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Jerusalem Building: Lolly Willowes, Blake and Rural Politics

Murray, A. (2020). Jerusalem Building: Lolly Willowes, Blake and Rural Politics. *Modernist Cultures*, 15(4), 419-441. <https://doi.org/10.3366/mod.2020.0307>

Published in:
Modernist Cultures

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Title Page

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Abstract:

Sylvia Townsend Warner's work is richly allusive, yet the precise purpose of her myriad references and echoes to earlier works of literature often remains opaque. This essay explores one particular intertext in her work from the 1920s: the poetry of William Blake. In her essays, poetry, and in particular *Lolly Willowes* (1926), Warner, I argue, attempts to liberate Blake from both jingoistic nationalism and from progressive improvement. It is in particular in the intertextual dialogue she opens up with rural preservationist J. W. Robertson Scott that we can see how Warner seeks to free Blake from those who believed that the Jerusalem could be literally built, rather than it being the preserve of an unfettered imagination. As I demonstrate, Laura Willowes has a series of Blakean epiphanies that allow her to become a critic of the materialism of modernity.

Keywords: Sylvia Townsend Warner, allusion, rural preservation, Romanticism, modernism

Jerusalem Building: *Lolly Willowes*, Blake and Rural Politics

As many readers have observed, Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel *Lolly Willowes; or the Loving Huntsman* (1926) is only superficially light and whimsical. Beneath its fantastical pastiche of Victorian realism there is a depth of allusion and reference that critics have only recently begun to explore in detail. As the best contemporary scholarship on the novel demonstrates, Warner's allusions are precisely located within broader political and philosophical debates.¹ Warner, as these critics have established, developed an explicitly political model of allusion. Moreover those references were by no means ahistorical or undertaken as simple homage, rather they aligned Warner with specific political debates of the interwar period. Charting the import of the full range of Warner's allusions in this novel is not my task here, but they include, among the most obvious examples, Daniel Defoe, John Milton, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Sabine Baring-Gould, John Locke, and Victorian advice manuals (*Enquire Within Upon Everything*). There is, however, one repeated reference throughout the novel that, I will argue, opens up the politics of the text in different directions, towards debates about the nature of rural community in the 1920s. Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt argues that 'as the plot of *Lolly Willowes* progresses, England's spaces are also replotted in response to Laura's broadening political perspective', and that this necessitates a rejection of the ways in which 'an ideology of place' is 'naturalized through historical and literary precedent'.² Key to that precedent is Warner's interest in the poetry of William Blake. In the year after *Lolly Willowes* was published, Warner, in a short essay, staged her own intervention in debates around the reception and appropriation of Blake's poetry. Warner identifies herself as an adherent to a Blakean antinomianism, echoing his critique of the materialism and conformity of modernity.

The poetry of William Blake appears at decisive moments in Warner's novel, in particular moments when Laura happens upon the secret and mystery of her self-realization. Yet this is not merely an attempt to frame Laura's quest for self-knowledge as Romantic individualism. Rather,

¹ For instance, Mimi Winick has examined how the novel opens up a dialogue with Margaret Murray's work of 'fantastic scholarship,' *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921), to explore enchantment as a feminist condition, while Jacqueline Shin has demonstrated the novel engages in a 'female appropriation and dispossession of male art,' in particular that of Henry Fuseli. See Mimi Winick, 'Modernist Feminist Witchcraft: Margaret Murray's Fantastic Scholarship and Sylvia Townsend Warner's Realist Fantasy,' *Modernism/modernity* 22, no. 3 (2015): 565-592.

² Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt, 'Footsteps of Red Ink: Body and Landscape in "Lolly Willowes",' *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 4 (2003): 449-71.

as I will demonstrate here, the references to Blake are part of a complex dialogue with the proponent of countryside transformation, J. W. Robertson Scott. Laura, like Warner herself, was part of a wave of reverse migration from the city to the country that was particularly freighted in this period, and throughout her career she attacked the clichéd pastoral modes of representing the rural and urban divide. David James has argued that Warner's *Summer Will Show* (1936) was part of a broader development amongst women writers of the 1930s to 'discredit the equation of regional prose with transparent or unreflective realism'.³ That novel's challenge to a particularly artless regional literature was prefigured, as I will demonstrate, by the ways in which Warner reflects in *Lolly Willowes* on the relationship between the country and the city.

At a very literal level *Lolly Willowes* is a bi-located novel, and there is within it a reflection on the relationship between country and city. It was a relationship that Warner had cause to reflect upon in the 1920s as she began to bi-locate her own life, living primarily in Bayswater but being drawn to the provinces, having short breaks in Essex, Oxfordshire and elsewhere before buying the late Mrs Green's cottage in Chaldon Herring in 1930. As this essay demonstrates, *Lolly Willowes* engages – if obliquely – with debates in the 1920s on the relationship between the country and the city, in the light of which Laura's relocation to Great Mop becomes freighted with even greater significance. Mapping the references to Blake in the novel offers a vision of Laura's self-realization as a critique of the countryside movement of the period which believed a Blakean new Jerusalem could take the form of functioning privies rather than spiritual renewal.

Warner's turn to Blake to articulate her ideal of rural self-emancipation sits somewhat uncomfortably with recent scholarship on regional and rural modernism. Neal Alexander and James Moran have attempted to renovate regional modernism by destabilising the urban-centric view of modernism that equates the metropolis with cosmopolitan internationalism, dismissing the regions as backward, conservative, and oppressive places from which any progressive artist would want to escape. As they note, many modernists retreated to the regions, taking advantage of modern communication technology and transportation to connect the periphery with the centre. 'In such instances of regional modernism,' they note, 'an internationalist or cosmopolitan sensibility arises, paradoxically, from situations and contexts that are distinctively local or provincial.'⁴ Internationalising the provincial is one means of refusing the association of the

³ David James. 'Realism, Late Modernist Abstraction, and Sylvia Townsend Warner's Fictions of Impersonality.' *Modernism/modernity* 12, no. 1 (2005): 111-131, 113. Italics in original.

