooses to construct these subjects using more formal poetic strategies.

Sylvia Townsend Warner is an important figure to examine, as there is rich discourse to be had about how women writers – and especially lesbian writers – of the time were still so often confined to a particular literary space, both in mode and matter, and how they worked to challenge that space. In the three chapters of this thesis, we explore how Warner employs strategies of subtle coding in order to form an open dialogue about lesbian love—creating poems riddled with heterosexual play, gender blurring, overt power dynamics, the inversion of Romantic tropes, and discourse on the creation of poetry, all which speak to the double-bound nature of the lesbian existence in the early twentieth century.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

/ BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN MANNER AND MATTER: /
THE FRICTION OF RETICENCE AND RESISTANCE
IN SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER'S INTIMATE POEMS

by

Giana Milazzo

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Montclair State University

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Chapter 1: Building Contexts and Categories: The Personal is Political

*Belle rivale, qui de mon amant
M'apris l'amour et la fidélité,
Moi, sans écharpe bleue et sans enfant,
J'ai ma fierté.*

*Belle éplorée, dont le coeur en peine
Comme une lune a soulevé l'immense
Océan de la sympathie humaine,
J'ai mon silence.¹*

-“Belle rivale, qui de mon amant” (from *Uncollected Poems 1931-1960*), Sylvia Townsend Warner

“J’ai ma fierté ... J’ai mon silence,” (“I have my pride . . . I have my silence”)

Sylvia Townsend Warner writes in one of her final uncollected poems. In her introduction to Warner’s *New Collected Poems*, biographer Claire Harman explains that in this poem of romantic suffering, “Warner has removed herself into French to signify a larger removal” (9). And indeed, as Warner is an often-overlooked English poet of the early to mid-twentieth century, her proclivity for privacy in both the personal and professional sense is displayed in this poignant last line of “Belle rivale, qui de mon amant.” A bleak yet bold declaration, it is representative of the type of poems this thesis is most interested in exploring—as we will unpack the dynamics of this reserved-yet-revolutionary poet. Warner is better known for her novels and short stories, but the central focus of this thesis will be her overlooked love poetry.

At first glance, Sylvia Townsend Warner is not easily categorized in the Georgian or modernist categories of her fellow thirties poets. Jane Dowson refers to Warner’s “Elizabethan stanzas” (9) with musical and pastoral qualities sometimes offered in the

¹Roughly translated: “Beautiful rival, that of my lover/ you taught me love and faithfulness/ Me, without blue scarf and without children,/ I have my pride./ Dear bereaved, whose heart-ache/ Like a moon rising over the immense/ Ocean of human sympathy/ I have my silence.” Though it is difficult to settle on an exact English translation of this poem, the central concepts Warner is emphasizing here are the questions of fidelity, heartache, and pride.

form of the ballad, the epitaph, or in stanzas like the pentameter quatrain. Though she is often formal in her language and meter, her subversive pastoral-inspired imagery is distinct from the picturesque countryside of other Georgian poets. More prototypically modernist qualities are found in her poems of sardonic rural dysfunction, the realism and ironic symmetries in her war poems, and the explicitly lesbian sentiments of her love poems. In “‘Undeservedly forgotten’: Women Poets of the Thirties,” Janet Montefiore comments, “The traditionalism of Sylvia Townsend Warner is of a more complex kind,” explaining in particular the mixture of both anachronistic and pastiche elements in Warner’s ironically pastoral long war poem *Opus 7* (1931), for example (130). In his short analysis of Warner’s poetry, Donald Davie also points out her use of a traditional style in the age of the modern, comparing the mode of *Opus 7* to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. He emphasizes that the pastoral, rural scenes she constructs in her early poetry persist even though the narrative of her works takes place in the more modern village; pointing out the instability of Warner’s verse, he explains, “And yet this new found responsibility to the date on the calendar has the effect of highlighting more than ever the incongruity between the matter and the manner, the impression of new wine in an old bottle” (60). Though largely unexamined by literary critics, a similar analysis of Warner’s incongruities can be applied to her unconventional love poems.

Though Davie admits that Warner’s quaintness of diction is part of a “deliberate design” (232), he reasons that poetic genres have a limited time-span and that they can outlive their usefulness. It is precisely her “deliberate design,” however, that critics have understudied—critics like Davie who have failed to give appropriate attention to the different strategies that women poets, and especially lesbian poets, have chosen to

employ. This thesis argues that Warner's poetic inconsistencies are characteristic marks of a lesbian feminist poet working within the limitations and traditions of her time. Her meticulous choice of form and subject is at the very least a product of multiple opposing influences, and often a purposeful construction. This paper will engage with lesbian, feminist, and modernist criticism to help explain why a writer placed so richly in the prime of modernism and with a revolutionary Communist spirit sometimes depicts in her verse a conservative, domestically repressed female speaker who is silenced, subdued, and controlled by her female lover—and why Warner chooses to construct these subjects using more formal poetic strategies. An author displaced somewhere between the modern and the traditional, Sylvia Townsend Warner is an important figure to examine, as there is rich discourse to be had about how women writers of the time were still so often confined to a particular literary space, both in mode and matter. By diving into Sylvia Townsend Warner's personal history, exploring the scope of literary traditions at the time of her career, and taking a close look at some of her most intimate poetry, we can lay the groundwork for uncovering an undeservedly forgotten poetic voice.

Of central interest to this study is Warner's use of a repressed, reticent female speaker. In chapters two and three of this thesis, I uncover the dynamics of this choice through close readings of poems from Warner's earliest collection *The Espalier*, her uncollected poems, and most importantly her joint collection *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*. It is important to consider how Warner subtly weaves taboo lesbian subtext with more old-fashioned attitudes through a Victorian model of emotional restraint. In Warner's work, images of liberation and suppression find a particular place in her intimate poems; in these poems, the silence and repression of the speaker is often used as

a defense mechanism to keep the relationship alive. The speaker's fear of loneliness (or any repercussion in general) seems to be a central motivation to keep quiet and composed. Sometimes this threatening force sparks when the speaker entertains the idea of challenging the beloved, or specifically in terms of an "other" lover—hinting a wrong or infidelity committed by the beloved. I argue that in the midst of this complex romantic uncovering, Warner employs strategies of subtle coding in order to form an open dialogue about lesbian love and sexuality: namely, using traditionally heterosexual language and motifs from male poetic traditions in order to define a female experience. We will explore the way she creates poems riddled with heterosexual play, gender blurring, overt power dynamics, the inversion of Romantic tropes, and discourse on the creation of poetry, all of which speak to the double-bound² nature of the lesbian existence in the early twentieth century.

A Spirit of Resistance is Born

Unpacking Warner's biography—a life fraught with forbidden love, loss, and political activism—is helpful in grounding the discussion of her poetic interests. Born in Middlesex, England in 1893, Sylvia Townsend Warner entered a world where most women of the upper-middle-class had a predestined path towards marriage and motherhood—concrete ideals both intertwined with a sense of limitation. The only child of Eleanor ("Nora") and George Townsend Warner, housemaster at Harrow School, she spent her childhood enjoying the luxuries of her class in the country, where she was educated privately at home, garnering a love of music, poetry, and history. In her

² By double bound, I mean to explicate the difficulty of fitting into the categories of two marginalized positions – Warner as woman and Warner as lesbian.

biography, Claire Harman points out the parental dynamics of her upbringing, as Warner shared a loving relationship with her father, and one of contempt with her mother:

“Nora’s ill-feeling was many faceted; Sylvia was not a son, she was not going to be a beautiful daughter, she was rather off-puttingly clever and rapidly becoming the apple of her father’s eye” (13). Warner’s resistance toward the typical life for an Englishwoman of her class was obvious from the start—she had little interest in attending the grand dinner engagements and dances at which Nora had hoped she would find her future husband: “On every count which she held dear, her daughter did worse than fail; she deliberately refused to take part” (23). Instead, she became an “unmarriageable intellectual” (23), going on to continue her study of music with Dr. Percy Buck, with whom she had a 17-year long love affair that began when she was nineteen.³

In *Lesbian Empire*, Gay Wachman explains, “Sylvia Townsend Warner was part of the generation of modernists who began learning their sexual, social, and literary politics during the First World War,” which came to define her adulthood and her “sexual, feminist, communist, anarchist radicalism” (2). Before finding a passion for leftist politics in her later adult life, however, Warner was involved in more mainstream patriotic efforts that were still notable for a woman of her class. During World War I, she volunteered to fundraise for the Red Cross and also worked in the munitions factory. It was around this time that she began looking to new avenues for work and fulfillment. After the devastation of her father’s death in 1916, she went on to study music and become an established musicologist in London, where from 1917 to 1927 she served as

³ “The considerable difficulty of keeping this secret in the closed society of the Hill was partly assuaged by the satisfaction Sylvia derived from conducting such an affair (Buck was married, had five children and was twenty-two years her senior) under her mother’s nose” (*A Biography* Harman 24).

an editor of the ten-volume *Tudor Church Music* project. It is during this time that her literary career began.

After meeting T.F. Powys and familiarizing herself with a small literary circle in the twenties,⁴ Warner began to write her own poetry, novels, and plays. Her previous specialized study in music composition and music theory found itself reflected in her sing-song poetic form and in the meticulous construction of her rhyme scheme: “In one sense, Sylvia never gave up composing, for all her writing is musical in nature and shows not simply a fine ear for cadences and the lyrical effects of language, but a keen interest in form and structure” (Harman 60). Harman also points out that in this structure, Warner sets up “a deliberate friction . . . between the form and the tone” (60). Shortly after publishing her first collection of poetry, *The Espalier* (1925), Warner went on to write her most popular novels, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), *Mr. Fortune’s Maggot* (1927), and later, *Summer Will Show* (1936). *Lolly Willowes* and *Summer Will Show* in particular express Warner’s spirit of resistance. The former is written about a long-time spinster who dabbles in witchcraft, and with it, Warner manages to debunk society’s fears and stereotypes of the single woman—which were issues she herself faced in her resistance to heteronormative expectations: “To Sylvia, as to Lolly Willowes, the heroine of her first novel, ‘coming out’ was really the beginning of ‘going in,’ and the process ended in marriage, an institution towards which she had no inclination whatever” (Harman 23). When she wrote *Lolly Willowes*, Warner was still seeing Buck, and in her work, she was combatting traditional ideas on the life of an unmarried woman. It wasn’t until the 1930s that Warner began to date a woman for the first time. In *Summer Will Show*, a novel that Warner wrote during her first sexual relationship with a woman, English aristocrat and

⁴ T.F. Powys and David Garnett were two authors in particular that helped her work get published early on.

heiress Sophia Willoughby experiences a political and sexual awakening in Paris during the revolution of 1848; after losing both her children and realizing her husband has been unfaithful, she forms an intimate relationship with his former mistress. Warner chooses her plots wisely, writing about significant moments in women's history and the shifting roles of gender relations, explicitly entertaining taboo subjects like same-sex desire, spinsterdom, and sexual love triangles.

