

The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Diffuse, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned,

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter Number Forty-Two

Poems, The Flint Anchor, The Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, The Flint Anchor, Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, The Museum

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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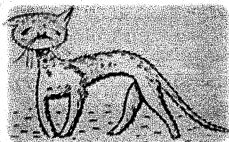
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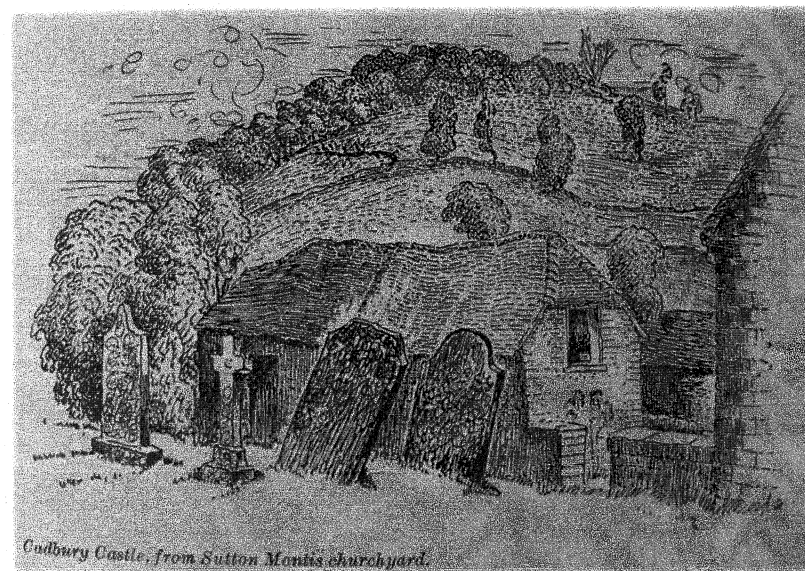


an illustration in *Time & Tide*
by Barbara Richardson for
The Magpie Charity

from *Somerset*

Cadbury Castle, from Sutton Montis churchyard

Drawing by R. Kirkland Jamieson



Cadbury Castle, from Sutton Montis churchyard.

And I must know before I go away
If for to-day
The weather of our love is wild or fair,
Or ill or well.

That might have been written by Miss Warner, actually it is by Miss Ackland: and the example holds good throughout the book.

The obvious conclusion suggests itself that the new poet been influenced by the more experienced poet, but mere pupilage is easy to detect. The hint in the foreword regarding the anonymous content of the lyric form affords a clue. Both poets are drinking from the same free fountain, both are travelling in the same vehicle. Poetry resolves the particular into the general, and among those who have the same moods in common it is easier to note resemblances than differences. Both these poets can register delicately and with felicity those passing moods of our daily life which vanish like wind-arrows across water unless we have trained ourselves to capture them by immediate expression in diary or poem. But their experiment in the presentation of poetry is disconcerting. It reminds us of how assiduous is that unseen collaborator in our best efforts – the great Anon.

Austin Clarke
The New Statesman and Nation
April 21, 1934

The New Statesman and Nation, September 24, 1949

VISIONS OF BRITAIN

Somerset. By SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER.
Essex. By PHOEBE FENWICK GAYE.
South Wales. By TOM RICHARDS. *Paul Elek.*
15s. each.
Recording Britain: Volume IV. *Oxford.*
£5 5s. for four volumes.

Miss Townsend Warner writes brightly of Somerset. She finds that old manor houses couch blinking behind yew trees, philosophic as tabby cats, or are worn like family jewels by shy, sly, gentle rivers; but her "atmosphere" though at times rather excessive is the result of acute observation. In Bath Abbey she sees an inscription: "Evan Lloyd, of Pengwern, Esq." "In that compact assertion what a mountain of Welsh pedigrees!"

NEWSLETTER NUMBER FORTY-TWO

*Somerset * Lolly Willowes * Valentine Ackland – A Transgressive Life*
a nightclub * events past & events future * books new & old
Montaigne * I.B. Singer * Shelley Wang

Thanks go to Frances Bingham, Ren Draya, Kate Macdonald, Jan Montefiore, Tess Ormrod, Professor Keith J.B. Rix and Judith Stinton for contributing to this issue.

* * * * *

Why Somerset?

Judith Stinton

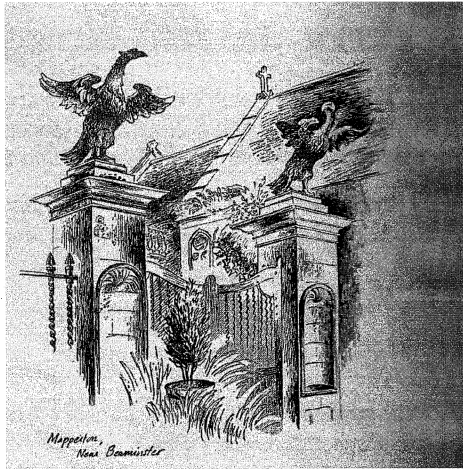
In England, immediately after the Second World War, publishers began commissioning books about the nation's landscape, towns and villages, in celebration of a world which had nearly been lost.

Paul Elek, an émigré from Budapest, was the publisher of a series of books called 'Vision of England', which by 1949 had included most of the country. Unlike the more famous Shell Guides, which began in the 1930s, and Nikolaus Pevsner's Buildings of England series from the 1950s, the Elek volumes were not arranged in gazetteer form. Instead, each one was simply one person's impression of a county, which could provide preliminary reading for the visitor. They were not intended as guides.

The books were illustrated with line drawings and black and white photographs, with a map inside the back cover. They were edited by Clough and Amabel Williams-Ellis who, as fellow members of the Communist Party, were known to Sylvia. Why they did not ask her to write the Dorset volume – one of the first to be published in 1947 – remains a mystery. Unfortunately, Paul Elek Publishers were taken over by Granada in 1975, and the imprint does not appear to have an archive.

