

*Literary Autobiography or
Autobiographical Literature?:
The Work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner*

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TWO OF FRANCE'S most renowned twentieth-century writers have considered that autobiography and fictional works are to a great extent so intimately linked as to be inseparable. François Mauriac in *Journal II* declares that a great novel cannot exist without expressing the romanticized inner feelings of the writer (138)¹ while André Gide in *Si le grain ne meurt* maintains that memoirs are only half sincere even if the writer wishes to tell the truth. In his opinion everything is always more complicated than stated (228).² And he thinks that perhaps one comes closer to truth in a novel.

Autobiography is a moment in the life of the author and as such contributes to the life that is being recounted. Therefore whether the facts in themselves are true or false becomes of secondary importance. As a historical document, it is possibly untrustworthy but as a work of art it provides the critic with an intimate declaration which constitutes a precious link between the author and his or her writing. The autobiography as a work of art is the projection of the inner man or woman into the outside world and can therefore only be considered as a kind of symbol of the writer in search of his own identity.

If the autobiography of a writer is to be considered in the light of his novels then these should also be examined in the light of the former — for life, fiction, and autobiography can be said to express a single truth — that of the artistic creation of the writer.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner has left a fairly exhaustive account of her life and work for she chose as media of expression various genres of prose: the novel, the journal of her teaching experi-

ences, the diary of a young woman in search of identity, and finally her autobiography.

Any pre-1980 study of her writing would have led the critic to believe that all her works contained large extracts of fictionally transformed real life experiences. The publication of *I Passed This Way* confirmed these suspicions. Her autobiography must be situated within the varied modes of her writing. If we accept that a certain number of her novels seem to ring truer than life, this stems from the fact that they are to be viewed within the context of *I Passed This Way*. Neither the novels nor the autobiography can be considered to portray an absolutely truthful picture of events for both contribute to the creation of a personal myth created by the author to give meaning to the legend of her own identity and existence. Philippe Lejeune in *Le pacte autobiographique* argues that whereas the novel may be charged with lacking exactitude the autobiography may be accused of lacking complexity (42). Here lies the fundamental difference; the novel supplies a multitude of minute details concerning the protagonist and his feelings, reactions, and activities; his life is concentrated onto the page in such a way that the reader is absorbed into the text which appears to reflect the "real life" of the fiction for the space of time spent in the reading of the passage. The autobiography, on the other hand, endeavours to transmit details of the life of the writer — and therefore protagonist — as he himself remembers it; long periods of time have to be condensed into the space of the reading of the book — writing cannot reproduce faithfully the events as they were; even an oral running commentary on an event is obliged to select, delete, condense, which implies censorship and a selection of the life-picture that one wishes to draw and leave for posterity. In the same work Lejeune defines autobiography as a retrospective narration in prose that a real person gives of his own existence when this person underlines his individual life and in particular the development of his own personality (14).³ If we adhere to this definition we conclude that *I Passed This Way* is the only work in the Ashton-Warner corpus that can lay claim to the genre of autobiography since *Myself* follows the form of a diary in the present tense whilst *Teacher* deals with her work and educational theories rather than

the development of her own personality. All three, however, are written in the first person and the author, the narrator, and the main character become one.

An examination of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's novels will establish that they too are written in the first person but the narrator is no longer Ashton-Warner. In this case the author controls the movements, actions, and thoughts of her characters but these fictional people must bear the responsibility of their acts. The reader is invited to follow the narration but not to take the information at face value. In some cases the reader is fully aware of the weight of the elements that the author borrows from her own experiences, but since the work is manifestly fictional, no one can accuse her of falsifying facts. Mumma and Puppa in *Greenstone* are obviously barely re-modelled versions of her own parents. Anna Vorontosof in *Spinster* expresses the author's own ideas on education and children, thus enabling her to broadcast her theories, which no New Zealand publisher would print in the early sixties. Tarl Prackett of *Bell Call* is also based on real life in spite of the legal reserve at the beginning of the book.