In her twenties and thirties Warner had been involved in a number of illicit affairs with married men (Percy Buck being the longest and most influential) with no interest in traditional marriage and family life; but without a doubt, her most significant relationship was with fellow poet and lover Valentine Ackland, the first and only woman she was openly with whom she shared a near forty-year "marriage."⁵ Warner and Ackland first met through mutual friends and began to spend time together in 1930 when Warner invited Ackland to live at Miss Green's Cottage in Chaldon as her steward. What originally began as a convenient living arrangement among comrades quickly turned into a communal space for lovers: "The difference in their ages – Valentine was twenty-four, Sylvia thirty-six – and the sameness of their sex, things which in cold blood might have presented themselves as impediments to a lasting love, were simply part of the new landscape in which Sylvia moved. She was excited as never before, released and unconstrained" (Harman 100). Literary critics do not often discuss Sylvia Townsend Warner's lesbianism, or perhaps more accurately, her bisexuality. Even Harman's

⁵ "[On January 12, 1931] on their way to [Miss Green's Cottage], Sylvia said very simply and decisively that she wanted no one but Valentine. It was a statement of complete trust, and their subsequent love-making was exceptionally happy. The next morning Valentine said that it had been a marriage-night. 'For my part, why not?' wrote Sylvia, many years later. 'I loved, I increasingly honoured, and if being bewitched into compliance is obedience, I obeyed. As for fidelity, it seemed as natural as the circulation of my blood, and no more meritorious.' From then on they were committed to each other, and kept 12 January as a wedding anniversary" (Harman 111).

descriptions in her biography skirt the change of Warner's sexual affiliation. And perhaps now, it would be better to understand Warner's sexual identity on something like the Kinsey scale, through Adrienne Rich's lesbian continuum⁶, or to spend less time on fitting her into categories at all, as we will see that time and time again, Warner-as-poet, like Warner-as-lover, often eludes any steadfast categorization. Though Warner's sexual identity remains unclear, there is no questioning the clarity of her passionate love and devotion to Ackland—a lover who far surpassed the significance of any male before her and influenced Warner's practice of a lesbian poetics.

Her relationship with Valentine Ackland had a major impact on both her poetry and prose. The two writers mutually inspired each other's work, providing personal and professional guidance throughout their stay in different homes together, and co-published a volume of poetry, *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* (1933)—the significance of which I will expound in chapter two. Though they shared many loving years together, Ackland's infidelity formed a wedge in their relationship—sometimes showing up in Warner's more intimate poems. Between the years of 1938 and 1949, Ackland had an affair with American scholar Elizabeth Wade White. During this time, the three women experimented with co-habitation and Warner sometimes moved out for a month at a time to give the others space. Despite these long years of experimentation and romantic suffering on Warner's part, Ackland and Warner remained together until the former's death in 1969.

⁶ In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich explains, "I mean the term lesbian continuum to include range through each woman's life and throughout history of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support, if we can also hear it in such associations as marriage resistance and 'haggard' behavior ... we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism" (135-136).

Warner's left-wing political activism progressively continued throughout her life and her relationship with Valentine Ackland. In addition to her largely nationalist work in First World War, she joined the Red Cross volunteers in Spain during the Spanish Civil War, gave lectures on pacifist and socialist initiatives during World War II, and joined the Left Book Club and other socialist organizations opposed to Fascism. Both her firsthand experiences of wartime and her love affairs became lasting markers in her poetry and prose. In her lifetime, Warner wrote several volumes of short stories and poetry, seven novels, a biography of T.H. White, a translation of Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and had several essays, poems, and stories published in *The New Yorker*. With such a successful outpouring of publications and a life of political commitment, it is difficult to understand why most of her recognition as a poet has been posthumous—and even that kind of recognition is generous, as some of her books are either out of print or only represented by small publishers, and only bits of her poetry are mentioned in specific forgotten writers collections. Even more difficult to understand is how and why a female poet harboring what Wachman defines as “sexual, feminist, communist, anarchist radicalism” (2) could be all but erased from the modernist canon.

The Confinement of the Categories

Taking a closer look at the amorphous definition that constituted modernist poetry may help explain the difficulty of falling under the categorization. In their introduction, the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* attempt to sort out the category and offer insight about some poets who fell in between the cracks of Victorian and modern. Discussing the early poetry collections of Thomas Hardy, Edwin

Arlington Robinson, and W.B. Yeats, the editors explain, “These books continue Romantic and Victorian traditions—a language of personal feeling, regular meters and rhymes, the imputation of human feelings to nature by the pathetic fallacy” (xxxix). They make a distinction between that type of *modern* poetry and truly *modernist* work—which literally means “advocate of newness”: “Through its fragmentation, ellipses, and jagged edges, modernist poetry disrupts formal coherence, traditionally enforced by regular meter and rhyme, tonal and figural continuity. It aggressively asserts modernity in form and subject matter, and it forces a sharper break with Romantic and Victorian tradition” (xxxix). On a formal level, modernist poetry indicates new ways of writing—inviting dissonances, juxtaposition, and irregularities of both form and subject.

There are, however, poets who worked within the realm of the modern who didn't have the distinct experimental quality of the likes of Pound or Eliot, poets who occupy a blurry middle ground that share qualities with modernism and also Romantic or Georgian conventions. The editors explain: “Still more formally conservative poets—such as the World War I poet Wilfred Owen, the Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay, and the New York traditionalist Edna St. Vincent Millay—brought inherited forms into fresh dialogue with ‘modern’ subjects, such as mass warfare, racial lynching, and sexual liberation” (xl). Georgian poetry, another amorphous categorization, is often distinguished for its solitary or melancholy lyricism, feeling for nature, and pastoralism. Though notably excluded in *The Norton Anthology* collection (and most others of its kind), Sylvia Townsend Warner can be aligned with the traditionalist Edna St. Vincent Millay who, like Warner, uses conventional forms to discuss modern subjects like sexual

liberation. Warner's poetic strategies are also often compared with other modern female poets including Anna Wickham and Charlotte Mew.

There are several explanations for Warner's being largely excluded from the modernist canon; Gay Wachman argues that though Warner's leftist politics and feminism are sometimes emphasized, her revolutionary representations of sexuality and experimental confluences of genres have gone unnoticed: "And because her writing is not 'difficult,' she has not been admitted to the mainstream modernist canon and has rarely been read with the care required by her subtle irony, her shifts in narrative genres and tone, her intricate, musical poems, and her layered and nuanced literary and political intertextuality" (2-3). Though often writing in formal and carefully constructed rhyme and meter, Warner certainly invites the types of juxtapositions and irregularities that *The Norton Anthology* editors argue characterizes the modernist poets. It is important to remember that every poem defined as "modernist" does not always follow a coherent set of doctrines and conventional wisdom. Modernism is not the clean break it is often made out to be by critics—there remains a continuum between Romantic, Victorian, and modernist work. Modernism is not one moment but a series of moments and instances of a larger whole. As we closely investigate some of the finest examples of Warner's poetry in chapter two, we can see how the categories typically associated with modernism shape and evolve—and in some cases limit—the possibility for who and what work is studied in the canon. But in this study, it is clear we are going beyond recovery and appreciation, as we will address how Warner employs a poetics of reticence, lesbian desire, and collaboration by using the strategies of her forebears and other creative techniques of her own.

Chapter 2: Framing Warner's Deliberate Design

Perhaps the tendency for the gatekeepers of modernism to write Warner off as a “traditionalist” has let her slip through the cracks—for example, as a reviewer of London’s *The Times* decidedly declared in 1982, “Sylvia Townsend Warner had a limited sense of the possibilities of poetry – her structures and procedures are conventional to a fault.”⁷ As mentioned earlier, however, Warner’s peculiar – and purposeful – mix of formal and modern elements is notable throughout her work. And though some of Warner’s political poetry like *Opus 7* has been recognized for its more prototypically modernist qualities, we find that even in her love poetry, a special type of hybridization occurs. In her most intimate lyrical poems, old fashioned qualities—repressed speakers, silenced voices, sing-song rhymes, pastoral imagery—are mixed and matched with modern elements—forbidden love in the form of the lesbian relationship, sometimes sexy language, and the tumultuous nature of infidelity. Before going into an analysis of Warner’s love poems, in this section we introduce how her early poetic decisions – her approach to form and subject – set up particular models that she revisits throughout her career. In sampling a few of her poems from *The Espalier* and forming a critical discussion around *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, we can see the ways Warner invokes, and complicates, poetic traditions in more ways than one.

An Early Discord: The Speaker's Troubling Sense of Self

The particular discord between manner and matter is noted in Warner’s earliest poetry. Harman notes that though some critics celebrated her first collection of poetry

⁷ See *The Times*, 29 July 1982. Robert Nye reviewing Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester, 1982). Quotation retrieved from Davie’s book.

The Espalier (1925) for harboring an “un-Victorian mind,” the peculiar use of traditional forms like the ballad, the epitaph, and the pentameter quatrain were “not simply traditional but almost quaint in 1925” (*A Biography* 62). Even before her complicated love lyrics are introduced in *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, Warner’s earliest poetry from *The Espalier*, published before she met Valentine Ackland and actually dedicated to “P.C. Buck,” has similar remnants of both reticence and resistance that we will see further developed in her later love poetry. Gillian Spraggs characterizes Warner’s early poetry by drawing attention to the distinct demeanor of her speakers; Spraggs explains, “The persona that emerges is characteristically watchful, curious, even, perhaps, at times, a little voyeuristic; yet always aloof, often seemingly dispassionate, occasionally sardonic, wistful or faintly regretful” (114). Exploring the nature of Warner’s poetic voice is a key to unpacking the incongruities that characterize her work as a whole.