⁴ Neal Alexander and James Moran, 'Introduction: Regional Modernism' *Regional Modernisms*, eds. Neal Alexander and James Moran (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 1-20, 2.

regions with tradition and nostalgia, but it can work to reinstate cultural binaries, the regional being only redeemed by the presence of modernism. As Kristin Bluemel Michael McCluskey have recently argued, the ‘modernists countryside’ is only a ‘small part’ of the larger picture of rural modernity in Britain where ‘rural regions, communities, classes, and figures can originate and sustain histories of and criticism on modernity and the modern’.⁵ The very construction of the ‘apparent disconnection’ between rural life and modernity is, according to Dominic Head, ‘in *itself*, a response to modernity rather than a refusal to engage with it’.⁶ *Lolly Willowes* sits uncomfortably alongside these attempts to trouble the seeming incompatibility of modernism and the rural. Warner, rather than embracing the modernity of Robertson Scott’s rural activism, critiques it. Where other writers may have brought internationalist and cosmopolitan sensibilities to rural Britain, Warner celebrates William Blake whose poetry and art was routinely dismissed and derided by modernists. Laura Willowes’s rural Blakean epiphanies are a return to a Romantic aesthetic that is seemingly at odds with modernism.

Blake and Cultural Politics

The status of William Blake’s poetry in the first half of the twentieth century was fiercely contested as his work became co-opted by both patriots and liberal reformers, while modernists lamented Blake’s intense individualism and want of formal control.⁷ Warner’s surprising turn to Blake places her at odds with many modernist writers for whom he was anathema. It is impossible not to view Blake through the lens established for us by the aesthetes who recovered and popularised his work in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and then later William Butler Yeats. The Blake that these critics produced through editions and commentary was characterised by ‘impressionism’ and ‘brilliant mystifications,’ according to Deborah Dorfman.⁸ The association of Blake with the excesses of late-Victorian aesthetic appreciation goes some way to explaining the modernist wariness of Blake. For a painter like Clive Bell, Gillespie explains, Blake’s great error was ‘to see the natural world as an obstacle to spiritual truths.’⁹ As Blake had written in a volume of Wordsworth’s poetry, in response to the fragment ‘Influence of Natural Objects’:

⁵ Kristin Bluemel Michael McCluskey, ‘Introduction’ *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*, eds. Kristin Bluemel Michael McCluskey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 2.

⁶ Dominic Head, *Modernity and the English Rural Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

⁷ For an overview see Edward Larrissy, *Blake and Modern Literature* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006).

⁸ Deborah Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 228.

⁹ Diane F. Gillespie, ‘Blake and Bloomsbury: Mental Warfare’ *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 33.1 (1990), 5-28.

‘Natural objects always did and now do weaken, deaden, and obliterate imagination in me Wordsworth must know that what he/ Writes Valuable is Not to be found in Nature’.¹⁰ This rejection of the objective world meant, for the influential art critic Roger Fry, that Blake represented everything that was lacking about English visual art. Musing on an exhibition of early illuminated English manuscripts at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1908, Fry claimed that:

the Apocalyptic artists allow the drawing to pass outside its proper boundaries as the caprice of their rapidly recorded visions directs. One seems before some of these strange and fantastic improvisations to recognize already the ancestry of William Blake, and to note the characteristic of English figure design, its visionary, capricious and intensely individual character, together with its want of the plastic and constructive sense.¹¹

The intense individualism of Blake was anathema to the impersonal, formalist, and abstract principles that Fry would so famously express in *Vision and Design* (1920). Fry was insistent that the artist’s role was to translate chaos into harmony, to impose order and form: ‘Almost any turn of the kaleidoscope of nature may set up in the artist this detached and impassioned vision, and, as he contemplates the particular field of vision, the (aesthetically) chaotic and accidental conjunction of forms and colours begins to crystallise into a harmony’.¹² But Blake’s painting was as far from detached and impassioned as possible, ‘marred’, according to Fry, ‘by a certain incoherence and want of reasonable co-ordination’.¹³ Colin Trodd has gone as far as to suggest that Fry was singlehandedly responsible for Blake’s ‘repudiation’ amongst the more radical artists of Britain between 1900 and 1930, seeing it as the epitome of an ‘anti-classical weakness at the centre of British art’.¹⁴

It was T.S. Eliot who, in 1920, offered the most influential literary dismissal of Blake in the interwar period, counselling against viewing Blake as ‘a naïf, a wild man, a wild pet for the supercultivated’. Yet Eliot refused to celebrate Blake’s work as strange or exceptional, for it possessed ‘the unpleasantness of great poetry’. Blake had, Eliot would declare, ‘by some

¹⁰ William Blake, *Complete Poetry and Prose* ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 665.

¹¹ Roger E. Fry ‘English Illuminated Manuscripts at the Burlington Fine Arts Club’ *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 13, No. 65 (Aug., 1908), 261-273, 268.

¹² Roger Fry *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920), 33-4.

¹³ Roger E. Fry, ‘Three Pictures in Tempera by William Blake’ *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 4, No. 12 (Mar., 1904), pp. 204-211, 205.

¹⁴ Colin Trodd, *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World 1830-1930* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2012), 464-5.

extraordinary labour of simplification' managed to 'exhibit the essential sickness or strength of the human soul'. Blake was lucky to have escaped a formal education, his interest in literature and painting uncorrupted by the expectations of society; Eliot, in a somewhat backhanded compliment, compared his work to 'an ingenious piece of home-made furniture'. Eliot admired the earlier and shorter poems, namely *Songs on Innocence and of Experience* (1794), and those in the 'Rossetti Manuscript', but he was not, unlike Warner, enamoured with the long visionary poems. These revealed what Eliot perceived to be the central flaw of Blake's poetic, namely the preponderance of philosophical speculation over the music of poetry: 'Blake was endowed with a capacity for considerable understanding of human nature, with a remarkable and original sense of language and the music of language, and a gift of hallucinated vision. Had these been controlled by a respect for impersonal reason, for common sense, for the objectivity of science, it would have been better for him.'¹⁵ The lack of control in Blake's visionary poetic made him incompatible with the 'impersonal theory of poetry' that Eliot would famously outline in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919).¹⁶ Yet, as Alexandra Harris has intimated, there was another, 'romantic' strain of modernism in the inter-war period that was far from hostile to Blake, with a painter such as John Piper celebrating Blake's work as offering a 'fullness' that escaped the abstract or surrealist artist.¹⁷

If modernists were, on the whole, haughty in their dismissal of Blake's want of impersonality and lack of formal coherence, a jingoistic nationalist culture had no such problems with the visionary poet's work. While they were far from rigorous or expansive in their reading of Blake, nationalists were more than happy to appropriate elements of his poetry to incorporate into the cultural fabric of monarchy and empire. In 1915 the Fight for Right Movement was established by Francis Younghusband to foster support for the nation's war effort. For an early meeting of the movement the Poet Laureate Robert Bridges suggested that Hubert Parry set the Preface to Blake's *Milton* to music. That poem, 'And did those feet in ancient time' (commonly now known as 'Jerusalem'), once set to music immediately took on a life of its own, adopted by the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies as the Women Voter's Hymn. In 1922 Elgar gave Parry's setting a far more elaborate orchestration, and it is that version that ended up in the late-twentieth century as an alternative national anthem. The poem, now deracinated from the

¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'Blake' *The Sacred Wood*. 1921.