If a relative resemblance of character and event is sufficient in a fictional work, in an autobiography where the author proclaims her writing to be "true," she is bound to a certain number of accepted principles, one of which is adherence to this "truth." This need not mean giving an exact account of events but could involve an account of the reactions, feelings, and reserves of the author to the circumstance at the time of writing. This can never be absolutely objective since the writer already knows the consequences of the event, has already drawn her conclusions and modified her behaviour in the light of this and probably other subsequent experiences.

In his article "Le style de l'autobiographie," Jean Starobinski illustrates the play between the past and the present; he maintains that the past can never be reminisced upon except from the present time; the "truth" about former days is such that for the soul who, today, recollecting their image, cannot avoid superimposing on them his own form and style. All autobiography — if only a pure narration — is a self-interpretation (258).

Sylvia Ashton-Warner is well aware of the limits of the truth that she feels able to tell. Frequently in *I Passed This Way* she admits that she is glossing over painful moments of her life that she does not wish to make public.

... I do find even at this early stage how impossible it is to write autobiography. One cannot speak ill of the dead, even less of the living. You cannot speak at all of the living, good or ill. Give me fiction any day. (22)

In this context it is of little importance to know what was "objective" reality, for the interest of an autobiography must remain the reflection of the personality of the author.

All too often certain readers attempt to criticize an autobiography because, they say, there are inexactitudes in the text. In doing this, they are in fact confronting their own version of what they consider to be the truth with that of the author and, in such a confrontation, who is qualified to judge the objectivity of either? The truth about the past is to be judged in the light of the author's present and not in the light of one's own. Even if the author lies, forgets, or deforms the elements of the story, the present statement of the writer will probably remain authentic in its expression (Lejeune 39).⁴

In a fictional work the reader is more likely to be pre-occupied with the similarities he is able to discern between what he knows of the author's life and the text. When the author announces that this particular work is autobiography, the reader is immediately tempted to seek out the omissions, inexactitudes, and deformations of the author, being convinced that he is likely to discover between the lines more truth than what is explicitly written.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner always protested that she was not a teacher. In *I Passed This Way* she declares: "If I had one hate it was the inside of the school-room" (141). Much later in life when she discovered on the dust cover of *Spearpoint* that she was called "One of the greatest teachers in the world" she wrote to her American editor, Bob Gottlieb, to confess her "deepest and darkest secret" (*I Passed This Way* 439). His reaction emphasized the paradoxical relationship that Sylvia Ashton-Warner had with her life's work:

As for hating to teach: that I believe. Writers hate to write too. The hardest and most painful thing is always the thing that means to oneself Truth; when you have to express your most inner meaning, and express it directly. You hate to teach because you are Teacher; because being Teacher you can't teach from the surface. *I could teach without pain, because Teacher I am none. . . . (I Passed This Way 468)*

Yet the person who refused to be classed in the teaching profession, preferring the title of "artist," chose to structure the writing of her autobiography around the succession of schools where she learnt, taught, and lived. Here the denegration seems far more significant than any firm declarations of choice.

The fragmentary organization of *I Passed This Way*, however, perfectly illustrates the author's conception of art and design as she defined it in *Myself*.

"What is your design?"

I told him.

"I thought," he said, "it would be a kind of five-, ten- or twenty-year plan."

"A design is not a plan."

"It is."

"No. A plan would nail you down act by act, govern you year by year. But a design —" I lifted my hands — "is a matter of shape. Some wonderful shape into which can be fitted any experience at all whenever it chances to happen. The thing is . . . to get going is to know oneself and what we can of the truth."

"And can any ordinary mortal," sincerely, "hope to learn to know himself on his adequate own?"

"*Anyone* can do *anything* if he has the urge." (98)

The author's ideas are expressed in terms of pattern and rhythm, colour and line, visual tableaux rather than linear accounts, all of which collaborate to develop this final design which is the retrospective recapitulation of her life and work. From the vantage point of the present time of writing the author is able to attempt to define the person she was.