We see this sort of calculated restraint in “Quiet Neighbors” (1925), for example, the first poem in her first published volume of poetry, which muses on the private and unknowable nature of human beings as the speaker explains that she may never know her London neighbors. In this poem, both the private sphere and the speaker’s own solitude are emphasized. Her neighbors “do not laugh loud, or sing” (line 17) and keep a proper back garden “always neat and trim” (line 22)—these descriptions are reminiscent of a Victorian restraint and seriousness. The neatness and control of these neighbors – and this withholding speaker – also parallels the neatness of Warner’s own formal poetic construction, with the odd lines in each quatrain rhyming throughout the verse, which is typical of a ballad. Interestingly enough, in his book on poetic form, David Caplan notes that ballads are a common musical form that tell a particular story that is often

characterized by a directness and an impersonality: “The ballads offer few clues about authorship because they stay impersonal. The singer does not describe his or her own experience but sings about other people, slipping into their voices” (42). In this poem we see the traditional rhyme and formal characteristics of the ballad, but it is also worth noting that the meter is fairly irregular throughout. Warner makes a particular choice in that she constructs only one quatrain with the perfect 6-syllables-per-line; it is even more interesting that this stanza is the one in which she discusses these qualities of being “neat and trim.”

In this very first poem Warner presents us, she is starting to discuss the formal elements of poetry within her poetry—a type of meta-strategy we will see her revisit again and again. Keeping time is something that meter does, and though the speaker declares that she is sitting “careless of time” (line 2), she centers our attention on the clock throughout the lyric; counting “Ten, eleven, twelve;/ One, two, three” (5-6), Warner-as-poet is also counting. This emphasis on time is reinforced throughout, as the last lines show our measured progression from hours (the ticking clock) to years:

For my life has grown quiet,
 As quiet as theirs;
 And the clock has been silent on my chimney-piece
 For years and for years (lines 37-40)

Again, we see how Warner reminds us of the speaker’s very solitary experience, directing our attention to all things “quiet” and “silent.” Ending with the repetitive marker “for years and for years,” we can imagine the clock’s chime echoing as well. This poem

introduces the importance that the practice of creating poetry has throughout Warner's work, as well as builds the context for this poetic persona of restraint.

Parts of this poem can be read as a commentary on the unwelcome nature of city neighbors who don't get to know each other, being always closed in by their walls, as opposed to the inviting scenes of Warner's pastoral works. Later, the speaker reflects on her neighbors' perception of her:

While they for their part
Should they hazard a guess
At me on my side of the wall
Will know as little, or less[.] (lines 33-36)

This poem is both introspective and ominous. Though this is certainly not a love poem, it helps give us an idea of the kind of speaker Spraggs discusses that is equal parts curious, aloof, and lonely—and one that relishes this sort of unknowability. And if this is in part a commentary on creating poetry alone in a cloistered, closed in setting, it reminds us of an earlier sonnet by William Wordsworth, "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room," a famous example that uses the metaphor of the small room to mirror the process of constructing of a formal poem:

In truth the prison, into which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,

Should find brief solace there, as I have found.⁸ (lines 8-14)

The speaker of Wordsworth's poem finds comfort and solace in remaining bound in the limits of the sonnet form. In her biography, Harman includes a memorable list from one of Warner's 1929 diary entries in which the poet makes critical judgment against "poems that are in *vers libre*" (79). Warner also admits some of the aims of her own work, explaining she is in favor of poems "formally tight in thought and construction" as well as poems that "evoke frames of mind, mention death, contain conceits and intellectual stresses, look neat . . . end cynically, [and] appear [in a] very self-controlled state" (79). Perhaps Warner also found a type of liberty in using traditional forms so long taken up by her poetic forebears. This example, and the peculiar "weight of too much liberty" Wordsworth introduces, will prove relevant in later analysis of Warner's complex love poems.

Like in "Quiet Neighbors," a similarly singular figure is constructed in *The Espalier's* "An Afternoon Call," a poem written as a quintilla – a 16th century Spanish quintain form with an eight syllable-per-line rule that Warner loosely follows. In this poem, a contrast is drawn between the traditional female domestic speaker and the wandering "wench" who lands at the former's door to find refuge during a storm. As a sign of peace, the tramping wench offers the speaker lilac that "[the speaker] had viewed her wrench/ Out of [her] neighbour's tree" (lines 4-5). The more old-fashioned speaker takes pride in her "well-found kitchen" and "kind domestic arts" (lines 7, 8), but this new woman wanderer looks on the speaker's kitchen in awe—"Like one who curious and serene/ Looks round on foreign parts" (lines 9-10). Unconcerned with domestic duties,

⁸ Wordsworth, William. "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room."
<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/183937>

the wanderer talks of journeying away from stifling domesticity and into the freedom of her chosen path:

She talked of winds and wayside fruits,
Seas, cities, fair-times, landmarks, routes
Of journeys past and gone.
I gave her an old pair of boots
That she might wander on. (lines 11-15)

In this ending, we see a communal transfer between the old and the new woman; despite their differences, they support each other in a way – exchanging the stolen Lilac for a pair of old boots – though both gestures are imperfect. However, we also note that the speaker reserves this full free spirit for someone else—for the marginalized outcast, the wench. The speaker does not allow herself to fall into this category; she is a marker of the past, content in her domestic setting. Rendering a collision between the traditional and the modern, Warner here lands at a compromise, though it is still not quite clear whether the relationship between the two is formed by contempt or solidarity. We can hope, as Warner invites us to, that the “new woman” wanderer will someday lose the stigma of the old word “wench.”

With either reading, it is clear that there are now two kinds of possibilities for women—the wanderer and the traditionalist: the wench is modern in her ability to explore the world, while the speaker is traditional in that she is confined to the kitchen. In these distinctions Warner is also playing with familiar Romantic tropes about spaces, comparing the confines of the domestic space in relation to the vast open potential of nature like nineteenth-century male poets Wordsworth and Coleridge. The speaker in

Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," for example, yearns for the "beauteous forms" of nature while "in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din/ Of towns and cities" (line 23, 26-27).⁹ Like in "Quiet Neighbors," in "An Afternoon Call" Warner is in some ways conforming to and in other ways subverting these poetic traditions of the domestic space, noting the difference between city and country behavior; she is also suggesting how this seemingly simple dichotomy of "nature as free, domestic as stifling" may be different for women. As we will see, nature – and the possibility it invites – remains a central interest for Warner.

In her early poetry and prose, Warner is often occupied with characters like witches, wenches, and outcasts, but she also recognizes the confines of her own marginalized position.¹⁰ In *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, Jane Dowson stresses how the figure of the woman-as-poet was not taken very seriously and became a subject of derision in the thirties. She explains that some poets' denunciations of their own sex came from an impulse to be "disassociated from a line of writing perceived as weak and valueless" (18), while others confronted the prejudices against the woman artist head on—like in Stevie Smith's poem "Miss Snooks," Anna Wickham's "Explanation," and Sylvia Townsend Warner's own "Wish in the Spring,"

In "Wish in the Spring," another poem from *The Espalier*, Warner juxtaposes the free and endless potential of nature with the limitations of human beings (specifically women)—a Romantic trope she revisits in her love poetry as well. "To-day I wish that I were a tree,/ And not myself" (lines 1-2) the poem regretfully begins, as the speaker laments her position. Again emphasizing the actual construction of poetry, the speaker

⁹ Wordsworth, William. "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798." <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174796>

¹⁰ For example, we can recall that *Lolly Willowes* is about a witch, and several characters in *The Espalier* and *Time Importuned* are characterized as such.

directs our attention to a “neat little row of poems/ Like cups and saucers on a shelf” (lines 3-4), clean little images that reference the style of Warner-as-poet. Similar to the way the “neat and trim” garden in “Quiet Neighbors” suggests a certain mastery or control of both emotional constraint and poetic construction, it seems that in “Wish in the Spring” Warner is commenting on her own form here too. The neat little row of poems like saucers on a shelf suggests a certain “neat” form and poetic lines that form rows rather than the unorthodox, fragmented lines of a modernist classic like *The Waste Land*.

She emphasizes that “No one would think it unnatural/ Or question my right” (lines 9-10) if she were a tree, hinting that these are the kind of hardships she faces as a female poet. As a skeptical glance about the seriousness of female poets was all too common in the early twentieth century, this lesser known poem boldly speaks to a generation of women. Maroula Joannou explains the weight that the historical and the material world hold in much of Warner’s prose: “[She] permits her characters no sanctuary from the materiality of existence” (iii). Warner’s realistic understanding of one’s limitations and surroundings is also noted in her poetry—“Wish in the Spring” being a fine example. The speaker finally declares,

But as I am only woman
 And not a tree,
 With piteous human care I have made this poem,
 And set it now on the shelf with the rest to be. (13-16)

Bold and yet still subdued, Warner’s quiet resistance is here noted, as she does solidify her own place in history by attempting to cast her poems in the canon among a future generation of female poets—“the rest to be.” We know, too, that ironically Warner has

not made this poem with “piteous human care,” but with exacting attention and a masterful poetic control, in this case organized in *abcb* quatrains and using juxtaposed asymmetrical line lengths (a stylistic choice revisited in other poems).

Though these are three very different early poems, we see in them all a speaker with a consistent quality—a disciplined attitude. This sense of discipline is also evident in Warner’s meta-commentary on her own poetic form. What’s also fascinating is that the title of this first collection bears some metaphorical play in the construction of her speakers. An espalier is defined as “a type of tree or shrub that is trained to grow in a flat plane against a wall or trellis, often in a symmetrical pattern.”¹¹ This attention to symmetry—which is clear both in her careful construction of verse and the predestined shape of the controlled tree—is especially relevant. Warner’s classical training limits her to a particular space, like a tree, and she is well aware of this space she occupies. In her biography, Harman comments, referencing Warner’s words from her archive: “It took Sylvia a number of weeks to choose a title for her poems, but she finally hit on ‘The Espalier’: ‘it seems to me expressive – a naturally rather straggling plant such as the mind is – mine at any rate straggles – deprived and formalized into producing fruit’” (61-62). Warner’s intimate poems deserve a closer look – not just because of their experimentations with a repressed speaker, nature, and the domestic – but because of their layered commentary on the meaning of poetic form itself and what it says about the female poetic identity.