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1972), 47-60, 53.

¹⁷ Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 33;

idiosyncratic symbolism of Blake's illuminated manuscript, transformed into a celebration of patriotism, the last stanza taken up as an invitation to national self-realization:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In Englands green & pleasant Land.¹⁸

The poem, as Shirley Dent has explored, was now easily appropriated not merely by conservative jingoists, but by anti-Semites and fascists. As early as 1917 John H. Clarke used the poem in *The Call of the Sword* to justify the violent expulsion of 'the alien Enemy, alien Usurer, alien Intriguer'.¹⁹ Yet as Michael Ferber notes the poem is both evocative and ambiguous enough that 'its wonderous claim that Jerusalem can be built or rebuilt here in England make it seem both patriotic and revolutionary, and even restorationist'.²⁰ Accordingly it was taken up by both left and right in the period, a rallying cry for both progressive internationalism and old-fashioned conservatism, a bifurcated reception that continues to this day. It was certainly this context that irked Sylvia Townsend Warner and, I argue, lies behind her attempt to develop an alternative Blakean vision of individual self-realization in *Lolly Willowes*.

Less than a year after *Lolly Willowes* reached the reading public, Warner published a short essay, 'The Inspired Old Bustard: William Blake 1757-1827 in *Time and Tide* (August 1927) in which she took issue with what she perceived as both the domestication and militarization of Blake's work. She takes aim initially at Blake's well-meaning, but over-bearing patron William Hayley, but it is that 'tribe of little Hayleys, who for the last twenty-five years and more have been pilfering the bustard's feathers to line their own nests' that she is prepared to 'roar very loud indeed against'. She had in mind a most specious specimen of Blake enthusiast that she had recently encountered while visiting the Centenary Exhibition of Blake's art at the Burlington Fine Arts Club. This woman positively gushes over Blake: 'Such a wonderful poem this! Such a favourite of mine! I quoted it in my little private *Anthology of Comfort* I made during the war'.²¹ Warner was aggrieved

¹⁸ William Blake, 'Milton' *Complete Poems* Ed. Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin, 1977), 514.

¹⁹ John H. Clarke, as quoted in Shirley Dent, '“Though readst white where I readst black”: William Blake, the Hymn “Jerusalem”, and the Far Right', *Re-envisioning Blake*, eds Mark Crosby, Troy Patenaude, and Angus Whitehead (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 48-62, 59.

²⁰ Michael Ferber, 'Blake's "Jerusalem" as a Hymn', *Blake, An Illustrated Quarterly*, 34.3 (Winter 2000/1) 82-94, 86.

²¹ Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'The Inspired Old Bustard' *With The Hunted: Selected Writings* ed. Peter Tolhurst (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), 186-8, 187.

that Blake's poetry had become so easily absorbed in to a sentimental culture: 'Blake's poetry was never intended for use as private poultices'. Yet it was not condemning Blake to mere sentimentalism that Warner took issue with, but rather his co-option in to militaristic nationalism:

He whose tears were an 'intellectual thing' shed them that they might scorch the brain, and rouse it to thought; he did not shed them for an irrigation system that should rear crops of mustard and cress on mental flannel – mustard and cress that would come in nicely for afternoon tea. Nor did he mean his poems to be seized upon as conveniently undenominational hymns, to be taught to defenceless school-children and sung on Empire Day. When Blake speaks of building Jerusalem he does not refer to the establishment of forced, native labour in African colonies. Neither does he refer to Welwyn Garden City.²²

Warner's targets here are sharply observed and offer a clear sense of the danger of Blake being absorbed in to either campaigns for the rationalising rural improvements of irrigation systems, or appropriated as an empire-building dirge inflicted on innocent children. Building Jerusalem was for Blake, and as Warner clearly knew, about a process of spiritual renewal, rather than the transformation of the Home Counties. Welwyn Garden City was founded in 1920 in Hertfordshire by Sir Ebenezer Howard who had developed the first garden city, Letchworth, in 1903. Howard first set out his vision *To-morrow : a Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898) in which he used the final stanza of Blake's 'And did these feet' as an epigraph to the first chapter. Howard, with ecstatic zeal, sets out the importance of unifying the town and the country together in order to truly reform England: 'The town is the symbol of society' while 'The country is the symbol of God's love and care for man.' As long as town and country remain so estranged from one another a perfect realisation of humanity is impossible. The countryside remained, for the late Victorian city dweller, alien, its

fulness of joy and wisdom has not revealed itself to man. Nor can it ever, so long as this unholy, unnatural separation of society and nature endures. Town and country must be married, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilisation.²³

²² Warner, 'The Inspired Old Bustard' 187.

²³ Ebenezer Howard, *To-morrow : a Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (London : Swan Sonnenschein, 1898), 10.

It is clear then why Warner had Welwyn Garden City in her sights. Howard had taken Blake's building of Jerusalem literally, imagining a split humanity being healed in five bedroom detached homes with good plumbing and a view of the town green.

Despite misappropriation and misunderstanding, Warner insisted there was life in the old bustard yet. She concluded her reflections by recounting some disobedient lambs that had invaded her front yard. Three lambs, being driven from the Harrow Road to Kensington Gardens, had escaped their flock and made merry in her garden at 121 Inverness Terrace. Several outraged neighbours admonished the intruders, and one onlooker had attempted to 'come in by the gate and drive the marauders out', before Warner threatened him with trespass. And while these three lambs enjoyed their 'Unconvened leaping and skipping' they 'sang a war song':

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!²⁴

Here Blake's poem becomes a war song of a very different stripe. Warner's sheep are, like Blake, attacking a conformist, materialist civilization. Her haughty neighbours who, one imagines, might lustily sing Blake's hymn, would serve to destroy the innocent exuberance of these lambs, and by inference that of the author. These are not the only recalcitrant lambs in Warner's oeuvre; in 'A Song About a Lamb', included in *The Espalier* (1925), a sacrifice of a lamb to God goes horribly awry when, 'by some slight mistake' God's lightning hits the reluctant sacrificer rather than the lamb, which, momentarily in 'a muse', 'soon took heart, and leaped among the pews'.²⁵ Yet Warner was clearly recalling this incident in her garden in 'Kill Joy', published in *Time Importuned* (1928) where the titular figure, a wolf, observes lambs at play. Unmoved, these speaking lambs explain of the wolf, 'From all his craft and cares/ We will redeem him', at which point 'from all bonds of right/ And wrong unfettered/ He'll dance with us in white/Array'.²⁶ These lambs retain an innocent purity if not naïveté, and it would seem they are the same creatures of Blake's

²⁴ Warner, 'The Inspired Old Bustard' 188; Blake, 'Milton,' 514.

