“Loved with an L…”: The Lesbian Continuum in Three Works by Sylvia Townsend Warner

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Abstract
This article takes as its critical point of departure Adrienne Rich’s concept of a *lesbian continuum* of female sisterhood, support and dissent against the norms of patriarchal society. In particular, Rich’s term is used to explore three key works from the 1930s by the English writer, Sylvia Townsend Warner – *Opus 7*, *Whether a Dove or Seagull* and *Summer Will Show*. Not only does Warner herself emerge both politically and personally as a radical lesbian writer during this turbulent period of the 1930s. The article seeks to argue in this context that these three works also represent in themselves a progressively connected delineation of a lesbian continuum of women’s lives through the individual female and lesbian voices that are articulated in Warner’s writing at this crucial stage in her career.

Keywords: Sylvia Townsend Warner; *Opus 7*; *Whether a Dove or Seagull*; *Summer Will Show*; lesbian continuum; politics; literature; 1930s

In her provocative and ground-breaking essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, first published in 1980, Adrienne Rich discusses different forms of female experience that have often been hidden from history, involving the alternative existences of women who have broken the bonds of traditional heterosexuality. Women have chosen to opt out and live their lives on the margins of patriarchal society without men, “as witches, *femmes seules*, marriage resisters, spinsters, autonomous widows, and/or lesbians” (Rich 1994:31). These varying degrees of women’s non-collaboration with the sexual status quo Rich characterizes as a “*lesbian continuum*” of female dissent:

> I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range — through each woman’s life and throughout history — of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a 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 a 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 the ‘haggard’ behavior identified by Mary Daly (obsolete meanings: ‘intractable,’ ‘wilful,’ ‘wanton,’ and

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> 'unchaste,' 'a woman reluctant to yield to wooing'), we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of *lesbianism*. (Rich 1994:51-2)

Even though this refusal to adapt to the expectations of conventional gender roles might only remain very much on a private level, Rich's understanding of the term nevertheless suggests a broader genealogy of female resistance to the prevailing system of male dominance. Women who choose to live alone or together with other women represent therefore a continuous challenge to this masculinist power, creating a narrative of disobedience that has been fragmented or repressed: "We begin to observe behavior, both in history and in individual biography, that has hitherto been invisible or misnamed, behavior which often constitutes, given the limits of the counterforce exerted in a given time and place, radical rebellion" (Rich 1994:57). The recognition of this concept of a lesbian continuum has a number of important critical implications. Firstly, there is clearly a greater reluctance among women to submit to the pressures of what Rich calls 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Secondly, this complex history of the female recalcitrance needs to be acknowledged more in the discussion of gender relations, since it has an impact on the condition of women everywhere:

> The denial of reality and visibility to women's passion for women, women's choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other*. (Rich 1994:63)

Thirdly, and most relevantly to this present study, the awareness of a lesbian continuum should help inform the work of feminist critics and researchers who seek to recover the experience of women who have been unwilling to define themselves solely in terms of the conventions of marriage and motherhood and whose 'double life' has been hidden from history. As Rich herself concludes: "The lesbian continuum, I suggest, needs delineation in light of the 'double life' of women, not only women self-described as heterosexual but also of self-described lesbians. We

need a far more exhaustive account of the forms the double life has assumed" (Rich 1994:67).[1]

Rich's radical feminist assertion of a lesbian continuum has not been without controversy of course. Critical reactions have gone from rejecting the term for being either too broad or too restrictive. Diana Fuss, for example, argues that "Rich's notion is too inclusive, too vague [...] ahistorical and amaterialist—too imprecise to be useful epistemologically, though enormously evocative politically" (Fuss 1990:44). Caroline Gonda refers in contrast to "lesbians [who] protested that once again the specificity of lesbian experience was being blurred: where was the sense of lesbianism as an erotic 'commitment of skin. blood, breast and bone'" (Gonda 1998:119). Cora Kaplan also expressed critical misgivings about "Rich's simple belief in the all-embracing political possibilities of lesbian existence", arguing that "her rejection of the political integrity of heterosexual feminism constitutes a denial both of the specificity and variety of female sexuality and the specificity and variety of feminism" (Kaplan 1986:55). In Rich's defence, however, Peta Bowden and Jane Mummery counter by stating that the idea of a lesbian continuum provided the point of departure for Rich to develop "a feminist theory aiming to connect women's culture with their past and contemporary realities, give voice to hitherto silenced aspects of women's culture, and re-vision patriarchal assumptions" (Bowden & Mummery 2009:53).

Without delving further in what is an ongoing debate within feminism about the theoretical, political and personal connotations of Rich's characterisation of both compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian continuum, I want nevertheless to adapt the latter concept in particular to a discussion of three key works of the English writer, Sylvia Townsend Warner: *Opus 7* (1931), *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1933) and *Summer Will Show* (1936). The reasons for choosing to apply Rich's term to these texts are linked directly to her appeal for the need to trace a

[1] A prominent example of the pioneering research done within this field is the work of Lillian Faderman, who is Professor of English at California State University. Her now classic histories include: *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981), *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (1992), and *To Believe in Women: What Lesbians have done for America – A History* (2000).

paradigm of 'woman-identified experience' through the lesbian continuum, not least within literature. In the case of Sylvia Townsend Warner, I want to show that not only did she herself emerge both politically and personally as a radical lesbian writer during this crucial period of the 1930s. I will also argue that these three texts in themselves represent a progressively connected delineation of the continuum through the individual female and lesbian voices that surface in Warner's writing at this stage. In both cases, narratively and biographically, the concept of the lesbian continuum helps situate these three works within a context of Warner's own commitment to the portrayal of women who choose to challenge the parameters of heteronormativity.

A case could certainly be made for extending the choice of Warner's texts to include work she published both before and after this particular period and which would also fall within the scope of a literary lesbian continuum. Her very first published novel, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), for example, is the story of a so-called maiden aunt in a middle-class family who rebels against her role as unpaid nanny, deciding instead to live on her own in a cottage in a village where she eventually joins a local witches' coven. Despite its pastoral elements of an escape to the country, there is clearly something gender subversive about a woman who refuses offers of marriage, drops out of refined society and ends up seeking the company of female devil worshipers. A similar focus on women living in self-sufficient isolation can be found in Warner's later work, *The Corner That Held Them* (1948), which is a historical novel about a group of nuns in a 14th century convent over a period of thirty years. Although Warner herself said that she based this depiction of women dedicated to a life without men "on the purest Marxian principles, because I was convinced that if you were going to give an accurate picture of the monastic life, you'd have to put in all their finances, how they made their money" (Warner 2012c:404), the novel is also an exploration of female empowerment in a context where the nuns themselves live, work, worship, eat, sleep, socialise and grow old together with very little direct male interference. Thus, the existence of a lesbian continuum could be established at least in these two novels, if not in others among Warner's oeuvre. For my own purposes, however, I feel that the restriction to three works will suffice, since, as I have mentioned earlier, I want to also link this discussion to a decisive moment in Warner's development of her own lesbian identity.