Critical Contexts: The Significance of a Joint Volume of Poetry

¹¹ "espaliered." *American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition*. 2011. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company 15 Mar. 2016. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/espaliered>

Many of Warner's most intimate poems we will explore are from *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* (1933), a collection co-published with Valentine Ackland. In vouching for Warner's rightful place among the modernists, it is important to contextualize this revolutionary decision to co-publish. The collection consisted of 109 poems, 55 written by one author, 54 written by the other, all without originally identifying which poet wrote what. In Claire Harman's introduction to Warner's *New Collected Poems*, she gives us context about this collection and the authors' intentions. As both women, especially Warner, relished the private sphere and the benefits of anonymity, the two poets' preface to the collection identifies their specific intentions, further distancing us as the reader by referring to themselves in the third person "they": "By withholding individual attributions they hope that the freshness of anonymity will be preserved. The book, therefore, is both an experiment in the presentation of poetry and a protest against the frame of mind, too common, which judges the poem by the poet, rather than the poet by the poem" (5). A pair of female lovers published a joint-collection of poems and decided that their poetry would take precedence over authorial identity. This type of experimentation speaks to the innovations of modernist poets creating (as the *Norton Anthology* editors urge) new ways of presenting poetry that disrupt formal and traditional methods—however here it is not the rhyme or meter that is disruptive, but the uncertainty of authorship and the presentation of the book to the world.

As Harman points out, however, the gender of "Valentine Ackland" was largely ignored by critics: "Several reviewers assumed she was a man, and those who knew or guessed otherwise didn't remark on the eroticism of the love poems ... Most of the reviewers seemed glad of the distraction provided by the 'experiment in the presentation

of poetry,' which became the focus of every review, conveniently displacing the issue of lesbianism" (5-6). Robert Frost, the collection's unwilling dedicatee, wrote privately to Louis Untermeyer about his "disgust and perplexity" at the matter, specifically asking not to be connected with the book by "that couplet in England."¹² Frost writes, "'Don't you find the contemplation of their kind of collusion emasculating? I am chilled to the marrow, as in the actual presence of some foul form of death where none of me can function, not even my habitual interest in versification'" (6). Whining that he could "do without" some of the more physical poems, Frost's comments represent how the public at large perceived this type of open same-sex sentiment as disturbing. It is important to keep this kind of bigotry in perspective as we work through Warner's lyrics and realize that in the simple act of writing them, she was part of a type of lesbian feminist resistance.

The history of the joint poetic persona Michael Field, which predated Warner and Ackland, can also tell us something about this layered issue. Beginning in the late 1870s, Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper wrote over 40 works together under the name Michael Field, as well as a long journal *Works and Days*. Critic Chris White explains the difficulty of pinpointing an explicit sexual relationship between the two women in a time when the dominant culture condemned such feelings and relationships. Discussing their joint volume of poetry *Long Ago*¹³ (1889), White explains how they used available models to talk about same-sex desire, invoking and distorting the lesbian precedent of Sappho: "The reconciliation of the old and the new – of classical Greek culture and literature and nineteenth-century remakings of those forms and ideas – forms

¹² "Couplet" is an interesting word choice considering this thesis is about form and content alignment; perceiving the same sex-couple as a rhyming couplet is a concept we return to at the end.

¹³ In *Long Ago*, Michael Field do a series of poems based on and completing Sappho's fragments (exploring their heterosexual version), alongside poems of passion between women.

an important part of the conceptualization of homosexual desire, and more significantly, of the place of homosexuals in a dominantly heterosexual society” (29). White emphasizes that in their subtle coding and appropriations of Greek culture these women “developed their own strategies for talking about and explaining such expressions of sexuality” (36). The same, we will see, can be argued of Warner and Ackland in *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, as Warner often carefully uses form and rhyme to rewrite a modern lesbian experience in a traditional formal context.

What’s also significant about the work of Michael Field is the unique female poetic space it created. In their reliance on and homage to Sappho in *Long Ago*, Michael Field advocate a certain type of lesbian community of women: a society of friendship that is also a site of poetic production. So in both their *poetic subjects* – Sappho and Lesbos – and in their own *poetic practice* – two women jointly producing poetry – Michael Field emphasize the importance of cultivating the poet identity. As White stresses, the practice of poetry is equally important to sexuality in the work of Michael Field. White explains that in their preface to *Long Ago*, meticulously written in the first-person singular, there is an ambiguous appeal to the “one woman”:

The “one woman” is either Sappho, a lover, or a writing partner. This ambiguity of identity is central to this volume of poetry. . . . In order to speak “unflinchingly” of woman’s love for woman, it is necessary for Michael Field to work in alliance with other women and other women’s formulations of such love. The construction in the preface is both strategic and passionate, not a privatized emotion [that] continues detached historical and social concerns. It is political, creating changes

in the presentation of love between women on the basis of the available cultural models. (33)

Presenting this type of ambiguity was central to their non-binary construction of sexual identity.

In their preface to *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, Warner and Ackland urge a similar kind of ambiguity, inviting the reader to allow their female voices to merge into one poetic identity or, at the very least, remaining anonymous so that their poems can be judged free of authorial identity (despite reviewers' attempts to separate the poems by poet, and the poets' subsequent decision to include an index of authorship). It is also known that part of Warner's motivation to publish a volume like this was to promote Valentine's work—"Sylvia's motives were nicely mixed; part blackmail of her publisher, part a pure desire to make poems she believed good available to readers, part the personal motive of making readers available to Valentine" (Harman 126). In her efforts to promote a fellow lesbian poet, Warner is carrying on the tradition of opening a community of acceptance for female poets—the same kind that Michael Field advocate for in their poetry. In the same year that *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* was published, fellow modernist poet and author Gertrude Stein also published *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), a book radically written under the guise of an "autobiography" of her life partner. In the very act of deeming it an autobiography, she is implying a similar notion about the joint identity that has been created between lovers—her lover is herself. Michael Field and Warner and Ackland play upon a similar type of joint poetic identity. Warner and Ackland may have borrowed from earlier poetic strategies practiced by Michael Field—and throughout her work and use of models of Victorian self-restraint

and her commentary on poetic form itself, Warner adopts a new lesbian tradition to talk about the identity of a female poet. And it remains a troubling tradition, as we will see the tension in deciding whether to celebrate or denounce this lesbian identity. After all, despite Warner wanting to promote and support Ackland's poetry by publishing *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, the authors also wanted their identities to remain anonymous.

Chapter 3: Celebration or Denial? Analyzing Warner's Ambivalent Lesbian Poetics

Like her earlier poems, Warner's 1930s love poems that bear an explicitly lesbian sentiment are characterized by incongruity and vacillation: she pairs the open discussion of same-sex desire with formal construction, revolutionary awareness with confined emotions, framing this poetics of lesbian longing with a haunting reticence. These poems remain Georgian in their neatly structured verse, the musicality of rhyme, and the sentimentalities and pastoral inspirations from the countryside and nature. In many of her love-inspired lyrics, she displaces her emotions onto nature—similar to the way the Victorians frequently used what John Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy—manipulating stormy weather, scenes from the garden, and animals' behaviors to articulate her mixed feelings about the evolving hurdles of passionate lesbian love. Integrating structured, at times playful, rhymes with serious, dark meditations, Warner uniquely pairs conventional strategies and modern sensibilities to create love poems distinct in their ominous tone, haunting reticence, and instability. In the following sections, we explore how the subversive strategies Warner employed in her early poetry reach new heights in her explicitly physical love poems and her more conservatively coded examples from *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*. Namely, these sections question her peculiar construction of lesbian sexuality through traditionally heterosexual language and motifs, as we examine how she uses male poetic traditions to define a female experience.

Relationship Dynamics: Repression in Warner's Explicitly Lesbian Lyrics

Commenting on her earlier work from *The Espalier* (1925) and *Time Importuned* (1928), Spraggs argues that Warner's carefully controlled rhyme schemes and sometimes anachronistic language is complicated by subject matter that is "romantically marginal or otherworldly" (113). Though the lyrics in *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* and many of her later uncollected poems distance us from the witches, gypsies, and eerie old women of her earlier work, Warner's love poetry is still concerned with the forbidden, the strange, and the marginal—the lesbian relationship. In "Never love unless you can,"¹⁴ Warner revisits her earlier poems that use what Spraggs calls an ironic "deadpan, habitual tone" that echo "ballads, folk songs and nursery rhymes" (113).

In "Never love unless you can—" Warner adopts a playful rhyme with eight rhyming couplets in a realistic love poem with an explicitly lesbian sentiment—one of the few poems where she directly uses the term "lesbian." This poem captures some of Warner's modern social commentary, as she here bridges the gap by equating lesbian and heterosexual relationships, creating a sense of connection as the speaker opens with: "Lesbian love is equally/ not from faults of temper free" (lines 1-2). Warner explicates a dualism in this verse, as the speaker suggests to "never love unless you can" deal with the realities of love's flippant nature where lovers "will sometime mope and pine,/ make you scowl or make you whine" (lines 3-4). Warner presents more contrasts as the speaker explains that delights and flatteries are mingled in with struggles "sometimes meek and sometimes grand,/ sometimes bite the generous hand" (lines 11-12). Suggesting these hurdles are part of any genuine romantic relationship, the speaker plays with clichés by entertaining the give and take, the hurt and reward of lesbian love. The last lines suggest

¹⁴ In Harman's edition of *New Collected Poems*, this particular poem is classified under "Uncollected Poems 1931-1960."

that this intimacy and connection are worth the more painful inconsistencies: “yet, take all in all, improving/ with the years at loved and loving” (lines 13-14). Formal in its adoption of a nursery-like beat with a final rhyming couplet reminiscent of a sonnet in the way it is spatially separated from the rest of the lines, this poem shows Warner’s ability to manipulate form to adhere to a modern subject as she employs a jeering, sardonic tone in explaining exactly what “lesbians sometimes will require” (line 7) while also weighing out frank realities of relationships.