²⁵ Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'A Song About a Lamb,' *New Collected Poems*, ed. Claire Harman (Manchester: Carcanet, 2008), 70.

²⁶ Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Kill Joy,' *New Collected Poems* 109-10.

‘The Lamb’, from *Songs of Innocence*.²⁷ So, for Warner, Blake is the source of a fierce innocence that acts as an agent of renewal, an alternative to the violence of empire, the conformism of education, and the sterility of the garden suburb.

Building Jerusalem in Idbury

While Warner was explicit in her rejection of the incorporation of Blake’s antinomian vision into contemporary nationalism, it was in her debut novel that she developed her most significant response to Blake’s poetry. Warner’s deployment of Blake in the novel as an inspiration for Laura’s self-realisation was the result of her dissatisfaction with the reformer J.W. Robertson Scott’s attempt, both moralising and material, to improve the lives of those living in the countryside. The genesis of *Lolly Willowes* can be traced back to mid-1920s, a period when Warner became interested in the condition of the countryside. In the autobiographical sketch ‘The Way By Which I Have Come’ (1939), Warner recalls that having been a ‘complete cockney’ for five years she was awakened from her metropolitan malaise by a spontaneous decision to purchase an ordnance map of the Essex marshes. Her cartographic spontaneity soon turned into an overwhelming desire to visit the Blackwater estuary, so she duly packed her knapsack and set off for the weekend. A weekend turned into a month, Warner spending her days walking all over the marshes and her evenings chatting to a Mrs May with whom she was lodging. Warner would draw on this trip in her 1929 novel, the historical romance *The True Heart*, but this was only to be the first of many spontaneous escapes and relocations to the country. The month in Essex got Warner thinking about the countryside, and in winter 1924-5 she dedicated her time to reading contemporary and historical accounts of countryside life, including a series of articles in the *Nation* published anonymously under the title ‘England’s Green and Pleasant Land’. In reading these sketches, alongside an historical survey of the English countryside, from *Piers Plowman* through to J. L. Hammond’s and Barbara Hammond’s *The Village Labourer, 1760-1832* (1920) Warner came to the conclusion that the ‘English Pastoral was a grim and melancholy thing’.²⁸ In her survey of Warner’s pastoral Mary Jacobs noted that Warner regarded living in the country as an essential step in her political radicalisation during the inter-war period.²⁹ Yet *Lolly Willowes* only makes a fleeting appearance in Jacobs’s survey, and the complex interplay between that novel and the anti-pastoral of the 1920s requires further explication.

²⁷ William Blake, ‘The Lamb,’ *Complete Poems*, 106.

²⁸ Sylvia Townsend Warner, ‘The Way by Which I have Come’ *With The Hunted: Selected Writings* ed. Peter Tolhurst (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), 13-20, 16.

²⁹ Mary Jacobs, ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral, 1925–1934.’ In Davies, Gill et al, eds. *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner*, pp. 61–82.

Coincidentally, the following summer Warner would respond to an advertisement, also in the *Nation*, to rent a country cottage from the still-anonymous author of those articles, J. W. Robertson Scott. She spent two months in 1925 in one of the Scotts' cottages in Idbury, a hamlet in the Cotswolds between Burford and Chipping Norton, where she was to work on the novel that became *Lolly Willowes*. J. W. Robertson Scott was a journalist who when he moved to Idbury at the age of 56 had envisaged semi-retirement from a successful career writing for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *Westminster Gazette*, and the *Daily Chronicle*. As Neil Philip notes, Scott made a 'very unlikely rural squire' in the 1920s; he was a pacifist, a vegetarian, a feminist, a freethinker, and a teetotaler.³⁰ Warner's landlady and landlord were, she soon found out, fellow travellers in their concern with the condition of rural England:

We met, so to speak, around the same cauldron. John and Elspet had also been thinking – for a long time – about the country. It seems incredible now; but, for all that, it is true that when they first went to the Cotswolds it was with intentions of a peaceful retirement, a well-earned rest. The honesty of their hearts set them off again on the most dragon-tracking, Jerusalem-building years of their lives.³¹

The metaphor of the cauldron clearly takes on a freighted significance in light of the plot and central theme of *Lolly Willowes*. Witchcraft here is translated here into a progressive politics of challenging the stagnation and mismanagement of rural communities. The Scotts' desire to build Jerusalem is also crucial, and indicates one of the key sources of Warner's interest in Blake in these years.

The Robertson Scotts had moved to Idbury in 1923 and quickly had a profound impact on what had been a village in decline, donating the land on which eight new council properties were built, Sunday afternoon lectures were given, and they introduced radio to the village. As John Lowerson notes, Robertson Scott was at the vanguard of the 'rural defensive tradition' that, particularly in the 1930s, drew attention to creeping urbanism and the threat posed to rural life by city-dwellers in search of quaint countrified life.³² In 1926 the Council for the Preservation of Rural England was established through the auspices of the Royal British Institute of Architects,

³⁰ Neil Philip, 'Robertson Scott and The Countryman' *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2008), 24-34, 28.

³¹ Warner, 'The Way by Which I have Come' 15-16.

³² John Lowerson, 'Battles for the Countryside' *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 258-280, 261.

whose then president, E. Guy Dawber outlined the primary goal of the body as ‘to organise concerted action to secure the protection of rural scenery and the beauty of country towns and villages from disfigurement or injury’.³³ Robertson Scott’s project was not, however, a little England model of pastoral preservation but a pragmatic attempt to improve the life of the poor of rural England who had been left behind.