In his introduction to the most recent collections of Warner's writings, *With The Hunted* (2012), Peter Tolhurst reminds us that despite being "one of the most accomplished writers of the last century [Warner] was largely ignored during her lifetime" (Tolhurst 2012:i). He also refers to Warner's biographer, Claire Harman, who explains this critical neglect in the following terms: "Being a woman and a lesbian and a Communist certainly didn't endear Warner to the establishment or to the literary canon-mongers" (Quoted in Tolhurst 2012:i). Maroula Joannou has raised a similar question about the condescension of literary history in this context: "Townsend Warner was a redoubtable feminist who always regarded women's rights as inseparable from other struggles for peace, democracy and freedom […] Why, then, is such a remarkable writer still neglected?" (Joannou 2006:iv). Since Warner's death in 1978, there have been repeated attempts at rescuing her work from this historical amnesia, to which the *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner* collection, in which Joannou's article appeared, represents the most recent and concerted challenge. The republication of many of Warner's novels and stories by the feminist Virago Press in the 1970s and 80s, the appearance of Wendy Mulford's study of Warner's lesbian relationship with Valentine Ackland, *This Narrow Place*, in 1988, as well as Claire Harman's comprehensive biography, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, in 1989, have all contributed to a renewal of interest in Warner's writing. In both these pioneering biographical studies, there is, however, little or no discussion of the two later works in my own selection as having anything more than a veiled lesbian subtext, while *Opus 7* is ignored altogether in this connection. One important literary historical link is nevertheless made by Wendy Mulford. Sylvia Townsend Warner's and Valentine Ackland's collaborative collection of poetry celebrating their own lesbian relationship, *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, as well as Warner's tale of a woman's encounter with lesbian love and revolution in France in 1848, *Summer Will Show*, are both brought together biographically in Mulford's book:

> [*Summer Will Show*], written at the height of the creative encounter between herself and Valentine, when they were collaborating on *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* [sic] and entering into their political commitments together, draws upon aspects of her and Valentine's relationship. (Mulford 1988:121)

Although Claire Harman is herself rather dismissive of the significance of the lesbian love poems in *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, stating merely that it "was generally assumed that Valentine was a man" (Harman 1989:132), in *Summer Will Show*, she draws a similar autobiographical parallel between the two main female characters: "Minna and Sophia are to a great extent Sylvia and Valentine" (Harman 1989:149). In contrast, recent criticism, not least that written by feminists, has been more inclined to underscore the radical lesbian politics of Warner's work. The collection, *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, has been the object of particular attention in this context. In her anthology of *Women's Poetry in the 1930s*, which addresses the neglected contribution of women poets to the predominantly male paradigm of the 'Auden generation', Jane Dowson points to the particular significance of Warner's writing in this 1930s nexus of politics and literature:

> Sylvia Townsend Warner clearly should have belonged to the canonised poetry of the Thirties. Her commitment to the cause of the Spanish Republicans was an extension of her opposition to the injustices of class inequality […] In her poems, as in her prose, Warner attacks institutions and bureaucracies which perpetuate poverty and illiteracy […] As a communist with a concern for the plight of the rural poor, Sylvia Townsend Warner was writing out of 'the discovery that the pen could be used as a sword.' (Dowson:1996:150-1)

In connection with the first complete reprint of *Whether a Dove or Seagull* in 2008, Frances Bingham comments in a similar way on the status of the collection as an underground lesbian classic that pushed the gender boundaries of poetry in this most iconic period of radical literary engagement:

> Out of print since that first edition, this has become an almost legendary text, frequently cited and long overdue for republication. It is an important collection, crucial to any overview of women's poetry at that period, and a moving account of love between two poets who are able to write about their relationship with subtlety and clarity. (Bingham 2008:1)

Continuing her own critical downplay of the radicalism of Warner's *Summer Will Show*, however, Claire Harman tends towards a further blurring of the connection between lesbianism and liberation when she introduced a recent edition of the book (Harman 2009:x). I will return in more detail to this question of the lesbian continuum of love and

revolution in the novel later. Suffice to say that in contrast to Harman, I think that the themes of lesbianism and radical activism become so intimately interwoven in Warner's writing at this time that they define the whole direction of her left-wing literary project.

In relation to Warner's epic poem, *Opus 7*, the critical consensus that can be discerned tends towards viewing this work as a minor piece, containing a somewhat quirky portrayal of a lonely alcoholic woman in a country village, the gender implications of which are left rather vague. Introducing the first reprint of this much neglected poem, Harman for example says that it shows "how essentially, if untypically, feminine a writer Warner was, using the freedom of her gender to say both harsh and simple things, 'not hampered', as she remarked in a lecture on 'Women as Writers', 'by an attribution of innate moral superiority'" (Harman 2008:4). In her preface to the recent collection of critical essays, Joannou repeats Warner's own throwaway characterisation of the poem as her "pastoral in the jog-trot English couplet" (Joannou 2006:i) without further comment, even though Warner also described it as a "truthful pastoral", very much opposed to the bucolic idealisation of rural life that often occurs within this tradition of poetry (Quoted in Mulford 1988:48).

In contrast to the equivocal critical response to the three works indicated above, I intend instead to reassert the intrinsic lesbian consciousness that these texts reflect. Not only in order to situate them within a continuum of dissenting woman-identified experience, but also to discuss them in the light of Warner's own attempt to turn a specifically female reality of resistance into the aesthetics of poetry and fiction.