In “Women and the English Poetic Tradition: the Oppressor’s Language,” Janet Montefiore discusses the ways women poets have connected with the poetic traditions they have inherited; she argues that as early as the seventh century, female poets have distorted existing poetic traditions in order to rewrite their own experiences. We have already noted how the transgressive act of Michael Field – despite their misleadingly harmless name – managed to distort this tradition. Highlighting examples from Amelia Lanier to Stevie Smith to Sylvia Townsend Warner, Montefiore explains, “Women poets ... attempted with varying degrees of success to appropriate highly formalized conventions of poetry to articulate their own concerns and experiences” (41). Similarly, Dowson argues that female modernists “adopted and adapted male-associated poetic conventions” by centralizing women’s experiences in their writing: “In displacing literary symbols, reversing gender stereotypes or challenging depictions of idealized femininity, female modernists culminate the progress of the modern woman poet towards aesthetic freedom” (*Women, Modernism and British Poetry* 172). In the case of *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* and many of the other uncollected poems shared here, we can see Warner

creating love poems that subtly—and sometimes not so subtly—articulate this double-bound lesbian experience by using, and sometimes distorting, poetic conventions.

“Since the first toss of gale that blew,” published in *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, serves as an example of Warner’s erotic, explosive lyricism. The metaphor and imagery of the storm characterizes the entirety of this sexually charged poem. Warner gives the weather full agency, beginning with the gust of wind, the very action that forces the bodies of the two lovers together:

Since the first toss of gale that blew

Me into you

The wind that our still love awakened

Has never slackened (lines 1-4)

This early poem anticipates the violent passion of a powerful love, though it is a love that continues to grow and one that has “never slackened” for nearly a year. Warner uses wind imagery throughout, as the storm persists and matches the sexual advances of the lovers: “Scattering lightning along thighs/ Lightning from skies” (lines 19-20).

Gillian Spraggs emphasizes how storm and storm imagery reverberate in the *Whether A Dove or A Seagull* collection, often used metaphorically to show the simultaneously threatening and alluring nature of this type of sexual desire:

In [this poem] it is the two women’s lovemaking that rouses the wind outside to emulation. There is more than a suggestion of sympathetic magic here: the upheavals in their microcosm are reflected in the wider world of nature. Witches are traditionally storm raisers, and Sylvia was always interested in witches. And

her conceit is followed through, she revels simultaneously in its eroticism and its sinister implications. (118)

Throughout the poem, Warner juxtaposes a literal storm against the “wild weather” of the couple’s sexual encounters, creating an amorous love that also connotes danger and damage as “long meeting of our lips/ Shall be breaking of ships” (lines 24, 11-12). The calamity continues up to the final lines:

What winds, what wrecking,
 What wrath of wild our dangerous peace
 Waits to release. (lines 30-32)

The explosive sexual “release” is apparent in the tumultuous nature of the verse, but there also lurks a haunting dualism, a self-reservation that repeats in several of Warner’s poems. Though their passion is seemingly as uncontrollable as a natural storm, the two lovers maintain a reserve with looks that match “the demure/ Flame of our candle” (lines 26-27). This duality is similarly noted in the clashing phrasing of the oxymoronic “dangerous peace” that brews. For there to be danger in peace there must be a threateningly powerful dynamic between the lovers; Warner constructs an inverted world where peace is volatile. With the conflicting yearning to both erupt and implode, this marks one early example of Warner’s erratic love lyric.

Constructed in formal verse, the rhyme scheme takes on a child-like, nursery rhyme quality with its 16 short rhyming couplets that make up the 32-line poem. Warner juxtaposes longer eight or nine syllable lines between shorter four or five syllable lines giving it an echo-like quality that mirrors the stormy nature of the verse; the alliteration, repetition, and parallelism of these last “What winds, what wrecking” lines also adds to

the echoing thunder-like rumble of the verse. This genre of the echo-poem is a centuries-old poetic tradition in its own right, used by George Herbert in his 17th-century poem "Heaven," Victorian poet Christina Rossetti in "Echo," and later, by Yeats in "The Man and the Echo" (1938). Discussing the repetitive rhyming couplets used in "The Man and the Echo," Helen Vendler explains: "The distinct units of the poem, as couplets that have less 'space' within them than quatrains do, lend themselves to being sharply 'bitten off'" (239).

The same can be said of the form Warner chooses to employ in "Since the first toss," a poem notably *not* set up in Warner's usual stanza form, but as one long echoing lyric that rings with biting urgency from one line to the next. Echoes themselves inherently invite repetitions and ambiguities. The structure reflects the movement of sounds bouncing back and forth, but as we learn from the ancient tradition of the echo, it is not another voice calling back but the speaker's voice alone that is reflected. Though the attention to one single voice is again an ironic play for Warner, as this poem is featured in a joint volume of poetry, and the rumbling thunder indicates these two women are the storm raisers. Warner aligns form, sound, tone, and context, and as a result, the body politics of the lovers' erotic connection rings as both electrifying and ominous. Mingling formal rhyme and an explicit sexual context, Warner brings a unique pairing of classic and modern to the female poetic sphere.

Speaking on the explicit revolutionary quality of this lyric, Spraggs goes on to argue, "In its sexual explicitness, the poem defies the conventional boundaries set for women's writing at the time it was composed. As a poem of love between women, it is simply unprecedented: revolutionary, in fact" (119). In "Since the first toss," Warner

simultaneously conforms to and subverts traditional notions of female power; this poem makes a statement that these two women together are a force to be reckoned with—a powerful connection with both promise and consequence—“For breath drawn quicker men drowned/ And trees downed” (lines 13-14). With such a bold statement on female power like this, we can get a sense of what scared Frost. The storm of their sexuality—always paired, for Warner, with this repeated trope of female fluidity—can drown men and destroy the phallic trees that their poetic forefathers created.

In *Feminism and Poetry*, Montefiore documents the influence of French philosopher and feminist Luce Irigaray and how she emphasized how new metaphors of liquidity were being used to describe the female experience: “The rightness of these metaphors is confirmed by the frequency with which imagery of water, oceans and dissolution is associated in women’s poems with identity and sexuality” (176). Irigaray argues that plurality and indefiniteness are important characteristics of female identity – and given Warner’s poetic vacillations and use of fluid metaphors, we can see how she helps create a woman-centered power in her poetry. Though Warner continues to use the oppressors’ language (though often subverting it) in a way that might seem less radical than the next generation of lesbian poets like Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich, it is examples like “Since the first toss” that give us reason to pause and reflect on just how much Warner, in her own way, has contributed to a radical lesbian tradition.

“Out of Your Left Eye” is another similarly explosive poem from the collection with keen attention on the physicality of the speaker’s beloved and the elements that threaten the prolonged existence of their relationship. Instead of using the storm as metaphor, Warner this time mingles the imagery of a bird moving in a tree with the

lovers' passionate advances. The bird's freedom is associated with their yearning for sexual liberation:

My hand along your thigh
 In stillness sheathing,
 My desire laid by,
 Lest a movement, at a sigh
 Flesh awaken like a tree shaken
 And out of its bower affrighted
 Shall fly, oh fly (10-16)

Just as the weather (i.e. "the wind that our still love awakened") enables the lovers' meeting in "Since the first toss of gale that blew," here the image of the tree shaking is linked with the awakening of flesh—of bodily pleasure. This eroticized image of "desire" and the attention directed to the hand along the beloved's thigh is reserved in its "stillness sheathing," the effect of which hints at an imminent explosive capacity. The speaker is prophesying the same warning of the grand release in the previous poem, "What wrath of wild our dangerous peace/ Waits to release," though it is a release that is yet to be satisfied.

Focusing attention on the erotic undertones alone hardly does justice to the intelligent, nuanced construction of this love poem. The layered complexity of this lyric follows as Warner uses the metaphor of the bird's flight to parallel the experience between the two lovers. The poem begins by addressing the lover "out of *your* left eye" and ultimately makes a comparison between the life behind the eye (i.e. directly addressing the beloved) and the bird's movements:

Out of your left eye
 Bright behind bar of lovelock tumbled awry
 Life looks at me,
 Sudden, dauntless and shy
 As a bird moving in a tree (1-5)

Since Warner begins with a central comparison between the beloved and the bird, the connection between the two remains throughout the rest of the lyric—what can be said of one is then implied for the other. In “The Practice of the Presence of Valentine: Ackland in Warner’s Work,” Frances Bingham argues that in much of Warner’s work, nature is “in league with Valentine”; she explains that Warner’s muse had her own personal iconography, commonly in the form of a bird—“swallows, falcons, even feathers, were all her symbols” (31). We can see that in this poem, and among others, Valentine is depicted as the flighty, free bird, while Sylvia is the caged.¹⁵ Even without the biographical dissection, which is all too tempting but also inappropriate given the preface to the collection, these two opposing images of the speaker and the beloved speak to Warner’s use of images of liberation and suppression, with dominant and submissive personalities inhabiting the verse.

Nestled between the attention to the physical body (the beloved’s thigh, the lovelock of hair) and the erotic undertones of the “flesh awaken” are the incongruities that make Warner’s love poems distinct. Like the conflicting phrase of the “dangerous peace” in “Since the first toss,” the characterization of the beloved and the bird as

¹⁵ Warner and Ackland provided an index of authors in a later edition of *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, so we know this was in fact a poem written by Warner. They provided the index after receiving criticism about their decision to remain anonymous (for more on this, see Harman’s introduction to *New Collection Poems*).

“sudden, dauntless and shy” is peculiar. Though not necessarily opposites, to be both fearless (i.e. dauntless) and timid (i.e. shy) is not entirely common. These terms alone serve as erratic examples within this poem. Perhaps this type of duality and sense of contradiction captures something about the erotic relationship, in which one can shift from dauntless to shy and back again suddenly: the sweetness of foreplay is sometimes at odds with the coldness or comedown of post-coital gloom.

Warner’s eccentric diction is matched with the instability of the narrative within the poem as she pairs elation with devastation, including both the explosive capacity of the speaker’s desire and her ability to cover it up (i.e. “stillness sheathing”). Mixed throughout the images of beauty and passion is a looming fear that both are fleeting:

So rare and renowned a bird – and never again, maybe,

Mine to behold, to hold in my sense’s tether.

Hush, for anon, oh, anon, it will be gone! (17-19)

The speaker is aware that the bird’s rare and renowned beauty is likely to pass, and given the central metaphor that guides this verse, the same can be said of the speaker’s insecurities propelled toward her beloved. Warner signifies intimate love through the beautiful, liberated image of the bird and notes the happiness and elation that the beloved experiences when witnessing the bird’s beauty, as the beloved is “delighted” to watch the sudden flight of the bird, an experience she calls “a wonder beyond why” (7, 8). While the beloved is in awe, the speaker, on the other hand, appears discomfited with the bird’s freedom and with its ability to move effortlessly from a tree to the depths of the sky: “And trapped by that freedom I lie unbreathing” (9). Warner here vacillates between images of liberation and of suppression; though the desire for an erotic release is

apparent, there is also a sense of reservation or even fear, perhaps as part of a greater awareness of love's imminent devastations.