Robertson Scott’s series of 26 sketches produced for the *Nation* were collected together as *England’s Green & Pleasant Land: The Truth Attempted* in 1925. They could not be further removed from the spate of nostalgic pastoral travelogues that dominated the market at the time, such as H. V. Morton’s *In Search of England* (1927). The popularity of the saccharine rural idyll in the 1930s was, Alex Potts argues, an attempt to ignore the industrialisation of agriculture in the nineteenth century and return to the imagined England of John Constable who ‘had to be plucked up from the past, tidied up and tamed, and then reconstituted as the father of an English landscape vision no-one previously had thought to conjure into existence’.³⁴ Against this limited, if dominant, version of the countryside was a ‘tradition of countryside description as an engaged social analysis of country life,’ one that found its apogee in Richard Jefferies’s progressivism and continued through into Robertson Scott’s portrait of rural life.³⁵

England’s Green & Pleasant Land describes life in a hamlet – one presumes Idbury – although the sketches are primarily works of fiction. As Robertson Scott explained he had sought to write ‘not the literal truth but the *essential* truth’. Before the war, he explained, he had attempted a far more scientific investigation of rural life, ‘a laborious combination of preliminary library work, of scrupulous question-and-answering on paper, of elaborate analysis and tabulation, of painstaking photography.’ Yet no matter how much he searched after empirical exactitude, the ‘results always seemed to fall short of reality. *The scientific method broke down because spirit is more than substance.*³⁶ There was a danger, however, in veering into the antithesis of scientific analysis, namely sentimental pastoral or ‘nice watercolours’ as he termed them, embodied in Felicia Hemans’s ‘The Homes of England’ (1827) which celebrated

The cottage Homes of England!

³³ E. Guy Dawber, ‘The Preservation of Rural England’ *Architecture, A Magazine of Architecture and the Applied Arts and Crafts* 5: 19 (Nov 1926), 221.

³⁴ Alex Potts, “‘Constable Country’ Between the Wars’ *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, V. III, *National Fictions*, Ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989), 160-188, 168

³⁵ Alex Potts, “‘Constable Country’ Between the Wars’, 161-2.

³⁶ J. W. Robertson Scott, *England’s Green & Pleasant Land* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947), 165-6.

By thousands on her plains,
They are smiling o'er the silvery brooks,
And round the hamlet-fanes.
Through glowing orchards forth they peep,
Each from its nook of leaves;
And fearless there the lowly sleep,
As the bird beneath their eaves.³⁷

Robertson Scott pitted himself against such easy visions of a rural idyll. It would, he admitted, be easy to retreat into 'the modest comforts of my own house, the simple delights of my own garden, and the serenity for which I live in the country,' yet to do so neglected the bleak reality of the poverty and suffering that surrounded him. His reader had to be prepared for unflinching realism: 'I hope you do not mind me mentioning the stinking privies.'³⁸ The task that Robertson Scott had set himself then was to steer a course between the Scylla of cold scientific analysis and the Charybdis of romantic illusion. The path towards 'essential truth' was to be found by distilling his observations of country life into a series of representative characters and types: from the lazy and unintelligent rectors and vicars, to the venal and drunkard Farmer Bloss, to Phoebe Gundry the impoverished spinster, to the noble Tory farmer George Ware, Robertson Scott offers an unflinching portrait of rural life.

Yet that portrait is not merely intended as colourful observation, but as part of a trenchant political critique:

We therefore strive.
We patiently, continually strive for a better day, as others have striven, successfully
Our faith is that, in time, a way will be made by the swords which are not sheathed, by
the mental strife which does not cease while Jerusalem is a-building.³⁹

Robertson Scott is of course paraphrasing the final lines of Blake's Preface to *Milton a Poem*, aligning his project of reform with Blake's revolutionary antinomianism. While there are a few moments of Blake-inspired polemic in Robertson Scott's book, there are also some pragmatic suggestions on how to realise Jerusalem. The solution, he averred, was not money, noting the

³⁷ Felicia Hemans, 'The Homes of England' *The Poems of Felicia Hemans* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1872), 412.

³⁸ Robertson Scott, *England's Green & Pleasant Land*, 18.

³⁹ Robertson Scott, *England's Green & Pleasant Land*, 84.

excessive national expenditure on alcohol, tobacco and gambling, in comparison to paltry spending on books. No, what the hamlet, what any hamlet needed was ‘a stiffening of moral fibre, a development of consciousness or a stretching of minds, better health, better hygienic notions, better ideals, spiritual regeneration.’ It was, Robertson Scott feared, not possible to do much for the majority, for ‘when the nation awakens to its backwardness, its obtuseness, its sinful neglects, its out-of-dateness, it will be too late ... to do much for the grown-ups of the hamlet.’ It was then for the children that Robertson Scott toiled, for ‘with this new life we shall certainly begin to build Jerusalem.’⁴⁰

The frustration that Robertson Scott felt at the demise of rural communities in the 1920s, and of the general ignorance amongst the urban elite of the reality of country life, was to lead him in 1927 to establish *The Countryman: A Quarterly Review and Miscellany of Rural Life and Progress* which he edited from Idbury for the next 21 years. The first issue of the magazine made it clear that this was not another attempt to emulate the success of *Country Life Illustrated* (launched in 1897). There were no discussion of country sports (Robertson Scott was vehemently opposed to hunting and baiting) or fawning profiles of the great country houses and their residents. Rather, *The Countryman* was a forum for serious discussion of issues facing the future of the countryside, with contributors including the Liberal MP Sir Francis Acland, the agricultural expert Rowland Prothero, 1st Baron Ernle, and the agricultural educationalist Sir Daniel Hall. As the magazine became more established and its circulation developed it continued to attract the most eminent of contributors, from peers, to politicians, to well-known writers, including G. K. Chesterton, John Galsworthy, Æ (George Russell), Stella Gibbons, Noël Coward, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Naomi Mitchison, and many more.⁴¹ Reflecting on the aspirations of *The Countryman* in 1947, Robertson Scott declared that it had aimed for ‘not a pretty-pretty, a trifling or captious picture of rural people and rural life and industry, past or present, but a representation which is true, informing, blithe, and hopeful.’⁴²

Warner declared herself ‘proud to be one of the original subscribers to *The Countryman*’ although her pride was even greater that she was, ‘so to speak, one of the original subscribers to Idbury; and I still praise as superlatively tonic that early vintage of *The Countryman* when the editor and his immediate circle wrote almost the whole of it.’⁴³ Warner would herself contribute to the

⁴⁰ Robertson Scott, *England's Green & Pleasant Land*, 155, 158.

⁴¹ A full list of contributors to *The Countryman*, 1927-47 can be found in J. W. Robertson Scott, *Faith and Works in Fleet Street* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947), pp. 96-99.

⁴² J. W. Robertson Scott, *The Countryman Book* (London: Odhams Press, 1948), x.

⁴³ Warner, ‘The Way by Which I have Come’, 17.

magazine, and was also clearly inspired by Robertson Scott's realist documentary style in many of her own portraits of rural life, such as 'Love Green' (1932), her sketch of impoverished village life clearly based on her own observations of Chaldon Herring. That article concludes with an anti-nostalgic realism in which she accepts the necessity of change, writing 'if there should ever come a revival of agriculture the façade which yet screens the change of heart must crumble, and Love Green be a village no longer, but instead, what even now it harkens to be, a small west of England Middletown.'⁴⁴ As Patrick Wright notes, the vision of the countryside that emerges in Warner's poetry (and that of Valentine Ackland) in the 1930s produced a 'resolutely anti-bucolic' view of the countryside.⁴⁵ Being a 'subscriber to Idbury' meant subscribing to a realistic, progressive, contemporary understanding of the countryside. However, if Warner was a fellow traveller of the Robertson Scotts and broadly embraced their reforming zeal, she found elements of their vision of rebuilding Jerusalem condescending and limiting.