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Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland became lovers on 11 October 1930. For Warner, it was her first experience of a lesbian relationship: "I got into her bed, and found love there", as she recalls in her diary (Warner 1994:70). It was clearly a turning-point in her life that gave her a profound sense of personal release, as Harman records in her biography:

> The cool autumn morning into which Sylvia awoke was unlike any other. Everything had changed, unsurmisably and for the good. She was joyful, and she

> was secure in her joy. 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 1991:100)

Their relationship was to last a lifetime, but was also quickly turned into active collaboration, both poetically and politically. The first fruit of this co-operation was the publication of their love poems to one another, *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, the title of which reflected the ambiguities of their own lesbian identity. Despite the happiness, emotional fulfilment and security that their companionship provided, they were both nevertheless deeply concerned about developments in the rest of society at this time. The rise of fascism throughout Europe filled them with alarm: all these authoritarian men in black or brown uniforms – Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, and Oswald Mosley in Britain – who were bent on wreaking havoc on the world.[2] Like many writers in the 1930s, Warner and Ackland looked for a solution in radical leftwing politics. Not only were they concerned about the international situation and the threat of war, the growing levels of unemployment in Britain, not least in the countryside, brought home the reality of the crisis of the system. As a consequence, in 1934, they both took the decision to join the Communist Party. Apart from politics, there were also other more tangible personal reasons for their membership, as Harman notes:

> Another element in Sylvia's wholehearted enthusiasm for Communism was the way in which it underlined the sense of ostracism she and Valentine had been made to

[2] Perhaps not surprisingly, this list does not include Stalin. As members of the Communist Party, both Warner and Ackland saw the Soviet Union as the main bulwark against fascism in the 1930s and 40s. It wasn't until much later that they became critical of stalinism. In an interview she gave in 1975, Warner described herself in terms of an anarchist: "I was a Communist, but I always find anarchists very easy to get on with. I think that's because, if the English turn to the left at all, they are natural anarchists. They are not orderly enough to be good Communists and they're too refractory to be good Communists. I became a Communist because I was agin the Government but that of course is not a suitable frame of mind for a Communist very long. But you can go on being an anarchist for the rest of your life, as far as I can see, and doing very well. You've always got something to be anarchic about – your life is one long excitement" (Warner 2012c:402).

> feel because they were lesbians. Rather than being slightly outcast, they could move themselves beyond the conventional altogether. Thus Communism conferred a blessing on their marriage and, because it was so closely tied up with their love for each other, became sacrosanct. (Harman 1991:142)

Both Warner and Ackland were very active throughout the decade of the 1930s, writing poems and articles for leftwing journals, campaigning for socialism and against the threat of fascism and war. In Warner's case, she also published a series of novels, poems and stories that articulated her new-found marxist-feminist view of society. It is in this context of fascism and war, gender politics and radical commitment, that the lesbian continuum within the work she produced in the early years of the 1930s can be understood. It is therefore to these key thematic elements in her writing that I now want to turn.

Women and War: Opus 7

In her introduction to Warner's *New Collected Poems*, Claire Harman correctly observes that "The war had haunted her early poems, with their cast of lone women and traumatised men […] The passage about the war from *Opus 7* is as forceful a statement on the subject as any by a non-combatant, I believe, and shows her long preoccupation with it" (Harman 2008:4). The passage of the poem in question, of which Harman only quotes the first part, depicts the First World War in terms of a monstrous banquet, "/w/hen grandees feasted have", a reference to those who instigated the mass slaughter in the trenches and who thrived on the sacrifice of young soldiers served up and devoured in the interests of class privilege and colonialist power:

> I knew a time when Europe feasted well:
> bodies were munched in thousands, vintage blood
> so blithely flowed that even the dull mud
> grew greedy, and ate men; and lest the gust
> should flag, quick flesh no daintier taste than dust,
> spirit was ransacked for whatever might
> sharpen a sauce to drive on appetite.
> From the mind's orient fetched all spices were –
> honour, romance, magnanimous despair,
> savagery, expiation, lechery,
> skill, humour, spleen, fear, madness, pride, ennui…
> Long revel, but at last to loathing turned,

> and through the after-dinner speeches yawned
> those who still waked to hear them. No one claps.
> Come, Time, 'tis time to bear away the scraps!
> (Warner 2008:162-3)

Although Harman gives an indication of Warner's pacifist sympathies, she does not develop their fundamental links with the portrayal of Rebecca Random, the central character of the poem. Instead, she views the work as being "deliberately thin", mainly "constructed as a vehicle for the poet's strong views on the state of English Pastoral" (Harman 2008:4). The personal impact of the war on Rebecca is not mentioned, for example that her alcoholism and decision to live alone might both be indirect consequences of the trauma of the military conflict. Rebecca, it could be argued, has decided to opt out of a patriarchal society that has brought only death, destruction and dislocation to herself and her world:

> War trod her low.
> Her kin all dead, alas! too soon had died;
> unpensioned, unallowanced, unsupplied
> with pasteboard window-boast betokening
> blood-money sent from a respectful king,
> she on her freehold starved, the sullen bait
> of every blithe philosopher on fate.
> Dig she could not. Where was the farmer who
> would hire her sodden limbs when well he knew
> how shapely land-girls, high-bred wenches all,
> would run in breeches at his beck and call?
> To beg would be in vain. What patriot purse
> would to a tippler open, when its terse
> clarion call the *Daily Mail* displayed:
> *Buckingham Palace Drinking Lemonade*?
> So fared she worsening on, until the chimes
> clashing out peace, renewal of old times –
> but bettered – sent her stumbling to the inn.
> No! No reduction in the price of gin.
> (Warner 2008:163-4)

The other key figure, apart from Rebecca herself, in this context of post-war social disruption is the "crippled Anzac" soldier who passes through the village, buying wallflowers from her garden and taking time to talk to her. Although he helps her realise that she could live by selling flowers, he also represents, more significantly, the embodiment of all the broken lives that the war has left by the wayside. Following in the wake of his

great-grandfather who was transported to Australia for "firing ricks", an act of social protest involving the burning of haystacks belonging to the landowners, the young man has himself been transported back to England to fight for the Empire, the patriotic myths of which he was inculcated with as a boy. Ironically, he now finds himself part of another lost generation of young men who have been condemned to the lowest and worthless category of physical and mental unfitness by the army – the C3's:

> When I was a pup
> I felt to come to England I'd give up
> all I could ever have – and here I am,
> her soldier. Now, I wouldn't give a damn
> for England. She's as rotten as cheese,
> her women bitches, and her men C3's.
> (Warner 2008:164)

