A review of

Fly Away Home: Stories

Andrew Teverson

The story 'Watermark', in Marina Warner's collection of short fiction *Fly Away Home*, begins with an allusion to the mysterious binoculars discovered by the protagonist of M.R. James's tale 'A View from a Hill' (1925). These binoculars, readers of James will recall, bequeath the gift of past sight, allowing the protagonist Fanshawe to see buildings and a gallows that have ceased to exist. It is hard to imagine a better analogy for the fictions in Warner's new collection than these magical binoculars, for almost all Warner's stories have the quality of magical binocularity; that is, they see the world from at least two different periods simultaneously and they permit knowledge of one period to adjust our understanding of another. In some narratives, this takes place through the medium of objects: in 'Ladybird, Ladybird', which itself has qualities that recall James, a mysterious dress purchased in a second-hand store seems to invite a ghost-child from the past to be reborn; and in the stories 'Mink' and 'Item, One Tortoiseshell Bag' respectively an old fur coat and a handbag form links between childhood and the present for the stories' protagonists. In other narratives, the binocularity of plotting is more structurally explicit: 'Brigit's Cell' (originally written for radio) juxtaposes the voice of a contemporary teacher taking a class to see the cell of the anchorite Brigit Torval in Norwich in 2011, with the voice of Brigit herself, reflecting on the events that led to her incarceration in 1211. The dual voices encourage a reflection on the social position of women in two radically different periods, but simultaneously draw lines of connection and comparison between their experiences. Also binocular in structure is the story 'Watermark' itself. In this case, Warner places in counterpoint a reflection on M.R. James's uncovering of Catholic frescoes in the chapel at Eton whilst he was headmaster of the school with a speculative narrative about the arrival in England of a family of Italian artists in the 16th century. The story – one of the outstanding narratives of the collection – is a complex meditation on the impact of the reformation, the sources of inspiration for James and Shakespeare, the intersection of Italian and English traditions, and (once more) the historical forces of change and continuity.

Warner's binocularity of vision is also apparent in her treatment of fictional inheritances. Repeatedly her stories echo, repeat and restyle the patterns of narrative inherited from tradition: 'Red Lightning' uses a narrative motif familiar from tales such as 'Sleeping Beauty' to contextualise the discovery of an ancient treasure hoard in Staffordshire; 'The Difference in the Dose' naturalises and modernises the story of Rapunzel; and 'After the Fox' resettles the stories of 'Bluebeard' and 'Mr Fox' in contemporary England. Warner's treatment of her

inheritances, however, is distinctive: in each case, the narratives she uses are made more everyday, more naturalistic – they are, even, domesticated – as if Warner is endeavouring to show that these enduring narrative patterns are not remote and mythical, but can continue to play themselves out in ordinary lives. This treatment is thematised explicitly in another of the standout stories of the collection, 'Forget My Fate', which, as the titular snatch of lyric suggests, concerns the story of Dido and Aeneas. In this story an Italian-Jewish music teacher from Egypt named Nino, with a complicated past, offers a classics teacher, Barbara May, an alternative to the epic myth of Dido and Aeneas imagined by the 'dreadful Roman collaborator' Virgil (137), in which Dido, reimagined as Elissa, the exiled Queen of Tyre, is 'NOT a woman who gives up in despair and shame' (142) and instead ends her days happily married to the king of Mauritania. This alternative possibility for Dido illustrates a thesis that Nino articulates for Barbara May, that 'you can push a story in other directions – ones that are less frenzied. Towards ordinary moments of love and satisfaction and happiness' (138). It also reveals to Barbara May, once she has recognised Nino's own love affair in the tale of Dido and Aeneas, that behind epic tragedy is

> an alternative story – one that isn't so compelling, but one that fits closely, if not obviously, to another kind of experience, a little more commonplace, with a happy ending. That story also invites us to enter but it is harder to notice. The voice is fainter when it says, 'I think you'll recognise this.' (146))

A significant proportion of Warner's stories may be regarded as illustrations and elaborations of this idea.

The stories in this collection are diverse, as might be expected from an assemblage of fictions written for a variety of purposes over a period of twelve years: some stories here were written for radio, some commissioned for specific occasions, some composed for performance, and others are original to this collection. Breathing through their diversity, however, are the continuities in theme and preoccupation that have characterised Marina Warner's writing throughout her career: there are meditations on generational change and inter-generational communication, reflections of the weight of tradition – and also its weightlessness, celebrations of the performance of the self, and parables about the need for reparation for past crimes. Above all, however, Warner's fictions are characterised by her sense of the alchemical power of the imagination when it is confronted with stories that are old but perennially new. Warner's narratives, to borrow her description of the sources of Shakespearian invention, are made powerful, and, paradoxically, pressingly relevant, by an imagination that is 'inscribed with the shadowy watermark of the past' (59).

Author: Marina Warner.

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