As we can see, Spragg's characterization of the speakers of Warner's earlier poetry as "watchful, curious ... aloof [and] faintly regretful" (114) is also true of the poetic voice in the collaborative work *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*. And again, this collection is particularly innovative as a pair of female lovers jointly constructed it. Though one is not prescribed to read it as strictly lesbian verse, Spraggs argues that understanding this passionate romantic relationship is key to a more fruitful reading of the poems. Spraggs also distinguishes Warner's poetic voice from Ackland's in this collection—she characterizes Warner's speakers as "self-protectively secretive" and "emotionally restrained and inhibited" (116), while Ackland is often frank.¹⁶ We can see how the juxtaposition of these two personalities plays out in a poem like "Out of your left eye," and we will see it proves relevant time and time again. Though Warner and Ackland themselves ask us to let go of traditional notions of authorial identity in their preface, in some ways, to deny the influence and presence of Ackland in Warner's lyrics is to support the mythic notion of the apparitional lesbian; by denying these factors validity, we are denying her sexuality and the revolutionary power of this work. Terry Castle reminds us, "The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else, in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. She is far away and she is dire" (2). In some ways, the stormy sexual force of the erotic poems partakes in this

¹⁶ Though Spraggs is insisting on a distinction between the two women that the women themselves were working to deny, their decision to add the index of authors to *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* allows for this type of speculation.

kind of imagery. Despite the conflicting plea that asks us to cover up her identity, Warner makes lesbian love, a forbidden love, visible in her poetry.

The sexual undertones of “Out of your left eye” are matched with a “stillness” and “rest” that may also be references to death, for meditations on death and loss are not uncommon in Warner’s poetry; the last lines read, “ – When we have swayed to stillness, and rest together - / You on my breast lying, fallen a bright breast feather” (lines 21-22). Similar to the way the erratic diction of “sudden, dauntless and shy” suggests a post-coital emotional shift, the Renaissance idea of “la petite mort” also indicates a type of post-coital moment here—the sexual explicitness in this poem suggests a reasonable reference to the “little death” of an orgasm.¹⁷ Again, working within the tradition of her predecessors, Warner at times conflates experiences of love and death in a way that recalls Shakespeare or Marvell.¹⁸ The tension and complication within this poem foreshadow an array of hesitations in Warner’s other love lyrics, where the suffocating nature of freedom and the haunting presence of death are both revisited.

There are other love poems that initially appear lighter in their natural imagery and tones of settled pleasure, in particular, an uncollected poem titled “Drawing you, heavy with sleep.” Here, Warner constructs a portrait of two lovers lying together. Though it is less explicitly erotic than poems like “Since the first toss,” its attention to the physicality of the two bodies intertwined in sleep makes it physical and sensuous:

Drawing you, heavy with sleep to lie closer,

Staying your poppy head upon my shoulder,

It was as though I pulled the glide

¹⁷ “petite mort, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2015. Web. 19 February 2016.

¹⁸ See the “amorous birds of prey” and the stillness of death emphasized in Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” for example.

Of a full river to my side. (1-4)

Warner employs the metaphor of a river to indicate the beloved's fluid motions. Though literary reviewers John Wilkinson and Claire Harman refer to this as a poem of "settled" love, the middle two stanzas indicate a familiar use of an ominous image from nature with an explosive capacity, here as "an arm of flood across meadows" (8):

And as the careless water its mirroring sanction

Grants to him at the river's brim long stationed,

Long drowned in thought, that yet he lives

Since in that mirroring tide he moves (9-12)

The powerful movement of the river – its "careless" capability to flood, to drown – connotes a dangerous potential, a raw force; even if it is at the moment only gliding, we know well that given Warner's frequent shifts in tone throughout her poems that this river's glide can quickly change beat to a roar. Similar to the way the imagery in the previous poems function, Warner vacillates between the beautiful and the destructive capacity of the river; given the metaphoric parallel, this same power to delight and destroy lies within the beloved. The beloved is just as flighty as the "sudden" fleeting bird in the tree or the "careless" river, while the speaker remains ever serious, ever thoughtful.

In her analysis of this poem, Montefiore argues that Warner plays with identity in complex ways, in particular arguing that the poet's use of the masculine "he" articulates the sexual identity of the lover's contemplative consciousness. Some might argue that at the time of the construction of this poem, "he" and "him" could be used to mean "anybody," or that alternatively, the choice to use the masculine pronoun avoided any

possible censorship of the poem's lesbian eroticism (this seems unlikely to me though, given the explicitness of the physical poems previously mentioned). However, Montefiore points out the following:

The trouble is that these explanations conform rather than counter the real difficulty, which is that the poem does *not* fully transcend the assumptions – that 'he' can denote all humanity, or that desire is always heterosexual – which are encoded in the language-conventions it is using . . . [this poem] cannot be claimed as an instance of female discourse existing outside the constraints of history.

(*Feminism and Poetry* 160)

In its ambivalence, we can see how this poem fits in line with Warner's self-effacing poetic tendencies that speak to the difficulty in articulating a lesbian existence.

The final stanza settles the tension in the image created, however, for it was only "entertained" and does not disturb or "stain" the purity of the sleeping lovers:

Your body lying by mine to mine responded:

Your hair stirred on my mouth, my image dandled

Deep in your sleep that flowed unstained

On from the image entertained. (lines 13-16)

Both the fluidity of the river and the attention to the beloved's hair suggest this is a love poem between women—despite the fact that the use of the "he" pronoun muddles the sexual identity of the characters. The river fits nicely with the familiar trope of water and fluidity used to describe female sexuality.¹⁹ In her subtle coding, Warner again creates an intimate lesbian lyric. And again, there appears to be a reserved quality in the speaker: a silence that sets in in the face of a threatening disenchantment. There is a recognition and

¹⁹ For more on this, see Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, London: Pandora, 1987, p. 158

fear that the speaker is ultimately not that important to the powerful lover, who can “entertain” the speaker’s image, but then flows on; hence, there is indeed a loss or an anticipation of loss that silences the speaker. In the poems analyzed thus far, Warner maintains a subtext of foreboding in her complex, manipulative portrayal of intimate relations, mixing formal poetic strategies with unsettling, unconventional contexts.

The Simultaneous Celebration and Denial of the Lesbian Experience

Though “Never love unless you can,” “Since the first toss,” “Out of your left eye,” and even “Drawing you heavy with sleep,” can be read as more explicitly physical lyrics on lesbian love, there are also more coded examples where Warner continues to play with and complicate familiar domesticity and nature tropes. Often in her language she emphasizes the caged or entrapped feeling associated with intimate love. The troubling “unbreathing freedom” referenced in “Out of your left eye” is not uncommon among Warner’s love lyrics in the *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* collection. In “I, so wary of traps,” the speaker specifically addresses the question about this type of freedom. In this short 8-line poem, the speaker admits she has been caught in something treacherous, despite her powerful wits—something, in this book of intimate poems, that we can assume to be love’s grasp—“I . . . / am caught now, perhaps” (1, 4) the poem opens. We get a sense of the stifling, dangerous capacity that freedom has, something we see referenced in a few of her other lyrics:

Though capture, while I am laid

So still in hold, is but

The limb’s long sigh to admit

How heavy freedom weighed. (lines 5-8)

It is a type of capture she isn't fighting against as she remains "so still in hold." This heavy weight of freedom is interesting; again, it is peculiar to associate a heaviness with freedom as opposed to a lightness.

This is where Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not" sonnet proves relevant again, a poem in which the speaker offers us a confined poetic form that is beneficial for those "Who have felt the weight of too much liberty" (line 13). Perhaps Warner employed this advice in her own ideas on poetic construction, but she seems to also take it a step further here by equating it with the boundaries within a relationship. Whether she is merely playing with the poetic ideas of her forefathers or subverting them to her own context, this oppressive nature of freedom speaks to Warner's poetic incongruities—it is as if she experiences a relief in being trapped or confined. Like Wordsworth suggests, some level of confinement can make one feel secure, and freedom seem dangerous. Perhaps there is a sort of masochistic quality to the dynamics of this lesbian relationship: a tendency in which the speaker enjoys being dominated or captured by the beloved, which was and continues to be the helpless or submissive role so long inflicted on centuries of women in a patriarchal society. These commonly heterosexual power dynamics are still at play in these lyrics that bear an explicitly lesbian sentiment—as they are featured in a collection of two female poets addressing each other. But perhaps what also further complicates this idea is that, as we know from the preface of *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, Warner and Ackland did *not* want their identities to be weighed. Are Warner and Ackland downplaying their revolutionary approach – like the masculine name chosen by Michael Field – in hiding behind a poetic persona? Are we to read these lyrics as a conversation

between lovers, male and female, female and female, or simply from one person to another? Despite the fact that some of Warner's lyrics do suggest a specific conversation between females, are they also self-effacing? Is Warner here, like Dowson suggests of other thirties poets, denouncing or downplaying her own sexuality as a defense mechanism? It may not be possible to easily pinpoint the answers to these layered questions, but it is quite clear that Warner remains aware of them in her poetic play—it is indeed part of what Davie calls her “deliberate design.” Warner continues to ask perplexing questions about caged domesticity that she only ambivalently answers.

Just as the speaker in *The Espalier's* “Wish in the Spring” ruminates on her oppressed position, Warner revisits a similar trope in *From Whether a Dove or a Seagull's* “O how perplexed”—a poem in which the speaker's silence and reticence again finds a troubling place. In this poem composed of three 7-line stanzas, the speaker contemplates the repercussions of speaking her mind and letting her inner emotions free. We learn this is no new dilemma, as the poem opens “O how perplexed/ With this now and that next” (lines 1-2), hinting these are things she's dwelled on before. Again we are placed in a domestic atmosphere, as the speaker thinks while in the kitchen:

The kitchen mock
 Of every stationary crock,
 My thoughts, besmirched with toil and swink,
 Drain greasy down the sink (lines 8-11)

It is worth noting that Warner places her speakers in domestic settings—working in the garden, toiling in the kitchen—all scenes where women are commonly placed. Because these thoughts “drain greasy” and not so easily, we know these are important

considerations—ones quite difficult and even painful to ignore. Whether the speaker of this poem is lamenting about a lover of the same sex or not, there remains a haunting quality to the speaker's quiet and incapable demeanor. She does not “dare” to let her thoughts “wander through window-pane” (lines 12, 13) where they will inevitably threaten the relationship.