Laura Willowes's Blakean Epiphanies

There are numerous echoes of *England's Green & Pleasant Land* in *Lolly Willowes*, but also a subtle critique of Robertson Scott's belief that building a few new cottages does Jerusalem make. Robertson Scott's portrait of country life was patronisingly dismissive of spinsters and of Londoners who seek a new life in rural villages. The portrait of Laura Willowes is a riposte to his limited vision, and ultimately to his whole project of building Jerusalem. As Warner understood, Blake's vision of a reawakened Albion was about casting off the mental shackles of any religious, materialist, or political dogma. Warner explores mental freedom through a complex dialogue with the greatest of Blake's illuminated books, *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*. Laura Willowes, like Robertson Scott, rejects the pastoral, recalling that as 'her mind groped after something that eluded her experience' during her residence in Apsley Terrace, that she was 'subject to a peculiar type of day-dreaming' in which 'she was in the country, at dusk, and alone, and strangely at peace'. Whether she was on the edge of a wood, or on a marsh she 'never thought of them as being in any way beautiful. It was not beauty at all that she wanted, or, depressed though she was, she would have bought a ticket to somewhere or other upon the Metropolitan railway and gone out to see the recumbent autumnal graces of the country-side' (76-77).⁴⁶ Laura's imagined countryside is sustained by a deep-seated desire for freedom, rather

⁴⁴ Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Love Green' *With The Hunted: Selected Writings* ed. Peter Tolhurst (Norwich: Black Dog Books, 2012), 297-309, 309.

⁴⁵ Patrick Wright, *The Village that Died for England: The Strange Story of Tynham* (London: Vintage, 1996), 137.

⁴⁶ This and all subsequent parenthetical references are taken from Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes; or the Loving Huntsman* (London: Virago, 2001).

than for some bucolic idyll resembling a Constable landscape painting; what Laura seeks is a crepuscular moment in which a liberty of thought and spirit can be realised.

Yet liberty of thought was hardly of such concern to Robertson Scott whose very Victorian view of self-improvement was social and material rather than spiritual. In *England's Green & Pleasant Land* he focuses in particular on the plight of the spinsters of the hamlet, and in them can be found similarities with Laura Willowes who was, *The Bookman's* reviewer of the novel assured readers, a type, 'to be met with in every village in the country'. Warner's novel was remarkable for taking this commonplace figure and developing a 'modern and fantastic theory about those endless old maids of the country that are so constantly the butt of novelists and short story writers.'⁴⁷ Robertson Scott provided portraits of two representative types of the country spinster. A Miss Hinkson, classed by Robertson Scott as amongst 'the lesser betters' is, like Laura, a 'refugee from life' who, as the result of 'a lonely and narrow existence,' has become 'a little odd'. This type of woman is classed by Robertson Scott as 'the victim of an era in which eldest daughters were sacrificed on parental altars. Brought up as a satellite of her parents, deprived of animating education'. Robertson Scott is confident, however, that the lot of the unmarried woman will be improved in the future: 'A later age will know how to make something of a girl who begins life with health, good looks, a sense of humour, and some natural kindliness.'⁴⁸ This confidence that the village spinster would soon be a thing of the past echoes Laura's niece, Fancy, who, reflecting on her Aunt's uneventful life, exclaims "'how unenterprising women were in the old days'" (6). Yet to declare that some women's unmarried lives were an unfortunate historical anomaly suggests that there is no agency in the decision not to marry. Warner's novel makes it clear that a life of quiet independence, such as Laura leaves after she makes the decision to move to Great Mop, is to be celebrated rather than condescendingly willed away.

The second spinster we encounter is Phoebe Grundy. Born in a 'genteel world', Phoebe Grundy's story, like that of her family more broadly, was one of decline. She had nursed her father, a 'well-off' miller, maltster and farmer' from the time she left finishing school till he died when she was thirty. At this point she was left in the care of her brother, James, who 'managed to fritter away house, mill, malting and farm', and eventually all of Phoebe's share in her father's estate. This trajectory, from gentility to poverty is strikingly similar to Laura Willowes whose father, a brewer, she looks after until he dies when she is passed 'as if she were a piece of family

⁴⁷ C. H. W. 'Lolly Willowes' *The Bookman* 69: 414, (Mar 1926): 326-327.

⁴⁸ Robertson Scott, *England's Green & Pleasant Land*, 35.

property forgotten in a will' to her brother, Henry, who loses most of her inheritance after investing in the Ethiopian Development Syndicate (6). These similarities are confirmed in the poignant metaphor Robertson Scott uses to describe the aging Phoebe Grundy, and from which is found the title of the sketch: 'Like a clinging beech leaf in winter, Phoebe is now in her eighties. Friends prove kinder to her than her relatives ever were, and her unselfishness and charity of thought enrich the hamlet.'⁴⁹ That Phoebe may well be a model for Laura is confirmed in the novel just after Laura has had her epiphany in the green grocers on Moscow Road, Bayswater, and has returned home with her chrysanthemums and map and guidebook of the Chilterns, determined to leave the cloying domesticity of Henry and Caroline's house in Apsley Place: 'She unfolded the map. The woods were coloured green and the main roads red. There was a great deal of green. She looked at the beech leaves. As she looked a leaf detached itself and fell slowly.' Dunlop, the servant then enters the room, 'took a deep breath, stooped down, and picked up the beech leaf'(88). The analogy here is ambivalent – either Laura is a solitary beech leaf, like Phoebe Grundy, withering on the vine, or the singular beech leaf represents her newfound independence. Beech trees are a recurrent presence in Laura's life once she leaves for Great Mop; she regularly finds herself in beech woods as she walks around the village, often at moments of self-awakening. The beech tree has long associations with both femininity and knowledge, but Warner destabilises the association as she returns to the image of Dunlop picking up the fallen leaf towards the end of the novel: Satan, she is sure, 'would remove Titus as imperturbably as Dunlop had removed the beech-leaf. She could sit back quite comfortably now, waiting for it to happen' (213). If Satan removes beech leaves it suggests that he maintains an indifference to the lives of unmarried women like Laura, and like Phoebe Grundy. Ultimately, the figure of the witch and the spinster are, for Laura Willows, cut from the same cloth. As she explains to Satan Mrs Carole would be thought by others 'a typical witch,' but in reality she's 'the typical genteel spinster who's spent herself being useful to people who don't want her' (239). While Robertson Scott bemoaned their plight, Warner gives them both a voice and real agency.