That Sylvia was not given the Dorset book seems a pity. Its author, Aubrey de Sélincourt, wrote in his foreword that 'There can be no vision without a personal and individual eye, and the fact that the eye happens to be mine is the cause of any oddities or idiosyncrasies which the following pages may contain.' In fact there are disappointingly few of the latter. With a name like his, de Sélincourt should be riding his steed across the Dorset hills with a prayer and a song. Instead he plods, while his 'idiosyncrasies' include ignoring Wimborne, dismissing Maiden Newton as 'a dull town' and spending an inordinate amount of time in Winterborne Zelston.

De Sélincourt was however fortunate in his illustrator, the wonderful Barbara Jones, whose drawings do much to enliven the text. Her flighty, exuberant style would have matched the Somerset volume – but instead Warner was given R. Kirkland Jamieson, whose grey shaded sketches do not especially enhance her work. And there's no sign of any consultation between writer and artist in either of these books.



Barbara Jones

In her first chapter, Sylvia says that her book 'cannot resemble a guide-book, since I am constitutionally incapable of resembling a guide, an err-and-stray book would be nearer my measure...' The format gave her a generous amount of editorial freedom, which she of course relished, as a glance at the index will show:

F:
 Farringdon Gurney
 Floods
 Foscott, Fair Maids of
 Forest, a drowned
 Friends, Burial Ground
 Frome

By turns erudite, fanciful, informative and jokey, Sylvia Townsend Warner's approach to her commission was very much her own.

Somerset was published in 1949. At the beginning of September of the same year, STW was beginning her 'ancient solitary reign' at the Pen Mill Hotel in Yeovil, while Valentine Ackland remained at their house in Frome Vauchurch with her lover Elizabeth Wade White. Sylvia had presumably chosen the hotel for its proximity to the railway station, from which she could easily catch a train home. For now, she was back in Somerset, in a mundane hotel in an ugly town, a place of which she had made no mention in her book on the county.

Birds of a Feather

Whether a Dove or Seagull. Poems by Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland. *Chatto & Windus.* 6s.

Miss Sylvia Townsend Warner is an accomplished poet, but the fact that she shares this book with a new writer is neither an example of the helping hand nor a reflection on the drastic economies which have taken place recently in the American publishing world. The two poets have shuffled their contributions for the bedevilment of critics and explain the experiment in a foreword:

The authors believe that by issuing their independent work under one cover the element of contrast thus obtained will add to the pleasure of the reader; by withholding individual attributions on the page they hope that some of the freshness of anonymity may be preserved. The book, therefore, is both an experiment in the presentation of poetry and a protest against that frame of mind which judges a poem by looking to see who wrote it.

The logic of poetry is very different from that of prose: for it proceeds by way of a hop, skip or a jump. This may explain why the poets, in their prose arguments, fail to see the mundane flaws in their syllogism.

Perfect freshness, presumably, results from total anonymity, but the writers could scarcely be expected to take so drastic a course. They have not realised, however, that if the element of contrast is sufficiently striking and both contributors are highly individual in style, the make-believe of anonymity cannot last very long. No doubt an idealistic impulse has driven both into protesting against the weak-mindedness of those who judge by names, as though an excellent sonnet or lyric, like a bank cheque, could only be honoured by a signature. Nevertheless, Miss Townsend Warner and her fellow poet actually encourage this disgusting frame of mind, for they provide at the end of the book a four-column index of page-numbers and their respective initials. In fact they give poor human nature all the material for a guessing competition complete with solutions. It is hard work to track down more than a hundred poems by cross-reference, but the reader will be tempted to test his own powers on literary detection, until, darting backwards and forwards from one end of the book to another, he develops a crick in the neck.

General conclusions might be drawn from this engaging experiment in the correct presentation of poetry. But an immediate and particular result emerges, and it is a result which the experimentalists, despite their emergency index, may not have foreseen completely. It is difficult to tell with certainty the authorship of any given poem. I thought I was sufficiently acquainted with Miss Townsend Warner's manner and could detect her neat turns and graces of phrase at once, but I was wrong. Here is the title poem, a pretty example of bubble-blowing:

Whether a dove or a seagull lighted there
 I cannot tell,
 But on the field that is so green and bare
 A whiteness fell –

The Cave of Harmony

PAST CABARET PROGRAMMES

Authors	Plays
JOHN ARMSTRONG	THE BRIGAND'S DAUGHTER
MAURICE BARING	KATHARINE PARR
J. B. STERDALE BENNETT	A REAPER OF JOY
ROBERTO BRACCO	A FORCED HAND
CHARLES COFFEY	THE BOARDING SCHOOL
[COMMEDIA DEL' ARTE]	A SICILIAN MELODRAMA
MRS. CONGREVE	DI CHI SEI IL BAMBINO
LOUIS ESSON	DEAD TIMLU
LAWRENCE HOUSMAN	THE QUEEN, GOD BLESS HER
ALDOUS HUXLEY	HAPPY FAMILIES
HENRY FIELDING	THE VIRGIN UNMASKED
	SCENES FROM TOM THUMB
ANATOLE FRANCE	THE KING OF THE JEWS
GEORG KAISER	FREDERICK AND ANNA
VACHELL LINDSAY	THE BLACKSMITH'S SERENADE
MACHIAVELLI	THE FRIAR
DOROTHY MASSINGHAM	WASHED ASHORE
HUGH MILLER	A DRAG PLAY
FRANZ MOLNAR	TWO DIALOGUES
MADISON MORTON	BOX AND COX
LUIGI PIRANDELLO	THE MAN WITH THE FLOWER IN HIS MOUTH
HANS SACHS	THE HOT IRON
ARTHUR SCHNITZLER	THREE ANATOLE DIALOGUES
	TWO REIGEN DIALOGUES
BERNARD SHAW	SCENES FROM CAPTAIN BRASSBOUND'S CONVERSION
AUGUST STRINDBERG	PARIAH
J. M. SYNGE	THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN
ANTON TCHEHOV	THE BEAR
	THE PROPOSAL
[VICTORIAN FARCE]	THE CAPTAIN IS NOT AMISS
GILBERT WAKEFIELD	PRELUDE IN A FLAT