Again, the speaker utilizes the image of a cage to talk about her relationship—a central trope for domestically repressed females:

Yet if my rage
 Should smite away the cage,
 If from the sea a wind should come
 And shout my jailers dumb,
 This heart that bangs on bone,
 Tossed to the firmament of being alone
 Would sink me like a stone (lines 15-21)

The speaker is bottling up a deep anger, though we know not the cause. The beloved is here the jailer, and the speaker's choice to remain caged is a conscious one. She realizes the sacrifice of not speaking up, but dwells on the unappealing repercussions of freedom and loneliness—a burden her heart simply cannot bear. Jane Dowson emphasizes that Warner was very conscious of “the double restraints of the lesbian existence” as well as the pressures and frustrations of both the single woman and the housewife. In this poem, Dowson argues, Warner challenges these conventions: “The looking-out-of-the window perspective is a literal device which punctuates the myth of domestic bliss; the view of the cottage may be idyllic to the outsider, but to the woman indoors the kitchen is a

prison of overwork and confinement” (*Poetry of the 1930s* 152). But in this argument, Dowson is giving a heterosexual reading of the poem.²⁰

In this re-envisioning of the myth of domestic bliss, Warner’s reticent speaker does little to combat the norm other than imagining escape in her mind—fantasizing the idea of a revolution, or at least revolt, that is never fully realized—as we have seen and will continue to see in her intimate poems. And perhaps there is little that she can do if we take this in the context of an early-twentieth-century bound housewife. But because this is a collection of poetry shared and addressed between women, we are also able to place this poem outside of a heteronormative context, and this also says something interesting about Warner’s reticent speakers: that this type of oppression persists in both heterosexual and homosexual relations. Warner uses the same dominant/submissive dynamics that have bound centuries of women.

The complexity of this layered issue is quickly referenced in Dowson’s work: “The poems in *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* express the lesbian continuum of mutual love with subtle coding, as in the title poem: ‘Whether a dove or a seagull lighted there/ I cannot tell’” (152). The ambiguity suggested in this title, like Warner’s meticulous choice of naming *The Espalier*, is again worth noting. Warner wants to intentionally blur this distinction between the identity of the two birds, despite the one’s soft call and the other’s loud, the one’s dainty diet of seeds and grass and the other’s wide range of prey,

²⁰ Dowson argues this poem depicts a repressed housewife and that it is representative of the type of quiet understanding women had that bound them to silence: “There was no available language model and the mother/housewife would have felt guilty about expressing rebellion. As Alison Light suggests, ‘Just how unquiet the depths were beneath the apparently unruffled surface of sensible and quiescent women living between the wars can be gauged from the success of Daphne DuMaurier’s 1938 bestseller, *Rebecca*’” (*Women, Modernism and British Poetry* 244). See also Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 13.

and the common understanding of the gentle dove versus the more predatory seagull. In the title choice alone, the two women set this up as a poetics of identity play.

And Dowson argues, as the title poem suggests, “The shared battle is between celebrating or denying a desire which counters convention” (152). This struggle to communicate female sexuality and sexual identity plays out in many of Warner’s lyrics, as we can see her speakers actively battle with convention in *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* and her other collections. Though Dowson works to solidify Warner’s rightful place in the modernist canon, she fails to address the issue of repression in Warner’s explicitly lesbian lyrics. She argues, “Like other female modernists, Warner’s depiction of freedom refutes the self-renunciation to which nineteenth-century texts often capitulated” (*Women, Modernism and British Poetry* 214), and while this may be true of some of Warner’s poems, her lesbian lyrics capture a self-renunciation reminiscent of the traditions Dowson argues Warner is writing against – perhaps indicating that both Warner-as-lover and Warner-as-poet were not able to completely escape the heteronormative traditions that bound her. Similar to the way Chris White argues that Michael Field’s poetic strategies included deploying “the language of classical scholarship” as well as “the language of love belonging to heterosexuality,” Warner is also working within this tradition of compulsory heterosexuality in order to discuss the lesbian experience (34).

Escalated Romantic Suffering: Repression in Warner’s Darker Lyrics

Of the assorted verses that constitute Warner’s collection of love poems, there are those that take a lighter approach to love’s rewards and woes, and there are various

examples of more serious meditations on the devastating realities of infidelity, bereavement, and death that plague the relationship between lover and the beloved. This ongoing discussion of repression in Sylvia Townsend Warner's work, in both her poetry and prose, also includes questions about the presence of a third—an "other" lover—who complicates the ideal relationship and causes tension. For example, in *Summer Will Show*, this "third" is the lover of the narrator's husband—a picture that becomes complicated once the lover and the narrator form a romantic relationship. The question of fidelity is also introduced in the epigraph to this thesis—a poem that addresses the beloved's faithfulness ("Belle rivale, qui de mon amant/ M'après l'amour et la fidélité"). Deepening the existing complication that the "forbidden love" of lesbianism already suggests, in "Being Watched" and "I always fold my gloves," Warner adds another layer by introducing the threats of infidelity and instability: this experience is now double-bound by two challenges to the norms of heterosexuality *and* monogamy.

In the painful portrait of "Being Watched," from *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, images of sexual faithlessness are paired with Warner's repeated literary device of conflating scenes from nature with struggle. In "Being Watched," the couplets with the unmatched lengths recall the echo device of "Since the first toss." Again, this poem is not written in stanzaic form, but as one long 40-line restless lyric with the haunting echo of each couplet weighing heavily on the speaker. There's an interesting combination of symmetry (in the rhyme) and asymmetry (in the line lengths) that is also suggestive of a power imbalance—again an instance where Warner is playfully matching form and subject, manner and matter. As John Wilkinson explains, this poem addressed to Ackland is "deeply painful" and "especially chilling" as the reality of infidelity "blights the

kitchen garden” (459). Just as the speaker of “O how perplexed” ruminates on her devastation in the kitchen, here Warner places us in another domestic setting, as the speaker is haunted in the garden.

The reality of the wandering beloved who strayed “to find/ Another more to her mind” (lines 3-4) troubles the speaker who sits tailoring at the weeds in the garden. While the assumed beloved waits “with folded hands” and remains unfeigned by the heat, the speaker suffers in silence: “Though in the sun I sweat” (lines 5,6). There is already a contrast presented here between the unaffected beloved and the reserved yet painfully aware speaker that echoes a similar dynamic to the couple in “Out of Your Left Eye” and “Drawing you, heavy with sleep.” In this complicated poem about a deviant romantic relationship, Warner constructs the natural images of the garden scene and the familiar weather imagery of a dangerous storm looming as “the stormcloud threatens [the beloved], but does not budge” (line 7). The violence of jealous feelings brewing is mirrored in the speaker’s vigorous work in the garden pulling at the weeds—a process that is symbolic in itself, as this “other” figure lurking may be the unwanted weed wedged between the speaker and her lover.

Let the smoke watch, let the slow watcher burn –

I have a deeper concern,

That winds my thought through earth in endless travel

As I bend to unravel

This warfare newly taken on with weeds. (lines 17-21)

More serious with its imagery of “smoke,” “burn,” and “warfare,” this poem presents a dangerous and threatening side of the speaker. Similar to the calamitous thunder and

lightning of the erotic “Since the first toss of gale that blew,” the metaphors of the storm and the weeding out of the garden are examples of natural devastations that mimic the emotional devastation of the speaker. The speaker uses her work in the garden as an outlet for an ominous unraveling, but her silence remains. Like the storm cloud, she “threatens” but “does not budge”; though her countenance is reserved and she appears in control of her anger on the surface, the foreboding nature of the verse hints at an impending destruction.

The reality of the speaker’s unfortunate position progressively manifests in the poem, as more ghosts from the speaker’s past seem to haunt her as the drama escalates, with each couplet still anxiously biting the next in this long poetic form: “I raise my eyes to confront the darkened air, / And other watchers are there” (lines 27-28). Ultimately, the garden is personified in its haunting speech that further reveals the action of infidelity:

The hedgerow ash in gossip with the wind
 Breaks off a while to find
 New talking matter in a comparison
 Of her newcome, her gone.
 ‘One woman or another, ‘tis no odds,
 Now this one grubs and plods,
 Much as the other did who now stands by.’
 ‘No odds,’ the weeds reply;
 And silently plum-tree and apple-tree
 Reach on, and root in me. (lines 31-40)

In this poem, as in many others, Warner is dramatizing the internal conflict of the speaker's psychological and sexual identity using an interior monologue and dialogue, the tension heightened by her choice of this particular poetic form.²¹ The "one woman or another" comment hints that the speaker attempts to trivialize and rationalize the beloved's tendency to stray, although it is a painful reality. Though there is anger and violence propelled in the images of burning "bindweed and couch-grass" and the bind-like nature of the "twining foes" and "shackle" of the weeds (reminiscent of the suffocating freedom in "Out of your left eye" and "I, so wary of traps"), there also appears to be an attempt at resolution (lines 14, 25, 26). As the speaker tries to stifle her anger and come to terms with the beloved's wrongs, we are left with the pleasant images of the "plum-tree" and "apple-tree" roots as opposed to the oppressive weeds. As the powerful last line suggests, the growing awareness of the speaker's unfaithful lover is now "rooted" in her consciousness. Though the "weeding" and "warfare" do suggest a more active stance of trying to remove something and not just being threatened by devastation, the ending leaves us with a familiar and painful silence as these unfortunate realities are "silently" (line 39) rooted.

Similar to the conflicting "dangerous peace" in "Since the first toss" and the dichotomy between liberation and suppression in "Out of your left eye," Warner's images here vacillate between an emancipated, unmatchable physical connection and the shackled emotional pain of silence. Warner further develops her reserved speaker in this poem of quiet dread; John Wilkinson, explaining a common link within her love poems,

²¹ In *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*, Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle explain the literary device of the modern dramatic monologue in their chapter titled "'I will put myself, and everything I see, upon the page': Charlotte Mew, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Anna Wickham and the dramatic monologue."

comments, “Although highly personal, the poems are peculiarly selfless” (460). In “Being Watched,” the speaker wrestles with the growing awareness and acknowledgement of the beloved’s unfortunate infidelity, a narrative that falls in line with Warner’s tendency to attempt to balance out the inherent pain and joy within love in her poems. What makes Warner’s love poems distinct is her ability to take the subject beyond the trivial “good” versus “bad” qualities of love; she adds a deeper, more dangerous layer of silence and restraint that further complicates each lyric. Her choice of form is particularly interesting here, as “Since the first toss” and “Being Watched” are two longer poems that seem to be the most explicitly urgent and affective.