These pictures on the screen of memory they move like shadows of leaves in the wind patterning on the grass, impermanently fleeting. This one here, now that one there forming impressionistically yet covering in a common theme.

(I Passed This Way 64)

The image that Sylvia Ashton-Warner projects of herself is in fact quite different from this vague, misty, and ever-changing kaleidoscope of memories which provide the material for her autobiography; as she focuses onto one particular memory she, in fact, conveys another self, a self with whom she is somewhat reconciled, a structured self, which has its particular place in society, onto the page. The self that appears in the writing takes form, becomes a separate entity which the writer is able to view from a distance, to consider, criticize, or enhance at will. This development is twofold: it may lead to the inexactitudes already mentioned but it also permits the writer to perhaps form a more precise idea of her own personality.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner's family had great importance in her life. She was one of the middle children of an extremely close-knit family of nine. In her autobiography, she constantly tries to trace her origins and this fascination is combined with an ardent desire to leave a trace of her own passage through this world. Thus the old kitchen table which bears the marks of childhood events is of prime importance.

This private life of a kitchen table; work marks and notches witnessing the past, and grooves where knives had carved. Ink marks where people had signed their names in wistful confirmation of having passed this way, or just plain blots. No scrubbing could erase them. These days they call these blots abstract art to be sold for thousands of dollars and teach children how to make them. I think we make quite enough blots in our lives without being taught how to make them. Given a chance a kitchen table can be a family diary of no uncertain moment for any who knows the code. By comparison Formica is pitifully illiterate. . . .

(I Passed This Way 60)

Life was far from easy but the difficulties the family had to face welded them together. Moving was a means of escape from the hardship of their daily life; there was a constant need to be elsewhere. Even as an adult Ashton-Warner admits:

You never want to stay too long in a place, even Pipiriki. You use up the people. They get to know you and no poor human can survive being kown. *(I Passed This Way 313)*

Fiction too, in the form of storytime, was also a means of escape. In the novel, *Greenstone*, Puppa, a fictionalized version of her own father, illustrates the author's strategy of story-telling: the story is carefully built up by the audience itself, the theme and the method of narration are unpredictable. Fact and fiction mingle to form the original style of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's writing.

The heroine of *Spinster* maintains that she dreams with her eyes open and lives with her eyes shut (*Spinster* 52). For the author the dream is the ideal, the unattainable which she endeavours to achieve by a system of fusion with the intangible object of her desire. Fact and fiction become one; the "oral" nature of her writing implies impermanence — and in spite of the apparent "sharing" of the moment of creation the writer reserves the possibility of subsequent modification and ultimately remains in absolute control of what actually arrives on the page for publication. As a teacher too, her practice has a tendency to englobe those whom she teaches; although she stresses the importance of exchange, of the "Thee and Me" relationship that should exist between teacher and pupil, she can declare "When I teach people I marry them" (*Teacher* 178). Despite the apparent contradictions that appear between her theory and practice at times, no one can deny the immense task that Sylvia Ashton-Warner accomplished in New Zealand and elsewhere in the world during her life. Yet she reacted strongly against what she considered as the injustices that affected certain pupils because of the rigidity of a system which left little room for personalized teaching. In her opinion, the methods were, to say the least, ill-adapted to the needs of the rural Maori. Her non-conformist ideas on education constantly brought her into conflict with a less imaginative Education Committee. Anna Vorontosof, the protagonist of *Spinster*, who also experiences this confrontation, declares

... this teaching utterly obliterates you. It cuts into your being — essentially, it takes over your spirit. (9)

Anna lives in a fusional world; if she feels at one with her young charges, as a teacher, she is also able to dominate and control

them largely because of the intimate links between them. This upsets the balance that she wishes to instill in the classroom. It then becomes possible to invert the initial premise "When I teach . . ." which may read "When I marry people I teach them." The fusional environment created in both the fictional and autobiographical writings of Sylvia Ashton-Warner clearly poses the problem of the power-game at work in human relationship.