Entertainments

I FANTOCCHI DELLA CAVERNA	THE OLD MAHOGANY BAR
A FRENCH REVUE	A RUSSIAN CHOIR
A HINDU TRAVEL LECTURE	THE BLUE BIRD COMPANY OF MOSCOW

Artists

LAWRENCE ANDERSON	HUBERT HARBEN	NORMAN V. NORMAN
ELIZABETH ARKELL	GRIZELDA HERVEY	FRED O'DONOVAN
WILLIAM ARMSTRONG	GEORGE HOWE	HENRY OSCAR
FELIX ATLMER	ISABEL JEANS	D. MAY PETRIE
REGINALD BACH	DOUGLAS JEFFRIES	NIGEL FLAYFAIR
ANGELA BADDLELEY	MARY JERROLD	ELIZABETH POLLOCK
HERMIONE BADDLELEY	EDMOND K. KAFF	BETTY POTTER
LESLIE BANKS	OLGA RATZIN	HELEN ROWE
LEAH BATEMAN	GERTRUDE KINGSTON	ALEXANDER BARNER
EILEEN BELDON	ELBA LANCASTER	ERWANT SCOTT
ANTHONY BERTRAM	EUBBA LANDI	HAROLD SCOTT
RICHARD BIRD	JOHN LAURIE	ATHENE SEYLER
NIGEL BRUCE	GUY LE FEUVRE	MICHAEL SHERRBROOKE
ADRIENS BRUNK	DULCE LEGGAT	CHARLES STAFFE
CHARLES CARSON	BEATRIX LEHMANN	ATHOLE STEWART
MARGARET CARTER	RAY LITVIN	SYLVIA TOWNSEND
DOROTHY CHESTON	ANDREW LUCAS	WARNER
HARRIET COHEN	JOAN LUTTON	RUTH WILLIAMSON
ANTON DOLIN	MOYNA MACGILL	BREMER WILLS
JOAN DRUCK	RAYMOND MASHBY	BEATRICE WILSON
GEOFFREY DUNLOP	DOROTHY MASSINGHAM	GEOFFREY WINCOTT
FLORA AND BELLA	CHARLES MAUNSELL	GODFREY WINN
MAJORIE GADAIN	MARY MERRALL	BRUCE WINSTON
FRITH GODFREY	HUGH MILLER	EDWARD WOOLFE
JOHN GOSS	RENEE MILTON	MARGARET YARDE
CYBIL HARSINGHAM	MATTHEW NORGATE	

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WILLIAM ARMSTRONG	A. R. FILMER	NIGEL FLAYFAIR
DOROTHY CHESTON	ELSA LANCASTER	HAROLD SCOTT
GEOFFREY DUNLOP	DOROTHY MASSINGHAM	BRUCE WINSTON

The **2021 Annual General Meeting** will be held via Zoom on Saturday May 8th at 3.30 pm. Please let Jan Montefiore (jem1@kent.ac.uk) know by the end of April if you plan to attend. We shall end the meeting collectively reading Sylvia for about 30 minutes. As on 27 January, each reader will have 3 minutes. If you wish to read, please email Jan with the title of your choice. The running order will be sent out together with the AGM agenda.

* * * * *

On 27 January 2021 the Society celebrated with a **Collective International Reading** of Sylvia's work. The Zoom was organised by Peter Swaab (thank you, Peter!) and the reading organised and chaired by Jan Montefiore (thank you, Jan!). It consisted of prose and poetry chosen by 17 members of the Society, according to their own preferences.

It was a delight to hear and see us together.

On art

Andrew Macdonald : *The Corner That Held Them* (the Machaut Kyrie)

Gill Davies : from a letter of 9 April 1942 to Paul Nordoff, about life in Dorset and writing *The Corner That Held Them*

Jay Barksdale : an unpublished letter to Isaac Bashevis Singer, and his reply

Imagining women

Hilary Bedder : from 'Opus 7' (Rebecca's flower garden)

Gillian Beer : 'Gloriana Dying'

Jan Montefiore : a thank-you letter to Alyse Gregory from 23 December 1946

Breaking the rules

Ann Torday Gulden : *Lolly Willows* (Laura throwing away her map)

Mary Joannou : *Lolly Willows* (Laura on why women become witches)

Nakawa Ayako : *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (Mr Fortune getting Lueli into trousers)

The love poet

Annie Rhodes : 'How this despair enjoys me!'

Claire Harman : 'Drawing you, heavy with sleep, to lie closer'

Peter Swaab : 'Lost summer' poems from 1949

Novels

Howard Booth : *The Flint Anchor* (the night fishing)

Ren Draya : *The True Heart* (the ending)

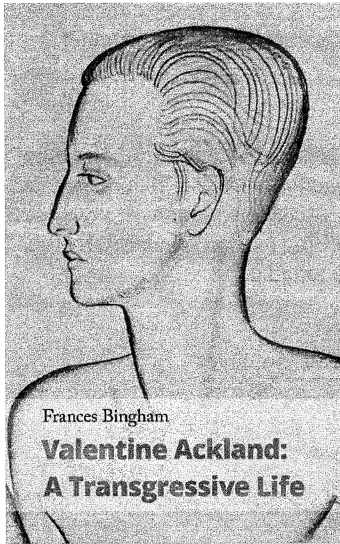
Short fiction : realist and magical

Rowan Bright : from 'Some World Far From Ours'

Kate Macdonald : from 'The Mortal Milk'