Robertson Scott's portrait of rural spinsters is clearly limiting, failing to understand how their condition may be one of freedom rather than suffering. Problematic too was his attempt to suggest that Londoners who move to the country could not truly take their part in rural life: 'as things are in the hamlets, the place for the sensitive, comfortably-off to be "happy" in is London or some other city.' An integral aspect of London life that rendered its citizens constitutionally unsuitable for rural life was their anonymity, for 'in cities you do not need to know your

⁴⁹ Robertson Scott, *England's Green & Pleasant Land*, 60.

neighbours,' whereas in a hamlet you will invariably find one's self living a life of heightened emotion, bearing your own heart while bearing witness to the very human suffering and hope of those around you.⁵⁰ Those Londoners, so ill-suited to rural life were seemingly the audience for whom Robertson Scott was writing. As he counselled his readers: 'there is no particular virtue in leaving London to live in a cottage, a farmhouse, or a manor.' Too often, he suggested, those who did so were much better suited to a garden suburb or 'one of those remoter be-villaged villages' an hour's train ride from London. Those who did make the change to London were, he feared, hardly the most likely to survive, for most of them were, 'in effect, fugitives from life':

Their minds are set on the impossible – on emancipation from life's discipline, on gaining what cannot be found, 'happiness' outside themselves. They have been leaners on London, and now they would lean on 'Nature'. Why should their characters grow more meritorious in the country? They will rub brains with no one. They will be free from the criticisms of their 'social equals'. They have forced themselves away from the restrictions and stimulus of life.⁵¹

Robertson Scott was convinced that there was nothing beneficial for those misfits who escaped London for hamlet life. Lest anyone suggest that the arrival of Londoners might somehow elevate the moral standards of the hamlet-dwellers, Robertson Scott intimates that countryfolk were 'more civilized in some essentials than the townees'. Long-term residents of the hamlet were not to be fooled by the new arrivals: 'Who, the hamlet asks with confidence, would not live in London if he could.'⁵² Robertson Scott's clear animosity to those Londoners who have 'failed to fit themselves to their own' would have been something of an affront to Sylvia Townsend Warner who had begun to see herself as constitutionally unsuited to a London life. Laura Willowes's migration to Great Mop takes on a freighted significance in light of Robertson Scott's work. While she may have shared his sense of a need for a rejuvenation of the countryside, Warner's novel troubles two of his conclusions about the countryside of the 1920s. In providing such a rich portrait of a spinster who had escaped the conformity of London for village life Warner was making a case for the value of individual freedom and, and she did so by once again turning to William Blake.

⁵⁰ Robertson Scott, *England's Green & Pleasant Land*, 21.

⁵¹ Robertson Scott, *England's Green & Pleasant Land*, 39.

⁵² Robertson Scott, *England's Green & Pleasant Land*, 40.

Laura Willowes's Blakean epiphanies need to be understood within the broader model of education and self-development in the novel. Laura, unassuming and to her family seemingly without initiative, had been sequestering herself in the library of Lady Place, reading promiscuously and inappropriately: 'as she was generally ignorant of the books which their daughters read, the neighbouring mammas considered her rather ignorant' (24). Yet, like all the small, and seemingly incidental details in the novel, Laura's programme of reading is far from arbitrary: Joseph Glanvill on witches, most likely *Saducismus Triumphatus: or, Full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions* (1681) and John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). While the former's attack on witchcraft may seem merely ironic given Laura's later pact with Satan, her self-education has taken her to the heart of debates around rationalism in the late seventeenth century. The immersion in Locke makes even greater sense when we consider Laura's later conversion to Blake. In *Milton*, Blake considers Locke, Newton and Bacon an unholy Trinity of materialism and rationalism, and the rejuvenation of England's could only come with their downfall: 'To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albions covering / To take off his filthy garments, & clothe him with Imagination / To cast aside from Poetry, all that is not Inspiration'.⁵³ Albion's freedom could only come by turning from rationality to the imagination, from reason to inspiration, so it is necessary for Warner to frame Laura's journey as one from unthinking rationalism to imaginative revelation.

Throughout the novel Laura's restlessness, her nagging sense that something is not quite right, is – little does she realise at the time – tied to her imaginative susceptibility to a mystical world view. At first she sees London as her oppressor, yet her dawning realisation is that it is not the geographical place, but modernity and reason that constrain her. 'Her mind', Warner writes, 'was groping after something that was shadowy and menacing, and yet in some way congenial'. When she was in these moods of restless melancholy, she would find herself walking all over the city, on a quest, the object of which she knew not. On such walks she likes to imagine herself in Defoe's London, when 'there was still darkness in men's minds'. There are two locations in particular that almost allow for the revelation she is seeking: 'Once, hemmed in by the jostling tombstones at Bunhill Fields, she almost pounced on the clue to her disquiet; and once again, in the goods-yard of the G.W.R., where she had gone to find, not her own secret, but a case of apples for Caroline' (77). A Nonconformist burial ground, Bunhill Fields is the resting place of Daniel Defoe, John Bunyan, and, of course William Blake. Beside Blake's grave she is able to grasp the necessity for mental freedom, as she does in the goods yards of the Great Western

⁵³ William Blake, 'Milton', 604.

Railway in Paddington which becomes, as the novel goes on, an important site in Laura's self-realization. It is in walking the hills around Great Mop that she is first truly aware of the presence of her 'loving huntsman', Satan, and it is the memory of it that sees 'all her thoughts slid together again like a pack of hounds that have picked up the scent'. The sound of a goods train whistle in the darkness of the Chilterns is the catalyst for her to remember an earlier moment of unease:

In the goods yard at Paddington she had almost pounced on the clue, the clue to the secret country of her mind. The country was desolate and half-lit, and she walked there alone, mistress of it, and, mistress, too, of the terror that roamed over the blank fields and haunted round her. Here was country just so desolate and half-lit. She was alone, just as in her dreams, and the terror had come to keep her company, and crouched by her side, half in fawning, half in readiness to pounce. All this because of a goods train that labored up a cutting. What was this cabal of darkness, suborning her own imagination to plot against her? What were these iron hunters doing near mournful, ever-weeping Paddington? (135)

What Laura has been seeking all along has been 'the secret country of her mind', and this 'desolate and half-lit' place could – little did she know – have been found in London as easily as the Chilterns. This is made clear in the reference to Paddington; in a very literal sense she has just heard a night train which is taking goods – perhaps even apples – to Paddington station, but there is a much more literary register. In the greatest of Blake's prophetic books, *Jerusalem*, the whole of London is transposed in to a battleground for the soul of Albion, and Paddington has a particularly important significance for Blake. The fields of North London, from Islington to Marylebone, to Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood 'Were builded over with pillars of gold; And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.' Yet in contrast to the prelapsarian peace of these fields is Paddington, and Warner's part quotation from Blake's vision of the area is crucial:

What are those Golden Builders doing
Near mournful ever-weeping Paddington,
Standing above that mighty ruin,
Where Satan the first victory won;⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Blake, 'Jerusalem' *The Complete Poems*, 686.