Warner allows for no heterosexual love interest to develop between Rebecca and the soldier in the poem. The young man is crippled and brutalised by the war, a stranger in a foreign country that treats him like a vagrant. Rebecca also remains herself an outsider figure in the village, one whose planting and tending of flowers by night make her perceived as a witch, fearful to men, although fascinating to women. To the women, her cottage and garden appear as a source of magic female fecundity, aptly named "Love Green", a secret space beyond male control:

> To sow by lantern light – it was a scene
> unpaired in all the annals of Love Green,
> flat against nature and good usage, less
> act of a wantwit than a sorceress.
> Outlandish her vast shadow prowled and stayed –
> a rooting bear, a ghoul about her trade –
> beheaded, with her rising, into dark.
> Birds scolded at her, dogs began to bark,
> John Pigeon, reeling home to fight his wife,
> checked at the glare, and bellowed out *The strife*
> *is o'er, the battle done*, to scare the fiend;
> while him forgetting, Mrs Pigeon leaned
> out of the bedroom window in her nightgown,
> rapt as a saint at gaze, to track the light down.
> (Warner 2008:173-4)

Apart from the bohemian lifestyle of Rebecca in which she devotes herself to the pleasures of drink, her cultivation of flowers takes on a powerful regenerative meaning as a symbol of physical and spiritual recuperation. It is an act of female defiance in the face of the death drive of patriarchal society, a reassertion of the life-giving forces of nature with which she is identified.[3] Rebecca lives by herself, but in symbiosis with her surroundings, growing flowers that become an integral part of the social and family rituals of the village. That she thrives on the produce of her garden, not least financially, is another corroboration of the female counter-culture that her life comes to signify:

> A like kind providence now brooded over
> Rebecca's steps, even when she was sober.
> Her ways were plenteousness, her paths were peace;
> all summers, even wet ones, brought increase,
> and markets matched themselves to her supply –
> as in political economy.
> None gave a tea-party or funeral
> lacking her wares; she decked the village hall
> for whist-drives, and the set bouquet supplied,
> with fern bewhiskered, and with ribbon tied,
> for Lady Lee who opened the bazaar.
> […]
> She filled the chimney vase, the silver bowl

[3] In 1938, faced with the threat of yet another world war, Virginia Woolf made a similar connection in *Three Guineas* between the struggle for women's liberation and the fight against fascism and war. Like Warner, Woolf also suggested that it is natural for women to opt out of a system of patriarchy, patriotism and imperial war-mongering: "'Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or 'our' country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts, or to protect either myself or my country. For', the outsider will say, 'in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.' […] Such then will be the nature of her 'indifference' and from this indifference certain actions must flow. She will bind herself to take no share in patriotic demonstrations; to assent to no form of national self-praise; to take no part of any claque or audience that encourages war; to absent herself from military displays, tournaments, tattoos, prize-givings and all such ceremonies as encourage the desire to impose 'our' civilisation or 'our' dominion upon other people" (Woolf 1977:125).

> whose bright undinted cheek looked back the rife
> wrinkles of Fanny Grove, a virtuous wife
> for five-and-twenty years and polishing still,
> and the cracked teapot on the window sill
> of sluttish, sickly, smiling Jenny Prince,
> of all save love of flowers deflowered long since.
> Gentle and simple, shamed and proud, she served
> (Warner 2008:177)

The ultimate act of female solidarity, which also makes up the climax of the poem, is however Rebecca's visit to the village churchyard, in order to check that the wreaths she made for the funeral of Bet Merley, the now deceased mother of seven children, are still on her grave. Bet, who had breast cancer, is another of the anonymous female inhabitants in the village resurrected in the poem, a woman who was "bandaged in oblivion of morphia, moaned and vomited, and died" (Warner 2008:183). In a revealing, if macabre flashback, a race develops between Bet and an old "patriarch" who is also dying. The question is who will go first. The value of their lives is put into sharp, gendered contrast by Warner, as Bet's cancer is linked to the breastfeeding of her seventh child, a disturbing image of motherhood, at once as giver of life and carrier of death:

> What though the patriarch was stale in vice,
> renowned for ancient rape and present lice,
> and Bet had held her head up with the best
> until her seventh bit her in the breast
> and graffed a cancer there?
> (Warner 2008:183)

In a graveside encounter with Bet's ghost, a scene that forms part of the 'truthful' pastoral corrective of the poem, Rebecca is confronted with a narrative of birth, labour and death that is the lot of women in the village. Ostensibly, this is an aspect of the poem that is reminiscent of Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard*, but without the pastoral consolation of Gray's reassurance that the "rude Forefathers of the Hamlet sleep", finally at rest from their toil. If Gray's "short and simple Annals of the Poor" projects an enobling image of humble village men, Warner writes back at this gendered trope by counter-posing the grim rural reality of a working woman's life:

> ‘What is this talk of flowers? No flowers are here.’
> ‘Yet sorrowing neighbours laid them on your bier.’
> ‘Neighbours I have who nothing feel for me.’
> ‘In course of time they’ll grow more neighbourly.’
> ‘Time may the living ease; us it helps not.’
> ‘You should lie easy now, your cares forgot.’
> ‘My cares were me. While I endure, so they.’
> ‘Ay, you’d a mort of troubles in your day.’
> ‘And seven my womb drove out, like days to know.’
> ‘The seventh was avenged on you, if so.’
> ‘Life grinds the axe, however we may end.’
> ‘Are all the dead doleful as you, my friend?’
> ‘How are the living? Look in your own heart.
> Farewell.’
>
> (Warner 2008:187-8)

Symbolically, the poem ends with an apocalyptic image of Rebecca drinking her last bottles of gin on Bet’s grave as the storm rages about them, anointing herself and the soil with alcohol and then fading into frozen death in a sisterhood of self-sacrifice. A similarly defiant note of fallen female identification is voiced by Warner earlier on as the narrator of the poem where she refers to herself as: “I […] a sister-soul to my slut heroine” (Warner 2008:169). It is also this community of ordinary women in life and in death that situates their poetic rehabilitation within a lesbian continuum of recovered female experience. The figure of Rebecca is without doubt one of Warner’s most powerful poetic portrayals of a woman who is both victim and virago, one who nevertheless succeeds in carving out a corner for herself within the confines of patriarchal society. The poem represents therefore a decisive first stage in Warner’s deployment of a radical feminist aesthetic in her 1930s writing.