Page Nelson : from 'But At The Stroke of Midnight'

from Frances Bingham's forthcoming biography,
Valentine Ackland : A Transgressive Life
Introduction – It Is Urgent You Understand
Frances Bingham



Valentine Ackland, poet and inveterate self-mythologising autobiographer, is best-known for cross-dressing, and being the lover of Sylvia Townsend Warner; she was proud of both attributes, but saw herself firstly as a poet. Her life encompassed Communism and Catholicism, war-work and pacifism, a life-partnership and many affairs, and – above all – the contradiction of being a fine poet and remaining little-known. Even if she hadn't written, Valentine's life would have been a remarkable one, representative of that extraordinary generation in Britain whose intellectual maturity coincided with the mid-twentieth century, and who rose to the challenges of that time with such verve and courage. But she did write: poetry of witness, commenting on the political state of the world and the plight of the powerless individual; poetry celebrating the natural world while lamenting its loss to the encroachments of war and progress; love poetry of

passionate complexity, and metaphysical poetry which meditates on the human place in the universe. This writing, by a poet deeply connected to her time and committed to interpreting its events and their impact on her own life, gives that life another dimension. Valentine's work expands the history of one fascinating individual into that of a wider community.

Her own life Valentine saw as a story; she retold it to herself and others, in its various versions, almost obsessively, as though without narrative to sustain her she might vanish, become merely a blank page. Some autobiographers can swing like a spider on their linear plumb line, the straight story of their life so far; others circle earlier events at an ever-greater distance, rounding outwards like an ammonite growing. Valentine was the hermit-crab variety, carrying her past everywhere, embellishing it and inhabiting it, using it both as camouflage and display, yet ready at need to jettison it for a similar, larger version of heavy identity. Her willingness to shape her life story to different artistic ends, and the parallel text of her poetry (not explicitly autobiographical, but a translation of experience) makes writing her biography an unusual task.

The Cave of Harmony

Open on week-days and Sundays
from 5.30 p.m. until 1.30 a.m.
(Fridays until 2.30 a.m.)

Dancing Every Evening
Cabaret Performances on Fridays
at least twice a month.

(Members will be notified of programme in advance.)

Suppers and Refreshments
Extension of Licence applied for on Friday nights

Subscriptions
(Covering admission any and every
night, dancing and Cabaret)

£4 : 4 : 0 per annum

or

£2 : 12 : 6 and £2 : 2 : 0

alternatively each half-year

(Wife of Member, £3 : 3 : 0 per annum
or £2 : 2 : 0 and £1 : 11 : 6 half-yearly)

No Entrance Fee for the first 200 members

Guest Fee 2/6 (Cabaret nights 5/-)

A form of application for membership is enclosed.

The Cave of Harmony

The Grapes Inn, Seven Dials

(1, GREAT EARL STREET, W.C.2)
HALF-A-MINUTE FROM CAMBRIDGE CIRCUS.

"... and end the frolic evening by partaking of supper
and a song at the Cave of Harmony."

—THACKERAY, *The Newcomes*.

The Cave of Harmony was founded in 1921 by Elsa Lanchester and Harold Scott. At first dances were held weekly at 107 Charlotte Street, with a cabaret entertainment once a month. In 1924 it was transferred to a studio off Gower Street, where it continued until the Autumn of 1925.

The Club is now re-opening at the Grapes Inn, Seven Dials, under the conditions outlined on the opposite page. The Grapes was built in 1835 on the site of The Sign of the Vine, a former public house, so named because it occupied the site assigned by the Domesday Book to a vineyard planted by the Romans.

It is the proprietors' intention to maintain the former policy of the Cave of Harmony, especially with regard to the nature of the entertainments. Particulars of past programmes will be found on the back page of this circular.

PROPRIETORS: THE CAVE OF HARMONY, LTD.
DIRECTORS:
HAROLD SCOTT ELSA LANCHESTER
MATTHEW NORGATE (Secretary)

The outwardly significant events of her life, their places and dates, are well-documented through multiple evidence, and duly appear in this book. The detailed record of an inner life, a writer's creative narrative, is also here, often in Valentine's own words. Autobiography offers insights (both intentional and unintentional) to the writer's mind, the colour of her thoughts, the weather of her relationships, which is why I've quoted so extensively from Valentine's writing on herself. She was well aware that her diaries were revealing, of her weaknesses as well as her humour and passion. Once, after quoting something self-complimentary she added '*Of course* I ought not to copy this, but no one will know until after I'm dead, if then, so what odds?' This throwaway remark could be taken to apply to her entire life-writing oeuvre, so much of which is about her work, as well as the – sometimes dramatic – events of her life.

As Virginia Woolf ironically observes, in a frequently-quoted passage from *Orlando*: 'life ... is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life ... has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking ... this mere wool-gathering; this thinking; this sitting in a chair day in, day out, with a cigarette and a sheet of paper and a pen and an ink pot. If only subjects, we might complain (for our patience is wearing thin) had more consideration for their biographers!' And she completes the faux-diatribes by declaring that, as we all know, 'thought and imagination – are of no importance whatsoever'. And yet, in Orlando's life, as much as in Valentine's, the invisible inner life of thinking and writing is as eventful as the outer life of action.

Apart from her books and (many but scattered) magazine publications, Valentine's writing has been preserved in the Sylvia Townsend Warner – Valentine Ackland Archive. When I was first researching both authors, these papers were still in Dorchester Museum, housed in an attic lined with oak cupboards – a haphazard treasury; part library, part paper-heap. There are dozens of notebooks, ranging from large ledgers and leather-bound account books through diaries of every size and format to tiny memorandum books for the pocket. All of these are crammed with poems, both finished and unfinished (some in many versions), notes, quotes, diary entries, travel journals, accounts, lists, reminders, prayers, jokes, menus, fragments of ideas. There are also shopping-lists, used envelopes, telephone message-pads, old photographs and post cards, with poems scribbled on the back. The history of a writer's mind is here. There are many boxes and files of typed paper: short stories, articles, a play, a novel or two, a children's book, the poems and – of course – memoir and autobiography in many versions and revisions. Some of Valentine's writing is not represented in the archive at all, some pieces are duplicated many times.