I Passed This Way provides the reader with a complex and contradictory picture of a woman who was, herself, constantly torn apart by indecision, a force which seems to form the basis of her artistic inspiration. Sylvia Ashton-Warner assumed her own ambivalences to the full and her writing aimed at reconciling them.

This autobiography is a sincere attempt to give a frank account of her existence and life in New Zealand since the beginning of the century. The writer feels that at certain times she has been misjudged and treated unfairly; the autobiography is an effort to set the board straight and to justify her behaviour to the world; the initial title "I Accuse" that her sister, Daphne, suggested for the novel *Spinster* would be even more appropriate for *I Passed This Way*, although as Gillian Wilce in the *Times Literary Supplement* points out:

The book is not a controlled artifact, not a wise, considered or guarded summing up of life. It is much more an intense reliving, seemingly spoken aloud rather than written, with all the messiness and contradictoriness that implies. (234)

Indeed the style effectively captures the different moods of the writer as she retraces her life as an artist from the impulsive and often excessive childhood to a more measured maturity.

You'd never recognise me as that girl from the past habitually playing the limelight, talking too much, throwing round my music gratis and flaunting my art; I was becoming the someone I'd always been interested in — a contained impenetrable spinster, an indispensable unit of society. (431)

Here the author is describing what one might call a progression

from innocence to experience, from wild enthusiasm to the wisdom of a mature adult who has learnt restraint and who is conscious of her true value to society. *I Passed This Way* demonstrates that the self of the past is very different from the present self and that only the latter is really competent to give a faithful account; the writer is able to explain both who she was and what she experienced earlier in her life, thus illustrating how she developed into the writer who is at present putting down her life on paper; in so doing not only does she respect the contract of the autobiography with its reader by informing him about the life of the writer but she also explores in detail for her personal gratification the whys and wherefores of the origins of her present existence; it is a concrete attempt to explain how she attained the delicate synthesis of her vision of her past life at the time of writing and the possibility of sharing this conclusion with her reading public. It is certain that the young Ashton-Warner would not have been able to write such a structured work as *I Passed This Way*.

Although at the end of her life Sylvia Ashton-Warner still despaired of the parochialism of New Zealand and its institutions, she seemed to have come to terms with herself, her art, and her country, for in spite of her years of globe-trotting it became evident to her that it really was the only place where she felt at home. Since this was the case it seems fitting that her autobiography that was to be her literary testament personally reconciling the woman, the teacher, and the writer was duly recognized in her homeland when it won the Wattie Literature Award. The fact that she was at last praised by her compatriots must have completed the feeling of contentment and peace that Sylvia Ashton-Warner expresses in the final words of *I Passed This Way*.

On the journey through life I'd often come upon some inn by the wayside which gave me shelter from the Pacific cyclones, but none had been quite the haven I'd sought, though sweet and bountiful enough, yet all the time the ideal, the perfect had been waiting for me in my own-built home in Godzone. Whatever my disasters in this country, surrounded by a wilderness of ocean, these islands turn out to be the one place where I would wish to be, and Whenua the one inn I desire. (499)

NOTES

- 1 "Je crois qu'il n'est de grande oeuvre romanesque qui ne soit une vie intérieure romancée."
- 2 "Les mémoires ne sont qu'à demi sincères, si grand que soit le souci de vérité; tout est toujours plus compliqué qu'on ne le dit. Peut-être même approche-t-on de plus près la vérité dans le roman."
- 3 "Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité."
- 4 "Le terme ultime de vérité ne peut plus être l'être-en-soi du passé mais l'être-en-soi, manifesté dans le présent de l'énonciation. Que dans sa relation à l'histoire du personnage le narrateur se trompe, mente, oublie ou déforme, et erreur, oubli ou déformation prendront simplement, si on les discerne, valeur d'aspects parmi d'autres, d'une énonciation qui, elle, reste authentique."

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