Early in Blake's life the whole of central London north of Oxford Street was open field land. Yet by the second decade of the nineteenth century, when Blake was writing *Jerusalem*, Paddington was a squalid village predominantly inhabited by Irish labourers.⁵⁵ It was of course, at the G.W.R. goods yard in Paddington that Satan one his first victory over Laura, the first moment where she had her first inkling of her 'secret', but at this point she cannot still grasp the significance of her intuition. She remains 'baffled': 'For a moment it has seemed as though the clue were found, but it has slid through her hands again' (135). The following morning, Laura concludes that the goods train was directing her towards Paddington. Warner's citation of Blake here suggests Laura is able to grasp spiritual transformation wherever it may be found. Her Paddington is not 'mournful' and 'ever-weeping' but powerfully transformative. Laura is gifted with an innate ability to see and feel the dark freedom of Satan, a freedom which Warner links with Blake's overcoming of conformism.

It is only towards the end of the novel, having met Satan, manifesting this time as a gardener in Wickendon, that Laura truly begins to grasp the significance of Paddington. It is this encounter that is key to Laura's self-realisation of her agency and power as a woman, and its location is crucial to Laura's understanding of a Blakean diabolism. Laura finds herself at 'Maulgrave Folly', erected by 'Sir Ralph Maulgrave, the Satanic Baronet, the libertine, the atheist, who drank out of a skull, who played away his mistress, and pistolled the winner, who rode about Buckinghamshire on a zebra' (226-7). It is clear that this is thinly fictionalised Sir Francis Dashwood, and that Laura has found herself gazing at an edifice modelled on the Dashwood Mausoleum on West Wycombe Hill. Dashwood was a notorious eighteenth century libertine, politician, and rake who set up the 'Hellfire Club' in 1746, allegedly dedicated to pagan and Bacchic worship, but in reality a bawdy drinking club.⁵⁶ The trivial transgressions and sham ceremonials of the 'Satanic Baronet' are precisely what Laura despises as manifestations of pagan practices. 'Poor gentleman', she thinks, 'how completely he had misunderstood the Devil!' (227). Immediately after this reflection, Satan appears, and tells Laura that despite the hill they sit on being denuded of trees, it still lives, for 'once a wood, always a wood'. There follows one of the most extraordinary passages in the novel in which we grasp the contours of the satanic for Warner: the holy and the enchanted may be repressed by the forces of modernity, but to the satanic mind they always retain their power:

⁵⁵ David Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (New York: Dover, 1991), 473-4.

⁵⁶ See Evelyn Lord, *The Hellfire Clubs: Sex, Satanism and Secret Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 97-114.

The good yards at Paddington, for instance--a savage place! as holy and enchanted as ever it had been. Not one of the monuments and tinkering of man could impose on the satanic mind. The Vatican and the Crystal Palace, and all the neat human nest-boxes in rows, Balham and Fulham and the Cromwell Road – he saw through them, they went flop like card-houses, the bricks were earth again, and the steel girders burrowed shrieking into the veins of earth, and the dead timber was restored to the ghostly groves. Wolves howled through the streets of Paris, the foxes played in the throne- room of Schönbrunn, and in the basement at Apsley Terrace the mammoth slowly revolved, trampling out its lair.

Paddington would remain forever savage, holy, and enchanted. Yet here Warner's allusion is not only to Blake but also to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Kahn' in which the opium-fuelled visionary landscape is described as:

A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!⁵⁷

It is of course in Paddington that Laura first has some inkling of the power of her own demon-lover, her 'Prince of Darkness', Satan (173). In fusing together two of the great visionary poets of the language, Warner aligns Laura's satanic possession with the Romantic rejection of the material and mental shackles of modernity in which urban development, religious institutions, and political oppression try, but ultimately cannot, impose limits on the human imagination. The truly Satanic, for Warner, is a creative destruction of all dominant forms of belief. In Blake's world the devil and the attendant evil he represents are understood to be those forces or energies antithetical to reason. As Blake made clear in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' to repress good and evil, body or soul, creativity of reason, is destructive:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.

⁵⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Kubla Kahn' *The Major Works*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 102-4.

Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.⁵⁸

Blind faith in either contrary would lead to spiritual impoverishment. The sham Satanism of Sir Ralph Mulgrave is no better than the mechanic religiosity of Henry and Caroline. We can also see this in Laura's indifference to the conventions of the Sabbath and demonology. She is a Blakean antinomian whose Satanism overcomes both the active and the passive, good and evil, leaving us, at the novel's end, as indifferent to these categories as she is.

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The New Modernist Studies has, somewhat awkwardly, attempted to find a home for the regional and rural as it maps the transnational and global. Modernist scholars have also attempted to find a home for Warner's idiosyncratic and diverse works within the experimental aesthetic practices of the period. As my essay has demonstrated, Warner's engagement with rural politics sit uncomfortably with reformist, socialist practices, while her enthusiastic celebration of William Blake as a visionary able to offer modernity spiritual renewal sits uneasily with the modernist dismissal of Blake's unruly aesthetic. As David James notes, the 'real challenge' in trying to locate writers like Warner in our current critical juncture is how we 'go about attaching value to regional writing in the course of reshaping modernism from the margins'.<sup>59</sup> The value of Warner's engagement with regional politics in *Lolly Willows* is precisely in its challenge to progressivism and its alignment with Blake's Romantic elevation of the imagination as a source for self-realisation and emancipation. Making space for the Romantic will require some reshaping, a willingness to see some writers of the inter-war period as self-conscious inheritors of a tradition that was seemingly at odds with the abstracted aesthetics of international modernism.

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<sup>58</sup> Blake, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' *The Complete Poems*, 181.

<sup>59</sup> David James, 'Capturing the Scale of Fiction at Mid-Century' in *Regional Modernisms*, eds. Alexander and Moran, 121.