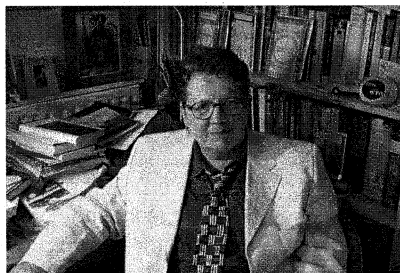
Also in the archive is the mirror-image of all this; Sylvia's papers, just as varied and unchronological, often telling the same life story from the opposite viewpoint. There are also innumerable mementoes of a shared life: love-letters, Christmas cards, notes, postcards, telegrams, their hotel room reservation card for 'Mr and Mrs Ackland'. There is an intense immediacy about these relics. The notebooks are covered in tear-stains, cigarette-burns, cat's paw-prints, wine or coffee splashes; full of pressed flowers, dried leaves, cuttings and scraps, the feathers which Valentine picked up and

kept, as they symbolised to her descending poems. The books smell of the river which ran past their damp house, the ghost of Gauloises cigarette smoke, the vanishing trace of scent from the writer's wrist. On opening one of the rarely-disturbed oak cupboards, one was assailed by this fragrance of the past, slowly fading in the attic of a museum.

Valentine was strongly aware of this future; the imagined reader of her diaries is sometimes addressed with apparent directness: 'It is growing dusk already and I must go.' No doubt this is why she cross-referenced her diaries, dated her poems (sometimes to the hour), and carefully noted revisions; some of her typed poems carry explanations of origin, such as 'written at about the time Sylvia was writing *The Sea Change*'. This is all most constructive, and her self-cataloguing certainly made the task easier when I was editing her poetry. But explanatory notes, asides, later added comments addressed to the future researchers Valentine evidently expected, can seem disturbingly personal. (Although one grows used to it, even I was startled, admittedly, when I received a letter in the post, the envelope unmistakably addressed to me by Valentine's instantly-recognisable typewriter. Fleetingly imagining that it might contain some imperious instructions, I opened it to find an affectionate letter from the inheritor of the machine.)

With such careful provisions made for the future, it can seem that the dead use us, indifferent as they must be to who we are; so long as we're resurrection-men, we will do. By the same token, it's often presumed that the writer of life stories is just a kind of grave-robber, ransacking the catacombs for choice relics. But our mutual aim – a considered life – should be a kind of time-travelling co-operation between the quick and the dead; an exploration of one character by another, completed by the reader's participation. It's easier than usual to imagine this ideal when writing about Valentine, an avid reader of even the most obscure biographies, who actually typed up volumes of her own diaries with numbered pages; so helpful. (When quoting Valentine's own words, her characteristic long dashes and ampersands are in the original texts, but ellipses indicate a word or phrase left out, unless marked as original in the notes.)

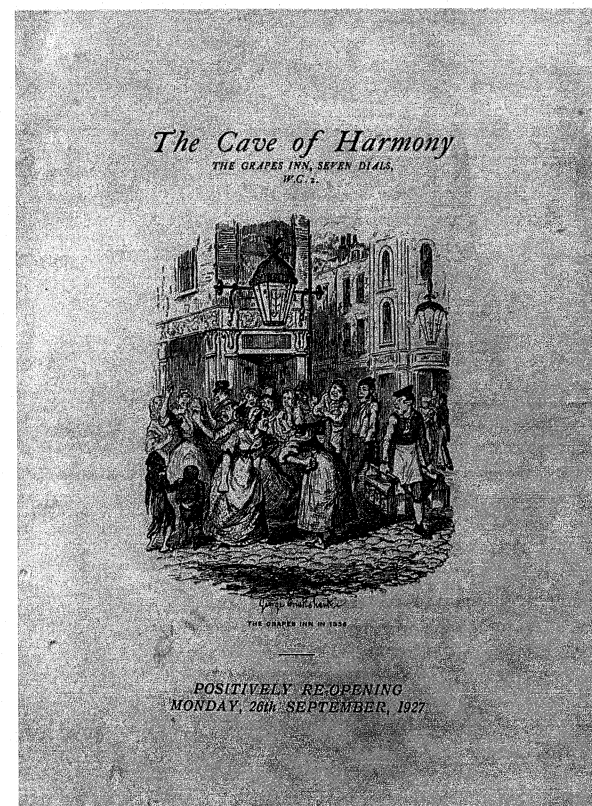
I was first commissioned to write a biography of Valentine twenty years ago, in 2001, but a few years later the publisher folded and the book didn't come out. In a way this was lucky, from a research angle. Then, I met people who are no longer here to be interviewed and was given generous access to the archive in its original form. Now, I have access to documents such as de-classified MI5 files and the Elizabeth Wade White Papers which weren't available until more recently. So this new biography contains both up to date research and memories which are older, and closer to its subject.



Frances Bingham in her office. Photo © Liz Matthews

according to Harold Scott in *The Early Doors: origins of the music hall* (1946, London: Nicholson, p. 226). Her poem of the same name in *The Espalier* (1925) is certainly related, for it notes the experience of dancing to the music of a black saxophonist. She also participated in the festivities, at least once (see image 4).

For more information on this fascinating interwar subject, see abeautifulbook.wordpress.com/2012/01/04/oceans-of-naughtiness/ 'Elsa Lanchester and Bohemian London in the Early Twentieth Century' by Rohan McWilliam in *Women's History Review*, 03/2014, Volume 23, Issue 2 / Aldous Huxley's novel *Antic Hay*, which features a visit to a similar cabaret.