In Warner’s and Ackland’s collection of love poems, *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, published two years after *Opus 7*, the lesbian continuum is taken another significant step further, both socially and sexually, by two women writers who turn the intimacies of their life together on the margins of a country village into transgressive art. The collection stands, moreover, as the most explicit, personal commitment to lesbian love that Warner ever came to make in her writing. In the next section, I want to look more closely at the lesbian personae that these pioneering poems seek to construct.

Women and Love: Whether a Dove or Seagull

In her critical reassessment of the work of women poets in the 1930s, Jane Dowson places Warner's and Ackland's candid, poetic collaboration within a gender-bending tradition of lesbian literary correspondence:

> Poems about shared loved are remarkably few and difficult to categorise. There is nothing of the confessional, even if there is conversational intimacy. The love songs of Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner, such as in the title poem of *Whether a Dove or a Seagull* [sic] are the most lyrical. These, like some by Vita Sackville-West, should be read in the light of a lesbian aesthetic of mutuality and coded declaration. (Dowson 1996:22)

Wendy Mulford also describes their compilation of poems as forming "part of a continuing dialogue between the two lovers" (Mulford 1988:50). In the same vein, Harman characterises the book as a "conversation between two intriguingly different voices" (Harman 2008:5). While agreeing with this point about the intimate reciprocity of the poems, I myself want to explore in what particular ways the collection contributes more tangibly to a lesbian continuum in terms of its poetic elaboration of woman-identified experience. After the depiction of the implicit ties of solidarity between working women in *Opus 7*, the poems in *Whether a Dove or Seagull* take the continuum to the very core of shared lesbian existence and consciousness. Here we find not only a coming out of women as lesbians, but also a bold attempt to translate the sensibilities of homosexual love into the literary craft of poetry.

The volume was first published in America in 1933, collectively attributed to "T. W. and V. A.", and then reissued in Britain the following year, together with a key to the actual authorship of each of the poems. It was a political as well as a poetic decision, reflecting the response of the two writers to the challenges of collective commitment in the 1930s. The most important underlying themes of the poems dramatise both this oppressive political situation, as well as the contrasting emotional and physical liberation of their new-found love. The tension can be seen in several of the poetic exchanges in the collection in which the two women cling together in a literal and metaphorical night that is filled with pain, conflict and death. It is the microcosm of their bedroom that seems at first to offer shelter from the

storm, but which provides only a temporary respite from the troubled world outside:

> But to wake at night with the wind blowing,
> With time flowing,
> With cancers growing,
> To look this way and that, from nation to nation,
> To see desolation,
> Battle and starvation,
> To search the mind for what is left it,
> Since cold cleft it,
> Or base use bereft it,
> And then to turn and see the loved one sleeping,
> And know doom creeping,
> Is to fall – Oh, is to fall a-weeping!
> (Quoted in Ackland 2008:54)

In the poem that follows, Ackland responds by projecting a mirror-image of the limitations of love to displace this condition of political and existential angst. It is also one of several occasions in the collection where the poems have clearly been arranged together in order to create a dialogue of night thoughts and feelings that balances between desire, doubt and the demands of their shared social conscience:

> Open your arms to me,
> Open your eyes, to see
> What crowd of misery
> Invades me ceaselessly.
>
> Wild things cry aloud:
> 'No rest for the proud – '
> Let be your bright head bowed
> Over me –
> And cover me –
> Lest your eyes discover me
> You, my mistress, cover me
> With your gleaming shroud
> (Quoted in Ackland 2008:54)

As part of this poetic interrogation of the power of lesbian love, there are also a number of overtly erotic poems that explore the tentative expressions of the physical aspects of their relationship. These appear as part of a secret nocturnal life that the two women cultivate behind closed

doors. Warner also muses about the impression they might have made as they walked out together in the village "paired in spring as the cuckoos do" (In Ackland 2008:93). At the same time, it is a sign of the social invisibility of lesbians that many people, including reviewers of the collection, often mistook Valentine for a man. There was however one notable exception: the American poet, Robert Frost, to whom the volume was originally dedicated. Frost was horrified by the "more physical poems in the book", and requested not to be connected further with it. Writing to the critic, Louis Untermeyer, Frost admitted to his sense of disgust and fear of castration on reading the book:

> 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. This to you. But what can I say to them? (Quoted in Harman 1988:133)

It was poems like the following, written by Ackland, that produced such a homophobic shock in Frost. In a mixture of strikingly anomalous metaphors of technology, geography and sexuality that are influenced by both Metaphysical and Futurist poetry, Ackland contrasts the binaries of rational and emotional, capture and release, active and passive in the sensual exploration of the female body:

> The eyes of body, being blindfolded by night,
> Refer to the eyes of mind – at brain's command
> Study imagination's map, then order out a hand
> To journey forth as deputy for sight.
>
> Thus and by these ordered ways
> I come to you – Hand deft and delicate
> To trace the suavely laid and intricate
> Route of your body's maze.
>
> My hand, being deft and delicate, displays,
> Unerring judgment, cleaves between your thighs
> Clean, as a ray-directed airplane flies.
>
> Thus I, within these strictly ordered ways,
> Although blindfolded, seize with more than sight
> Your moonlit meadows and your shadowed night.
> (Quoted in Ackland 2008:46)

Once again in reply, Warner herself plays upon the alliterative elusiveness of lesbian identity that is suggested by the L-word followed by three dots, almost like an abbreviated love that dare not speak its name. There is certainly an intended pun on the pronunciation of the letter L, which in French sounds like "elle", meaning either she or her (the poem also contains the old French word 'demoiselle', denoting young lady).[4] Moreover, for someone like Warner, who had been heterosexual for the first twenty years or so of her adult life, the poem recalls her wonder at falling in love with Valentine Ackland, whose androgynous persona was clearly a revelation to her. It was the great love of Warner's life, love with a capital L, rebellious and exotic, with Valentine metamorphosed as an elemental force of nature:

> Loved with an L…
> Lynx-eyed and leopard-thew,
> Whom first I knew
> Like the crane demoiselle
> Long-legged and prim.
> Limber in love and light
> As lambs that dance in white,
> Unmatchable delight
> Of lip and limb;
> Leda for hue, and fell
> As lioness to smite
> With lust's renew.
> Now, for the world's spite
> What more shall I tell?
> Loved with an L…
>
> (Quoted in Ackland 2008:96)

This aspect of the lesbian continuum connects with another theme in the collection to which they both often return. Although the poems focus mainly on the inner world of two lovers cocooning in a small cottage, their relationship is also linked to the seasons, to a love that responds to the changing times. They both seek therefore to depict the dynamic of their feelings as something correspondingly natural, integrated and authentic in their daily lives. Warner, for instance, recycles the classic