“I always fold my gloves,” a lyric later published in Harman’s edition of Warner’s *New Collected Poems*, is another notable example of a poem characterized by similar adversities. With undertones of infidelity, silence, and loss, it is constructed with common elements that Warner continued to explore throughout her career. The poem opens with the speaker’s reflection on a lyric her beloved composed, as she reflects, “Ten years ago you wrote that” (line 3). By invoking this poem written by Valentine, Warner is again using the meta-device of writing poetry about writing poetry: she is directing our attention to the actual construction of the lyric, lingering on the choice of what words to rhyme with palm and hand: “and the one rhyme was *calm*,/ And the other rhyme was *understand*” (lines 3-4). In this first stanza, she plays with the very production of poetry—paralleling her own “palm to palm” (line 1) and reflecting it by joining the two “your hand and mine” (line 2). Reflection, repetition, and parallel images are used throughout the lyric—images of hands and bodies folded together and lying “face to face” similar to the parallel image of “Your body lying by mine to mine responded” (line

13) in “Drawing you, heavy with sleep.” These are references that Warner perhaps included in order to invoke the mirror image of the same-sex couple.

In her chapter addressing mirrors and opposites in love poetry, Montefiore discusses the “identification of self in another” (106), a psychoanalytic concept much discussed by Freud as well as Lacan.²² Montefiore connects psychoanalytic theories with the construction of poetry, discussing, for example, how the formation of an imaginary identity describes the narcissistic relationship of doubles and reflections that are part of a crucial phase in the infantile acquisition of identity. The love sonnet is a male poetic tradition that speaks to this “I-Thou” dyad, the identification of self in other; and specifically in sonnets, the poet often defines his lady as a mirror reflecting an “ideal to which he aspires” (147), creating the high minded illusion of romantic love. Though she is not writing in sonnets, this “I-Thou” dyad – lover as self – is not uncommon in Warner’s lyrics that play upon these dual personalities and mirroring identities. Montefiore goes on to explain how under Freud’s influence we see how the lover in sonnets is always masculine and the beloved is the passive, feminized reflecting Other: “For in any poem where the lover’s self is being defined in and through a relationship with a beloved, that process of definition implies the masculinity of the lover and the femininity of the other; which is why . . . the love-poem presents problems to women poets” (109). Though obviously, as “I always fold my gloves” and many other poems involve a conversation between two intimate women, Warner is subverting these narcissistic patriarchal traditions to create an opposite dynamic.

²² For more relevant discussion on the relationship between image, desire, and identity, see Frederick Goldin’s *The Mirror of Narcissus* (1967) and much of the work of French feminist and philosopher Luce Irigaray.

However, as Montefiore suggests, Warner is continuing to use male poetic traditions to define the female experience: “The examples of women’s poetry which ought to correspond to Imaginary femaleness always turn out, when looked at closely, to be engaged with the same masculine language or symbolism which they are supposed to transcend” (178-179). Though Warner borrows this type of heterosexual power-dynamic in much of her love poems analyzed thus far, we also see how she attempts to integrate feminist and lesbian traditions, including references to the same-sex couple as a mirror and her oft-cited metaphors of fluidity. Again, like the joint poetic identity created by Michael Field, like the suggestion of Stein writing her lover’s autobiography, in “I always fold my gloves” again we see Warner fusing two personalities—her lover is herself and there is a reflection here that the muse is the poet and poet is the muse.

In this poem the references to “palm to palm,” the idea of bodies folding together, and the other mirrored images suggest both a tender and sexually fulfilling unity, but as we’ve continually seen, always lurking are the threats to the speaker’s ideal romantic love. As she looks toward the past and the calm house the two dwelt in, the present-temporal space for the speaker is characterized by a sense of love lost by way of infidelity or death. The speaker’s initial reference to the 10 year old poem suggests those times are long gone and Warner has picked up writing where Ackland left off. The images of “ghosts,” “destruction,” and “assonance of death” add to the haunting subtext in this poem.

Warner also uses imagery from the natural environment, particularly the figure of the owl, to represent the complicated nature of their relationship (lines 2, 6, 12):

Calm in our wide house we dwelt, and at night nothing flew over;

Only the owl (the owl who for surer destruction has learned

Silence, unerring in darkness as the hand of the lover);

And the blameless mornings returned. (lines 5-8)

The reserved-self of the speaker in “Being Watched” can be related to the way the silence of the owl functions in this poem. The owl, representing the wise, has “learned silence,” a past tense behavior that implies it was not always this way. The owl, in his (or her) ominous image, has learned to be silent even though something is awry—perhaps the fact that Warner’s lover Valentine is straying to other sexual partners or any other hidden secret that would disrupt or disenchant the speaker’s vision of romantic love. Despite this portentous inkling that information lurks that could disenchant the lovers, the speaker, like the owl, remains silent, allows “blameless mornings” instead of argument, engulfed in the habitual, comfortable “tidiness” of their pleasant relationship (mirrored with the clean, dainty image of the gloves throughout the verse) (lines 8, 11).²³ The speaker’s reticence resonates in this lyric just as in the others before it.

As the presence of death and loss hangs overhead throughout the poem, so does the lack of honest communication between the lovers. The owl – another important bird – is predatory in nature, hinting that there is a destructive implication for breaking the silence. With the influence and fear of death weighing on the speaker, we might assume it is this fear that pushes her to inaction—to live in the “calm” house and let “the destiny which paired [them]” prevail over a lonely life and an even lonelier death that would transpire if the silence was broken by the truth of infidelity (lines 5, 10). The last stanza further deepens the complicated nature of the lovers’ relationship: “As if in us sheltered the ghosts of the dead and the dear, / As if in us dwelt a promise and a rainbow sign”

²³ The significance of the image of the gloves is repeated in Warner’s *Summer Will Show* as well.

(lines 14-15). These idealized images of a “promise” and a “rainbow sign” are juxtaposed against the biting reality of the final line “of lovers folded without fear” (line 16). Fear’s presence is very real, and the “fold” hints at the end, the collapse—death.²⁴ The parallelism of “as if” evokes an ominous twist to this mysterious romantic verse, leaving the reader to question the presumed tenderness shared between the two lovers and their future together. Regardless of whether the speaker is attempting to let go of the loved one on account of her infidelity or her death, the silence, the sense of loss, and the tenderness between the two fit neatly in with the reserved-self of Warner’s other complex romantic lyrics. Instability and uneasiness characterize this verse just as in “Since the first toss,” “Out of your left eye,” and “Being Watched.”

Conclusion

In *Lesbian Empire: Radical Crosswriting in the Twenties*, Gay Wachman comments on the realistic limitations that exist within Warner’s novels, explaining, “Shifts of genre and tone are central to Warner’s literary achievement as a leftist sexual radical: unlike the merrily escapist creations of Ronald Firbank or Elinor Wylie, the joys of her pederasts, lesbians, and homosexuals are severely limited by history” (73). This has come to shape our understanding of her poetry as well – her speakers are bound and Warner attempts to find solace in the bind. In doing so, another interesting explanation to consider throughout this analysis is if and how silence or repression can be used as a form of powerful emotional resistance. As John Kucich suggests in *Repression in Victorian Fiction*, perhaps there can be a sort of feminist power in choosing silence and

²⁴ John Wilkinson refers to this poem as one of “love and loss following Ackland’s death,” however in Claire Harman’s edition of *New Collected Poems*, “I always fold my gloves” is organized among the unpublished poems from 1931-1960. Ackland died in 1969.

withholding information.²⁵ After all, as the speaker of the epitaph decidedly declares “‘J’ai ma fierté ... J’ai mon silence” (“I have my pride . . . I have my silence”). It is difficult to say, though, at what point this silence, repression, or unknowability goes from being a powerful act of agency to a submissive quality that is characteristic of the ideal domestic woman poised in her restriction and decorum.

These are all important angles to consider when analyzing the complicating positions that traditionalism poses in Sylvia Townsend Warner’s work, especially considering that at the time, writing openly as a lesbian, about forbidden love and lesbian desire, was an act of resistance in itself. Radclyffe Hall’s explicitly lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) was banned just five years before Warner began drafting the daring *Summer Will Show*. Just ten years after Elsa Gidlow published “On A Grey Thread,” debatably the first volume of openly lesbian love poetry in North America, Warner and Valentine Ackland co-published the explicitly sexual *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*. Warner was well aware of the difficulty of her marginalized position as a lesbian poet, and her active resistance to institutional norms and questions about sexuality play out in her poetry. Though worlds away from her contemporary T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Townsend Warner faced the same difficulties that all modern poets did. In “The Metaphysical Poets” Eliot explains that poets of their civilization must be “difficult,”²⁶ and though Warner may not be formally difficult, in some sense she faces the same type

²⁵ For more on this, see book by John Kucich *Repression in Victorian Fiction*. University of California Press, 1987. Print.

²⁶ “We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*” from “The Metaphysical Poets” in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry Vol. 1*. New York: Norton, 2003. 3rd ed. Print.

of fragmentation and transition that characterized the modernist era: a time that had become unhinged by new psychic, social, historical, and sexual awareness.

“I always fold my gloves” is an appropriate place to close our analysis, as it ends meditating on the same layered questions we have been exploring. Dwelling in the impossibility of the “as if” – as if monogamy weren’t an issue, as if their sexuality wasn’t an issue at the time – leaves Warner, and her speakers, riddled with the fear that these two female bodies will always have when “folded” or intertwined together. In this final example, one that debatably goes deeper than the rest, Warner writes a poem about poetry and openly discusses the lesbian relationship, all while using her familiar tropes of nature (in this case, a bird) and playing with the idea of a joint poetic identity. The conclusion appears to be that unfortunately the speaker continues to be caught in a liminal space between celebration and denial. Warner points out the unity of the hands and bodies folded together – the same-sex couple as the rhyming couplet – only to have it threatened at the end of nearly every verse. Like most poets writing in the age of an unstable modernity, Warner and her speakers remain doubly bound.

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