Speculations Sparked by Speaking about

Mr. Fortune's Maggot

Rey Draya

Although all of us seemed to dislike the title, the novel was much admired and offered fascinating avenues for our zoom discussion. Thank you, Peter and Jan, for organizing this event!

I remain curious about the word "maggot" and urge further inquiry: in the early 20th century was it commonly used, especially to describe a quirk or personal idiosyncrasy? Or, as Rose mentioned, is there a musical meaning? She told us that there is group of Irish jigs, often fiddle tunes, with names like "Clancy's Maggot" or so-and-so's Maggot. With Sylvia's keen knowledge of music, would she have fashioned a title that suggests "Here's the odd little tale of a man named Fortune"?

Indeed, I am excited about exploring the motif of music in the novel and urge further investigation – for example, the harmonium as symbol and actual instrument of destruction, and the importance of Haydn.

And we also wondered about the protagonist's name: I associate "fortune" with fate; Andrew pointed out that our hero had first worked in a bank, so fortune connects (ironically) with riches.

Another proper noun, Fanua, is an anagram of "fauna" and suggests the natural beauty of Mr. Fortune's chosen island. One of the peak moments in the novel – Fortune's walk in the rain – evokes an Edenic experience. He casts off the trappings and confinements of his former life and revels in the world of nature and the islanders' freedoms and happiness.

I'd like to suggest further considerations of other key names: Lueli, Theodore, Timothy, and Mason (the Archdeacon), seem rich with associations.

Of course, we had different reactions to the story's ending. Several people felt that Fortune's farewell was sad: I found his decision triumphant. Nor could we give thorough attention to the topic of the love between Fortune and the young boy. Much material for future round tables!

Cave of Harmony

Professor Keith J.B. Rix bring to our attention a London nightclub of the 1920s – the Cave of Harmony. The major player is Elsa Lanchester, known today as the wife of actor Charles Laughton and as the Bride of Frankenstein. But then she was active in bohemian and socialist circles, worked as an actress, dancer, vaudevillian, and was thought no better than she ought to have been. She and her partner Harold Scott, actor and musician, founded the cabaret in 1924, in which they sang, hosted, performed one-act plays, and revived music hall songs. The club blurred distinctions between high and low art, high and low class, and provided a space where gender boundaries, especially for women, were fluid. Sylvia has a part in all this. Its name was suggested by her,

Within the ever-expanding definition of biography I personally prefer those books about people's lives – or aspects of them – which leave one with the sensation of having met, known, liked or loathed someone, in all their complexity and contradiction. So I aim to give the impression of getting to know Valentine as one does get to know people, through a mosaic of their own anecdotes (and those others tell of them), meetings with their friends and relatives, discoveries about their pasts, revelations about their thoughts. However, there is no fictional writing here. If there's a conversation, it's a conversation somebody noted down; if a fast car drives along a lane between summer hedgerows, it did.

Of course, we now know far more about Valentine's life than one would ever know about a living person, and also far less; no amount of research and scholarship can replace the briefest meeting. My interpretation is, however, based on a premise she would understand; that many stories make up a life, not in its entirety, nor in any final version, but as it is lived – changeable, vivid, real.

'Reading my own works', the poem which gives this introduction its title, is addressed directly to the reader, that imagined other in the future who will hear Valentine's voice and see her words. It's an extraordinarily direct statement of the poet's need to communicate and belief in the power of poetry, and a perfect introduction to her authentic voice, which rings with integrity and self-awareness, as it sounds out powerfully, compelling attention. This poem encapsulates the often conflicting emotions of writing; the joyful experience of reading her own work, the fearful possibility that creativity may be merely a mirage. As a commentary on Valentine's entire poetic life, the poem is completed by its specific inclusion of the reader; we may pour her poem away only half-emptied, but our very existence offers some sort of hope that we may, just possibly, understand.

I hear my own voice, over the desert of days,
Across the sandy stretch of the war I see my own words;
And I had almost forgotten that once I could speak.

You who read words when you want them,
Who turn on the tap of a book, who pour a poem
Half-emptied down drain – It is urgent you understand
How bounteous the words looked, how coolly the mirage
Flowed over sand.

Valentine Ackland: A Transgressive Life will be published on 20th May, 2021 by the Handheld Press (handheldpress.co.uk), available worldwide in paperback (£15.99, US\$17.99) and as an ebook in all the usual places.

Sylvia – The Chinese Connection

Tess Ormrod

In the 1930's Chiang Yee, a Chinese scholar and artist widely travelled through Britain, published a series of idiosyncratic travel books. He called himself "The Silent Traveller" and recorded his experiences from a Chinese point of view. The books were also beautifully illustrated by the author; paintings and line drawings keeping much of traditional and classical art techniques. He was also very fond of interpolating poetry; his own, English, and that of other Chinese poets.

In *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* (1944) he speaks of a compatriot and friend, Wang Li-Hsi, better known in England as Professor Shelley Wang, since he, like many other Chinese living abroad, had chosen to adopt an English first name. Wang had selected Shelley out of his admiration for the man both as poet and revolutionary. Chiang then quotes two short poems by Wang:

How is one worth a bowl of rice by selling writings?
Endangered by life yet craving to live I left my country.
But history has always been made by swords and
The huntsman hallos them on.

On Lake Annecy
Tenderly like the hand of a mother
The lake wind smooths my face.
Far have I travelled – but nowhere
Have found a more enchanting scenery than this.
Mont Blanc's turret of ice
Has rung its changes of beauty for millions of years:
At noon it is like a transparent blue stone
And cannot be distinguished from the sky or water;
The setting sun gives it new colours,
It glitters with every shade of red and purple.
Peace is in the heart of the universe,
Beauty is given in wedlock to the soul of man,
But now
We in our world are water
Grumbling, quarrelling and wrestling in a boiling cauldron.