[4] Warner was a fluent speaker of French and later acclaimed translator of the work of Marcel Proust.

trope of locating their love in an organic impulse, one that was rooted both in nature and nurture:

> This sapling love
> That you by chance have planted
> In me, unwanted,
> Shall never wander or remove
>
> Out of my grief;
> Thence it shall thrust and nourish
> Till it is flourished
> With steadfast power of limb and leaf.
>
> Stray as you will
> Through time and into distance
> It with insistence,
> Unmoved, shall follow you, until
>
> Being full-grown
> It touch you into its tether,
> And we together
> Under my shade and banner of love lie down.
> (Quoted in Ackland 2008:83)

In contrast to this image of love's exclusive introversion, there is also, as I have indicated, an urge to reach out to another world, one that is not so private and secure. As in *Opus 7*, this takes the form of short, poetic sketches of other women, usually working-class, whose lives are more constrained by the hardship of domestic work in cottages that have very few amenities. The condition of the rural poor became the focus of Warner's and Ackland's first public activism together, involving them in campaigns for the rights of village wives and serving girls, against the long working hours of farm labourers, the low wages, the lack of health care and schools. Apart from in their poetry, this commiment culminated in the radical sociological study that Ackland published herself in 1936, *Country Conditions*, which Mulford decribes as a "handbook setting out all the disadvantages the agricultural worker suffered, in work, housing, transport, education, health, wages and social life" (Mulford 1988:79). In another poem in the collection, "Being Watched", Warner connects herself to a tradition of struggle of women to cultivate gardens that provide fruit, berries and vegetables for the table, a task that is seen in terms of "warfare [...] taken on with weeds". More compellingly, she

imagines herself being observed by the former female occupants of the cottage, with whom she shares a sisterhood of physical labour among women throughout history. The ghosts of these nameless housewives, who have coaxed the same reluctant soil, gather while she digs, creating a continuum of truculent female experience and consciousness:

> ‘I fought these twining foes my lifetime through:
> Now they have shackled you.’
> I raise my eyes to confront the darkened air,
> And other watchers are there.
> Us with indifferent contented gaze
> The empty house surveys.
> The hedgerow ash its 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.
> (Quoted in Ackland 2008:100)

Thus, the figure of Rebecca comes back to haunt Warner’s poetry also in this new context. Warner’s identification with women who eek out a living from the soil, often demonised for their trouble, reverberates through several of her poems in the collection, most evocatively in “Wintry is this April, with endless Whine”. Once more, Warner imagines an encounter with an older woman in a garden, preparing the ground for planting. In this very much down-to-earth vignette, Warner documents the life of a working woman, with whom she clearly feels a strong affinity, both because of her physical toughness and ostracized social status. As in previous poems, Warner oscillates between positive and negative images of the earth, sometimes seeing it as a source of spiritual regeneration, at others as a physical enemy to be fought but never completely conquered. Repeatedly, however, she shows her awareness that labour on the land was no idyllic pastime, but a hard-won battle for survival, not least in the growing of garden crops that was traditionally the task of the women:

I passed the house
Where under sagging thatch dwells she whom all
Think witch, and call
Grannie – though she goes light-foot as a girl
Under her threescore years and ten. There,
With wind-wisped hair
Straggling under hat rammed down, and roughshod
Small foot on spade, obstinate to the blast,
The ill day's last
Opponent, she worked her winter ground for spring.

Above the wind rang the spade's stroke on flint,
As she by dint
Of versed limb's long cunning clod after clod
Wrenched from the sullen hold of earth and turned
Backward and spurned
Free of her steel, and with the wind were borne
Her grunts, angry and triumphing, as though she laboured a foe
(Quoted in Ackland 2008:35)

The lesbian relationship between Warner and Ackland, of which the poems in *Whether a Dove or Seagull* were a literary celebration, proved without doubt a turning-point in their political and writing careers. After joining the Communist Party, they became in Mulford's phrase "Writers in arms", both literally and metaphorically (Mulford 1988:70). Not only did they use their writing and speaking talents to promote the struggle against fascism and for socialism. When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, they refused to just sit on the sidelines, volunteering instead to serve at the front as part of an ambulance unit in Barcelona. Warner herself became an executive member of the *International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture*, attending conferences in London, Paris and Madrid, while the civil war still raged in Spain, where she argued for active solidarity in deed as well as in word.

The 1930s was also a prolific period of literary production for Warner, resulting in two of her most overtly political novels – *Summer Will Show* in 1936 and *The Death of Don Juan* in 1938. The first was set in Paris during the revolutionary uprising of 1848, the second was what she herself called "a political fable" (Quoted in Mulford 1988:124), based on the Spanish Civil War. *Summer Will Show* is certainly her most ambitious and elaborate feminist work of fiction, detailing the complex historical dialectic of lesbian love and revolutionary political activism. It

represents the culmination of Warner's contribution to a literary dramatisation of the lesbian continuum.

Women and Revolution: Summer Will Show

In her introduction to a recent reprint of Warner's *Summer Will Show*, Claire Harman makes another rather surprising disclaimer, in light of the previous feminist discussion of Warner's work, that, in her view, the story is not primarily concerned with either sexual or socialist politics: "Just as this lesbian novel refuses to unpick and categorize the characters' sexuality, so there is no special pleading on behalf of the author's own political ideology" (Harman 2009:x). Although she admits, using a curiously disdainful metaphor, that "we may see 1936 poking its face through the fabric, a reminder that Warner wrote *Summer Will Show* of and for her own troubled times. The ultimate message is, however, a fatalistic and pessimistic one", that is of the delusions of revolutionary social change (Harman 2009:xv). More perceptively, Maroula Joannou emphasizes instead the radical co-relation between the themes of gender and social liberation in the novel: "The issues of sexual and political revolution in *Summer Will Show* are seen to be inextricably linked and the one to be a prerequisite for the other" (Joannou 1998:100). Although Joannou does not explore this critical observation in any detail, she has nevertheless put her finger on what is a pivotal point in the novel. Using the concept of the lesbian continuum, it is possible to develop her comment further and argue that the gender war that is waged against Sophia by her husband, who cheats on her, abandons her, strips her of her income and takes away her children, is a personal projection of the 1848 class war in France, into which Sophia is also drawn. Thus, the sexual attraction that Sophia subsequently feels towards Minna, the charismatic ex-mistress of her husband, and the radical political involvement that Minna also represents, are intimately bound together in the novel. Moreover, this aspect of the gendered experience of these women provides the basis for their becoming both lesbian lovers and revolutionary activists together. Paris offers therefore not merely a physical escape route for Sophia from the prison-house of her marriage in England, but also the possibility for her to free herself psychologically, socially and sexually from the constrictions of heteronormative convention.

