

## The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

---

### The Difficulties of Autobiography

Sylvia Townsend Warner\*

**How to cite:** Warner, S. T. 'The Difficulties of Autobiography.' *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2020, 19(1–2), pp. 109–112 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2020.14>

Published: 15 April 2020

---

### Copyright:

© 2020, Tanya Stobbs. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2020.14>

### Open Access:

*The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

# The Difficulties of Autobiography

*Sylvia Townsend Warner*

*Editorial note: Warner submitted this essay to the New Yorker in 1945. It was rejected by Gus Loblano in a letter dated 15 August 1945.*

It was in the last autumn of the last century, in October or perhaps November, that I became aware that the Word has Power.

The discovery came on me in a flash, so overwhelmingly and so sweetly that I can still see exactly what I saw at the time.

Before me were the iron-grey backs of my nurse and of another nurse called, by adoption into the family she at once served and commanded, Nannie Ewart. My nurse was young, her waist was waspish and she walked with a bounce. Nannie Ewart was old, heavy, and austere, and her hair was dressed in a manner that proclaimed her religious persuasion: that is to say,<sup>1</sup> arranged at the back of her head in a sort of platter of narrow braids rivetted together with metal hair-pins. She was wheeling a perambulator, and sitting up in the perambulator was Rosalind Ewart. This enables me to fix the date. Rosalind was three years younger than I, and if she was sitting up in a perambulator that autumn afternoon I must have been nearing my sixth birthday.

Our nurses were talking, Francis Ewart and I were tagging along behind, and I was listening to what the nurses were saying but not paying much attention to it. They were talking about an outbreak of fire in a lunatic asylum, more of their family affairs, I supposed, they both had that kind of family. I heard my nurse say, 'That's the Shadow of Ashlydiatt.'<sup>2</sup>

Now I know that this is the title of a novel by Mrs Henry Wood, who wrote *East Lynne*, but is too often confounded with Mrs Humphrey Ward<sup>3</sup>, who didn't; and I daresay the fire in the lunatic asylum was also

part of that lady's works. Then I knew nothing more than the words, and they were enough. *The Shadow of Ashlydiatt*.

For a moment that will last me till my dying day everything became transfixed and transcendent – the speechless blue of the autumn sky, the road to London sloping down before us with its vista of dismantling trees, the iron bench which the Town Council or possibly some dead benefactor had caused to be placed just there, and which the nurses scorned to use for to sit upon cold iron brings on you know what, the fallen leaves I was scuffing with my feet, the pungent sorrowful smell of autumn in a clay-soil country of fine timber. I received the words, and swallowed them, and became conscious of literature.

Presently I saw a nun flash past on a bicycle.

But my dedication to literature was not affected in any way by this conjunction of events. Nuns, on or off bicycles, were already a familiar spectacle to me. For a wooden paling, about six feet high, extended along this part of the road to London, and behind it were the grounds of the Convent of the Visitation. The fence was supposed to be impermeable but there were several cracks in it, and through these cracks Francis Ewart and I used to watch the bicycling nuns. Actually, they meant more to Francis than they did to me, because of the way Nannie Ewart did her hair. The platter expressed that Nannie Ewart was Low Church. Consequently when Francis looked through the cracks he expected to see penitential scourgings or the fires of Smithfield . . . more than nuns bicycling, anyway.

Now I suppose I should explain that this was not a bicycling order. Indeed the Convent of the Visitation housed nuns of the most enclosed and contemplative kind, and was one of the aristocratic convents of England. Ladies of the great Catholic families, Welds and Howards and Herberts, made their professions there, and well-bred widows went there to end their days, and often we saw four-wheeler cabs turn in at the drive gates carrying elegant ladies who were making a retreat there or visiting their aunts, so much so that for a long while I understood the name of the convent in a purely social sense. As for the nuns not on bicycles whom we met out shopping they, of course, were the lay sisters. My nurse used to discuss them with the trades-people; influenced by Nannie Ewart she was a little suspicious of them. The butcher gave the convent a very good name, and said he could not wish for better customers. The fishmonger was less enthusiastic. I think he felt that they slighted his craft, because they bought only rather dull fish and showed an unenterprising faithfulness to cod.

My father was friendly with both the convent's doctor and the

convent's priest. The doctor was a simple and violent Scotsman, and the priest was a man of great worldly wisdom and sophistication with whom my father used to discuss the internal politics of French politics.<sup>4</sup> Some little while before I received my vocation to literature the convent had become, as a whole, dangerously constipated. And what else could you expect? – said Dr Ruthven: these good ladies live on cold meat and tea, and take no exercise. All contemplative orders are constipated, said my father, as though he had lived in dozens of them. He was a historian, and found an occasional axiom very soothing. But Dr Ruthven was a zealot for regular evacuations, and before long he was raising hell in the Convent. First he tried to change the diet, and the unnatural hours at which the cold meat and the tea were consumed. Here he stubbed his toe on the Petrine Rock, and had the sense to admit it. So then he began to demand that the nuns take exercise. 'We walk in the grounds,' said the Mother Superior. Dr Ruthven replied that they didn't walk fast enough or far enough to do themselves any good, and, moreover, that while their constitutions were enfeebled by retaining so much waste matter they would never be able to walk adequately. Something more strenuous was required. 'Bicycling!' he exclaimed. 'That's what you ladies need.'

At this there was a considerable outcry, and some of the elder nuns declared that they would rather die than bicycle. They also tried to pretend that bicycling was specifically forbidden to their Order. There was no ring of Petrine Rock under this particular protestation, and when Dr Ruthven, implacable in healing, appealed to the convent priest Father Shadwell sacrificed to Aesculapius and gave, or procured, a *nihil obstat* to the prescription. A dozen reliable bicycles were purchased, and every afternoon the nuns pedalled briskly along the mossy paths of the convent grounds, floating in and out of the bushes like rooks.

Many people have assured me that this could never have taken place, that I must have dreamed it or invented it. But it is true, I saw the bicycling nuns with my own eyes. If it had not been for the Shadow of Ashlydiatt falling on me just then and just there I daresay I should not remember them, and Dr Ruthven's glad trumpettings about how he saved these good ladies against their own will would have brushed my hearing in vain. If Mrs Henry Wood had rejected that particular title, if my nurse had mentioned it further along the road where there was no crack in the fence, if Phoebus had preferred to touch my trembling ears with some other arrangement of words, something, for instance, much more creditable out of the Bible or Sir Thomas Browne – but one loses oneself among ifs. Just as I cannot gainsay the fact that it was the Shadow of Ashlydiatt which awoke me to the power of the word I

cannot recall that awakening without a flash of wheels and a sweep of black skirts crossing my mind's eye. Unfortunately, a feeling for words is but a minor part of the business of being a writer. The sense of form is more important, and harder to come by. In writing fiction one can achieve, at any rate, symmetry; but in autobiography I do not for the life of me see how one can reconcile the claims of truth and the claims of proportion. Nothing is clearer in my memory than how I first began to feel excited about words. What better beginning for an autobiography? And just look what happens next!

## Notes

- 1 Warner's typescript reads 'that it to say'.
- 2 *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863), by Mrs Henry Wood (born Ellen Price) (1814–1887). *East Lynne* was published in 1861.
- 3 Mrs Humphry Ward (1851–1920), née Mary Augusta Arnold; English novelist.
- 4 Probably a slip in Warner's typescript, possibly for 'the internal niceties of French politics'.