At the end of the quotations reads (Translated by Miss Sylvia Townsend Warner). I, certainly, was not aware that Sylvia either spoke or read Mandarin and can only surmise that Wang had given her a rough literal translation which she had turned into appropriate English verse, or that someone had transliterated the original which she rendered into poetry. Any elucidation would be welcomed.

noblest part of a man's anatomy. Therefore enlarge it with a wig." The atmosphere of beautiful, unplaceable weirdness set against the knowing absurdity of Warner's comedy is irresistible.

Lolly wearies of her uneventful spinsterdom surprisingly late in life in the book. Only at the age of 47 does she flee to the Chilterns on a whim. There she becomes a witch, curdles milk, nurtures a familiar (a black kitten named Vinegar) and consorts with Satan, who appears as an English country gentleman in corduroy and tweed.

Warner, almost the archetype of the fearsomely clever interwar lesbian literary intellectual, was a poet and musicologist as well as a novelist. This book owes many of its later readers to its reputation as an early outpost of feminism. Its message — drab, overlooked middle-aged single women are powerful — isn't hard to miss. "Women," Lolly tells Satan at the end of the book, "are dynamite, and long for the concussion that may justify them." Warner works her theme persuasively. In *Lolly Willowes* the eccentricities and oddities of a peculiar spinster are taken seriously and to their logical conclusion. Of course she's a witch. If the book strikes a blow against patriarchy, it also takes aim at the ordinary, the smug, the expected and the dull. I love it.

Ingrid Hotz-Davies and Greer Gilman in conversation about the Handheld Press edition of *Kingdoms of Elfin*

Tuesday, 11 May 2021 from 14:30 to 17:30 EDT
An online event at eventbrite.co.uk

Join us in conversation with Ingrid Hotz-Davies, Professor of English at the University of Tübingen and author of the Introduction to the Handheld Press edition of *Kingdoms of Elfin*, and Greer Gilman, fantasy author and critic, about these 'magical lands populated by strange beings who look like humans but act like sociopaths'. Warner's remarkable imaginative triumph at the end of her long career in creating these stories, which would never fit into any approved box, makes her fairies as fascinating as they are addictive. *Enter Elfindom with care.*

* * * * *

The **STW Reading Group** reconvened on March 18 for a discussion of *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, zoomed of course. Discussed were the significance of the title, particularly 'maggot', Mr Fortune's names, whether the ending was sad or not, whether Mr Fortune 'had' to go and what might have happened had he stayed, imagery of water and the four elements, the dangers of conversion to those one loves, anti-imperialism, Christianity, Moby Dick and Haydn. If you are interested in joining a future discussion, subject TBA, please contact Peter Swaab or Jan Montefiore.

**Rereading : *Lolly Willowes* by Sylvia Townsend Warner
a comic tale about a genteel witch**

James Marriott – 16 October 2020 – *The Times*

Nowadays so many of my contemporaries believe themselves to be witches that any novel on that theme risks sounding tiresomely zeitgeisty. Of course, Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel *Lolly Willowes* (1926) preceded the trend by almost a century. And unlike the faddish tarot-dabblers of north London, her heroine really is a witch.

Lolly grows up in an upper middle-class country family and exhibits early signs of eccentricity. One evening her father discovers she has spent the day tied to a tree (abandoned midway through a game with her brothers), but far from being perturbed, she is "sitting contentedly in hay-band fetters and singing herself a story about a snake that had no mackintosh".

For the first two thirds of the book, Lolly strikes the reader as eccentric rather than supernatural. She roves the countryside looking for rare herbs, spends the evenings reading Herodotus and Locke and informs a suitor that he may be a werewolf ("for many people are without knowing"). After her father's death she moves to London to live with her stolid, unimaginative brother Henry (now a lawyer) and his family. This new role as dependable maiden aunt is a dreary one. Warner's portrait of comfortably suffocating family life is one of the most memorable things about the book: "They were carpeted with experience. No new event could set jarring foot on them but they would absorb and muffle the impact. If the boiler burst, if a policeman climbed in at the window waving a sword, Henry and Caroline would bring the situation to heel by their massive experience of normal boilers and normal policeman."

The prose is gorgeous. For elegance of sentence and serendipity of image Warner is the match of any 20th-century novelist. Here's a clear night sky: "a few stars glistened there like drops of water about to fall". Here's a heavy curtain: "[it] hung in solemn folds, almost as solemn as organ pipes".

Only on a second reading are you likely to notice that beneath this glinting perfection something occult is stirring almost everywhere you look. Warner's prose is as careful of its supernatural secrets as her heroine is. After the death of her mother, Lolly "only cried when alone in the potting shed, where a pair of old gardening gloves repeated to her the shape of her mother's hands". Why "repeated" not "reminded"? What lurks in those gloves: a subtle agency, a hint of the afterlife?

The unease intensifies. This is Henry winding up the grandfather clock later in the book: "The quivering chains were wound up till only the snouts of the leaden weights were visible, dropping sullenly over the abyss of time wherein they were to make their descent."

The novel is funny too. Warner is a master of the arch-whimsy distinctive to the 1920s. Lolly's nephew Titus objects to his parents' plans to make him a sculptor because of the decline of wigs: "Revive the wig, and I object no more. The head is the

Shelley Wang was a political exile who had sought refuge in Europe from the political turmoil and persecution at home. He was an active communist, involved with various left wing activist movements and journals including the *Left Review*. It was in this milieu that he became acquainted with Sylvia and Valentine, particularly during the period of the Spanish Civil War. While in England he and his family lived in Hampstead and could be seen in the East End of London delivering and circulating the *Resistance News* to the Chinese community. When the Japanese invaded China he returned in 1938 to fight for his country and was killed in action at the front in Henan in 1939.

Both Wendy Mulford in *This Narrow Place* and Jan Montefiore in *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* speak of him as being well known to Sylvia and both refer to the one recorded incident of their acquaintanceship when he came to lecture in Dorchester to the local Labour Party.