Ostensibly, the starting point of Sophia's transformation is her decision to leave her privileged, but pointless, domesticity in Dorset and go to Paris to confront her husband's mistress, Minna. Her desire to have an illegitimate child of her own is also an indication of her desperate determination to break with her past. Instead, her encounter with Minna leads to her questioning much more than her own personal submission to male authority. It is Minna who helps her gain an understanding of the patriarchal structures that have determined her life as a woman, a wife and a mother:

> 'You have run away,' said Minna placidly. 'You'll never go back now, you know. I've encouraged a quantity of people to run away, but I have never seen any one so decisively escaped as you.' […]
> 'But what have I run away from?'
> 'From sitting bored among the tyrants. From Sunday Schools, and cold-hearted respectability, and hypocrisy, and prison.
> 'And domesticity,' she added, stepping out of the dusters. (Warner 2009:179)

It is however not only her husband's male chauvinist behaviour that compels Sophia to see herself in new ways, but also the concomitant destabilising of her own heterosexual female identity. It is the discovery of her physical attraction to and desire for Minna as a woman that is the catalyst that changes everything. Without the shame or moral misgivings Sophia feels about her own marriage, their relationships awakens the passionate, spontaneous and sensuous sides of Sophia's nature that have previously remained dormant:

> Never in her life had she felt such curiosity or dreamed it possible. As though she had never opened her eyes before she stared at the averted head, the large eloquent hands, the thick, milk-coffee coloured throat that housed the siren voice. Her curiosity went beyond speculation, a thing not of the brain but in the blood. It burned in her like a furnace, with a steadfast compulsive heat that must presently catch Minna in its draught, hale her in, and devour her. (Warner 2009:120)

Although the scenes of love-making between the two women are discreetly drawn in the novel, it is nevertheless this sexual conversion that opens up a life that is radically different, liberating and satisfying to Sophia. It is this new-found freedom that encourages her to question her own class prejudice and eventually embrace the libertarian ideas that Minna advocates. A parallel is therefore intimated between Sophia's coming out as a lesbian and the struggle for an alternative world that is

going on outside in the streets. Thus, Warner weaves together the personal and the political conflicts through the psychological tensions between individual and collective in the story. In both contexts, the novel articulates a historically grounded, yet utopian desire for a different way of life, where social inequalities are redressed, but more significantly, human relations are transformed.

At the beginning of her relationship with Minna, however, Sophia thinks only of her own personal liberation: "I am fascinated, she thought. I have never known such freedom, such exhilaration, as I taste in her presence" (Warner 2009:183). It is her dramatic loss of marital status and demotion into the ranks of the dispossessed that fundamentally challenge her aristocratic attitudes. Her rather melodramatic experience as an unsuccessful street singer also triggers a radical shift in consciousness. Being drawn into political activism is seen therefore as a logical consequence of her social descent, even though it is once again Minna who functions as the female principle of conscious resistance in the narrative, the one who explains the radical transcendence of Sophia's new life. This personal revelation also corresponds to the symbolic coming-to-fruition that the title of the novel suggests, *Summer Will Show*:

> '/I/t is not true, Minna, that I have left Frederick and renounced my income because my sympathies are with the Revolution. I am here as I am because I saw a chance of being happy and took it. As for the Revolution, when I smacked my husband's face and sent him to the devil, I never gave it a thought.
> 'Anyhow,' she added, countering a look of triumph on Minna's face, 'I had done with Frederick long before. The smack was only a postscript.'
> 'You had done with Frederick, yes. But what is that? So had I. So had dozens of other women. To give up a thing or a person, that is of no significance. It is when you put out your hand for something else, something better, that you declare yourself. And though you may think you have chosen me, Sophia, or chosen happiness, it is the Revolution you have chosen.' (Warner 2009:226-7)

Sophia's trajectory starts with her alienated condition as the personal property of her upper-class husband: "/T/o think that the stables and sheepfolds and kennels of Blandamer House had not produced a more vigorous or better-trained animal than she" (Warner 2009:9). However, instead of remaining a thoroughbred servant, she strives to become a fully human being whose existence is validated by the control that she gains over her own body. Living on the margins of class society and

beyond the norms of heterosexual behaviour, her increasingly compromised status as a lady is depicted in inverse proportion to the physical and emotional freedom she experiences as an independent woman:

> The decorum of class had gone, the probity of class had gone too […] With a step she had ranged herself among the *mauvais sujets*, the outlaws of society who live for their own way and by their own wits. There had been no tedium about her fall, and with a flash every false obligation was gone. […] Her happiness, blossoming in her so late and so defiantly, seemed of an immortal kind. (Warner 2009:235-6)

Warner's novel is historical in that it is set in the past, but there is also a more modern Marxist consideration of residual, dominant and emergent ideology that goes beyond its specific 19th century context.[5] Different levels of political and gender awareness are reflected in the narrative. This is something Warner saw herself as a prerequisite for writing historical fiction: "There were tolerable Marxists before Marx. But they were before Marx. And a historical novelist who includes (and I think the historical novelist should) the economic ground-base, must simultaneously recognise the social-economic variations which move that ground-base […] The historical novelist cannot dodge the obligation, so it seems to me, of knowing pretty accurately how people clothed their minds" (Warner 2012c:270). There are certainly elements in both

[5] These categories of residual and emergent aspects of culture are usually associated with Raymond Williams, who discusses them at length in his book, *Marxism and Literature* (1977). In an earlier essay, Williams defines the two concepts in the following terms: "I have next to introduce a further distinction, between residual and emergent forms, both of alternative and of oppositional culture. By 'residual' I mean that some experiences, meanings and values, which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue - cultural as well as social - of some previous social formation [...] By 'emergent' I mean, first, that new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences, are continually being created. But there is then a much earlier attempt to incorporate them, just because they are part - and yet not a defined part - of contemporary pratice. Indeed it is significant in our own period how very early this attempt is, how alert the dominant culture now is to anything that can be seen as emergent. We have then to see, first, as it were a temporal relation between a dominant culture and on the one hand a residual and on the other hand an emergent culture" (Williams 2001:170-1).

Minna's and Sophia's consciousness of class and gender that appear somewhat before their time.[6] Of course, Warner is also writing back at the contemporary political conflicts of the 1930s, showing how revolutions throw up ideas that connect both to the past and the future.[7] However, it is at such liminal junctures in her development within the lesbian continuum that Sophia is shown making a leap towards a higher level of feminist awareness. There is therefore a dialectical link made between a woman's marginalization as a lesbian and the sort of situated knowledge that this social and sexual position makes available. As Adrienne Rich also notes:

> By the same token, we can say that there is a *nascent* feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality. But for lesbian existence to realize this political content in an ultimately liberating form, the erotic choice must deepen and expand into conscious woman identification – into lesbian feminism. (Rich 1994:66)

In Sophia's case, she comes to understand more clearly how the personal deepens the meaning of the political. Thus, she goes from being a foot soldier of the revolution, smuggling ammunition and political pamphlets, to seeking a greater theoretical grasp of its strategies of struggle. She begins therefore to intervene herself in the debates, sometimes in order to question the opinions of the leaders, most of whom are men. At one point for example, both Minna and herself reach the same prescient critical conclusion about the shortcomings of this male leadership, whose decisions will have such dire consequences for the revolution:

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[6] The novel also contains other more tangibly anachronistic details, such as the fact that on the last page of the book, Sophia reads from the opening paragraph of the *Communist Manifesto* in English in the 1888 translation by Samuel Moore, which begins with the famous words: "A spectre is haunting Europe - the spectre of Communism". The very first version in English of the *Manifesto* was translated by Helen Macfarlane and published in 1850, still too late for Sophia to read it in 1848, however. Macfarlane's translation also begins: "A frightful hobgoblin stalks through Europe. We are haunted by a ghost, the ghost of Communism". See further, Rowbotham 1998:3.

[7] I use the term "writing back" in the same post-colonial sense of engaging with the dominant ideological discourse of the time. See further Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2002:6.

> 'Yes, I know about lock-outs. It is a device often used in England. But are you going to stand it?' [Sophia] enquired.
> 'No!' said the man.
> 'No,' said Minna.
> 'Decision is a great deal,' pondered Sophia. 'But not quite sufficient. I think you would do well to get rid of some of your ridiculous leaders for a start.'
> 'That idea has occurred to us also, as it happens. The more so, since we do not consider them our leaders. At first, our go-betweens; and now, for some time, our betrayers.' (Warner 2009:250).

Similarly, in the key political discussion about "Bread or Lead", that is reform or revolution, Sophia searches herself for ideological clarification, before taking a stand of her own: "Now into the most outrageous rumours and theories the question of the workless penetrated, and those words, *Bread or Lead*, clanged through every conversation. Sophia found herself believing, arguing, theorising, with the rest" (Warner 2009:283). Although this is undoubtedly a novel of historical ideas, one of the strengths of Warner's depiction of the 1848 revolution in Paris is that its conflicts and contradictions do not merely make up the backcloth of the plot, but are dramatised through the clash of intellectual and emotional responses of the characters themselves, in particular those of the women.

In the end, after fighting herself on the barricades and witnessing Minna being bayoneted in the breast, it is Sophia who is left to deal with the consequences of the revolutionary defeat. Thus, the novel concludes with a contrasting set of images that both hark back to the isolated and frustrated woman she once was and the personification of female agency she has become. It is a point in the novel that could easily have become psychologically simplistic and ideologically reductive, but is left deftly in the balance of personal confusion and radical political hope:

> Ah, here in this empty room where she had felt such impassioned happiness, such freedom, such release, she was already feeling exactly as she had felt before she loved Minna, and wrapping herself as of old in that coward's comfort of irony, of cautious disillusionment! How soon her blood had run cold, how ready she was to slink back into ignominy of thought, ignominy of feeling! […] She took up one of the copies, fingered the cheap paper, sniffed the heavy odour of printer's ink, began to read. […]
> '*A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism*. […]
> '*Communism is now recognised by all European Powers to be itself a power*.

> '*It is high time that Communists should lay before the whole world their point of view, their aims and tendencies, and set against this spectre of Communism a Manifesto of the Party itself.*'
> She seated herself; and leaning her elbows on the table, and sinking her head in her hands, went on reading, obdurately attentive and by degrees absorbed.
> (Warner 2009:328-9)

Thus, the novel closes on a note of critical reflection, of Sophia's need to come to terms with her sense of profound individual loss and new-found political conviction. As at the start of her story, she finds herself once more alone. However, the difference is that now she has been part of a counter-culture of rebellious women and men, who have tried to live together in solidarity, against the tyranny of conventional social habit. Moreover, her love for Minna remains a challenge to heteronormative practice, a defiant memory that continues to pose the potentially utopian question: what if?

Thus, Warner's novel not only extends the experience of female bonding in her writing, it also stands as a fictional testimony to a lesbian continuum of gender-based resistance. Sophia's liberation encapsulates what Adrienne Rich has herself identified as the essential driving force behind this continuum: the struggle of women to recover the power over their own personal and sexual identity. There is, moreover, an intrinsic link between the political and the erotic, in that the trajectory of the lesbian continuum involves different forms of resistance to compulsory heterosexuality: "/W/e can connect these rebellions and the necessity for them with the physical passion of woman for woman which is central to lesbian existence: the erotic sensuality which has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience" (Rich 1994:57). *Summer Will Show* is Warner's greatest tribute to this radical lesbian tradition of dissenting women.

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It is these woman-identified values that inspired Warner's own literary pursuit of the deviant lesbian condition, past and present. My discussion of this female consciousness, sometimes oblique and at others more explicit, in her early 1930s work has therefore been based on the same radical feminist rationale. I hope moreover that my adaptation of Adrienne Rich's concept of the lesbian continuum has shown how

relevant this can be in illuminating more fully aspects of Warner's writing that have previously been blurred or ignored by other critics. In an article she published in *Left Review* in 1936, Warner wrote about her view of the essential social function of literary criticism: "A literary critique is not merely concerned with literature. As literature is concerned with living, its criticism must have a life interest also, must express an outlook on behaviour and social conditions" (Warner 1936:178). In my own approach to Warner's lesbian literary project I have tried to remain true to the spirit of this radically oriented, critical practice.

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