The occasion is reported by Sylvia in her own inimitable style in a letter to Edgell Rickword, another member of the Left Book Club, in November 1937:

"We entertained Professor Shelley Wang at the weekend. He arrived with a large suitcase held under one arm, and the handle of the suitcase in the other hand, like a talisman. The suitcase had given way under the weight of books in it, and we had to go to the local leather shop to find him another, and Mr. Pouncy's mind opened unwillingly to the idea that suitcases should be used for other objects than suits. However the East wore Mr. Pouncy down, and Shelley Wang went on to Exeter (which he insisted on calling Executer) leaving the broken suitcase under the spare-room bed and the handle on the mantelpiece. We loved him very much, but I am afraid the Dorchester audience found him perplexing. He told them stories of the Chinese revolutionary spirit, but did not make it clear that the stories dated, many of them, from 3000BC, and had, naturally, become stylised in course of time.

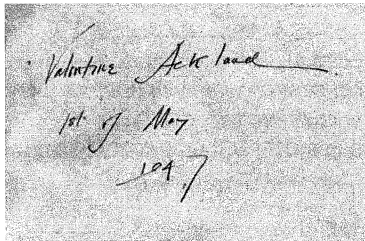
One of these stories I saved for you, it was so beautifully Marxian. A Chinese dictator, determined to have peace in his dominions, took away all their weapons from the peasants. The metal thus collected he had melted down and cast into the shapes of twelve massive religious figures which adorned his palace. In the end the peasants overthrew him with sharpened bamboos. You will see that this seemed all rather odd to the Dorchester Labour Party."

Oh, to have been a fly on the wall!

Sources : Chiang Yee *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* (Methuen 1944) pp. 12-14 / William Maxwell (ed.) *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (Chatto & Windus 1982) p. 50 / Janet Montefiore *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (Routledge 1996) p. 142 / Wendy Mulford *This Narrow Place* (Pandora 1988) p. 92

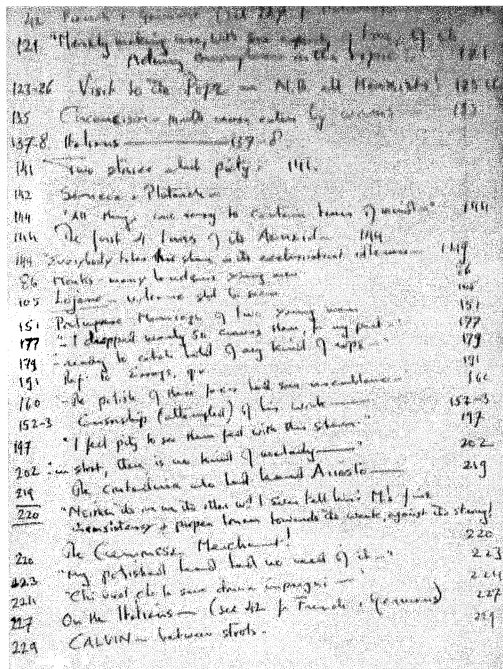
A travel book from Valentine Ackland's Library

Jay Barksdale



Below, tugging the coat-tails of Peter Swaab's article on annotated biographies in the Sylvia/Valentine library (newsletter 41) are annotations in Valentine's copy of *The Diary of Montaigne's Journey to Italy in 1580 and 1581* (Hogarth Press, 1929). Twenty-seven page numbers, on the inside back cover, in ink in Valentine's crabbed hand, refer to incidents and his observations which caught her interest: anecdotes

of piety, an audience with the Pope, ecclesiastical idleness, proverbs, the authenticity of the first four lines of the Aeneid, a Portuguese marriage of two young men, an illiterate contadina who could endlessly recite Ariosto, etc. The text itself is marked but a few times, and always with a small pencil check. The inscription is in Sylvia's unmistakable hand.



Valentine noted page 86 with 'Monks – many handsome young men'.

Montaigne writes "We also saw a convent of monks who call themselves the Jesuates of St. Jerome. They are not priests, nor do they say mass or preach, and most of them are ignorant. They pride themselves on being excellent distillers of lemon-flower waters and similar waters, both there and elsewhere. They are clothed in white, with little white birettas and a gown of dark brown over it; many handsome young men... We found that they had perfumed their cloisters for our benefit, and made us enter a cabinet full of phials and earthenware vessels, and there they perfumed us."

A letter to Isaac Bashevis Singer, and his reply

Lower Frome Vauchurch – Dorchester
2 : ii : 1975.

Dear Isaak [sic] Bashevis Singer,

Do not feel endangered when I tell you how much I admire your stories.

I live in England, I am over eighty, it is unlikely that I shall come to America. But at my age, self-denial cramps the spirit, and I can no longer deny myself the pleasure of telling you that I read you with enlightened joy. And those two words are exactly what I mean.

Yours sincerely
Sylvia Townsend Warner

His reply, also written, i.e. not typed, is dated Feb 14, 1975 and on stationery of 209 West 86th Street New York N.Y. 10024

Dear and great Sylvia Townsend Warner,

What a surprise to receive a letter from you and what kind words! I am one of your ardent readers and admirers. Your knowledge of nature and your love of it is unique. I am late in answering you because your letter went first to the New Yorker, then was forwarded to my address in New York and then to Florida, Miami Beach where I stay for a while. All this took a lot of time. All I can say to you is: I am grateful. I hope you will continue to write as beautifully as you do for many years to come, and if you visit New York, I would be happy to see you and to tell you how much joy you gave me and many readers. I love nature but I know only the names of a few flowers. The Yiddish language is very poor in this field but very rich in words which describe character and personality. English is rich in everything, especially your English.

With admiration and love and also with gratitude.
Isaac Bashevis Singer.

p.s. I hope my letter reaches you because your address is very difficult to read. I hope for the best. Good luck to you!

Sylvia's letter is at The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin – www.hrc.utexas.edu, and Singer's reply in the STW Archive.