This Month We Have Been Reading...

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Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978) is not someone people seem to read much these days. Indeed she was never a big-selling author. All the better to discover a gem like this short novel then. It was originally published in 1926 and its full title runs: *Lolly Willowes or The Loving Huntsman*. It is a gentle but weirdly deceptive piece of writing. It does that thing that you sometimes wish the novel you were reading would do but that very few novels do in fact do, namely change their very nature halfway through. At first you think you’re reading a rather limpid and poignant account of a country girl called Laura (duly abbreviated to Lolly) whose beloved father dies when she is in her mid-twenties and who never really recovers. (There is a fascinating comparison to make here with Katherine Mansfield’s marvellous short story, ‘The Daughters of the Late Colonel’, published a few years earlier, in 1921, in which we encounter two sisters left at once bereft and disconcertedly liberated when their curmudgeonly father dies.) Lolly goes to live with her brother and sister-in-law, in London, and devotes most of her time to looking after their children. It has all the marks of a kind of classic account of ‘the spinster’ (itself, of course, a word hardly used nowadays): Lolly never finds a man, and leads a sort of ghost’s life, her role as the children’s governess largely taken for granted. But then one day she announces that it’s all over – she is going to move out and live by herself in a village in the Chilterns, called Great Mop. And she duly leaves, much to the rest of the family’s general concern and disbelief. But it’s what happens to her in Great Mop that really, as it were, lifts the lid off this text. We don’t want to spoil any of the further turns of the plot for you, but let’s just say that if you know the 1973 cult movie *The Wicker Man* you’ll perhaps notice some striking correspondences. It’s a beautiful but also, in the end, surprisingly spooky book.

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Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* is a remarkably violent novel. Just about every character in the book suffers from or commits violence, often in extreme forms: from Pip’s reluctant mock-fight with Herbert Pocket, to his being violently ‘brought up by hand’ by his sister, to the extended fight to the death of Magwitch and Compeyson, to Molly’s strangling of her love-rival with her bare hands, to the wife-beating of Estella by Bentley Drummle, to Orlick’s attack on Mrs Joe, his attempted murder of Pip, and his Quentin Tarantino-style pantomime performance of violence towards Pumblechook as he and his accomplices slap their victim’s face, pulls his nose, and stuff flowers into his mouth, to Miss Havensham’s immolation and Pip’s ambiguously violent attempt to save her. But *Great Expectations* is by no means an isolated case. As Garrett Stewart points out, violence is endemic to Victorian fiction, and Victorian plotting is seemingly addicted to violence in all its forms. But while it is never entirely lost from critical view, a thematics of violence is far from the only thing on Stewart’s mind in this book as he analyses the extent to which violence is also ‘endemic’ to the power of nineteenth-century prose itself. He argues that English and European realist fiction is ‘driven’, in a psychoanalytic sense, by real or representational violence, and proposes that in Victorian fiction the linguistic deformation of prose, the figurative ‘violence’
of narrative form, engages with the often disturbing scenes of actual violence in nineteenth-century novels.

So Stewart wants to link represented violence with questions of narrative form. Now, it is in the study of narrative – in narratology or narrative theory – that structuralism comes into its own in literary studies. This is most evident in the well-known argument that there are only a certain number of ‘underlying’ plots – an idea initially elaborated by Russian critic Vladimir Propp in the 1920s and most recently developed by Christopher Booker, who argues that there are in fact only seven ‘basic’ plots (The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories (2004)). And this abstracting and classifying impulse behind structuralist narratology is also evident in a work such as Gerard Genette’s subtle and highly sophisticated analysis of narrative perspective and temporality in his groundbreaking Narrative Discourse (1986). It is against this abstracting impulse of traditional narratology that Stewart argues. Rather than considering the large-scale ‘structures’ of narratives, Stewart pays careful attention to the micro-details of plotting and to effects of language. He names his approach ‘narratography’ in order to emphasise his sense of the significance of writing in the workings of narrative. For Stewart, the problem with narrative theory is that it involves too much abstraction and therefore too much ‘avoidance of surface texture’: in narratology, ‘the grain of narration’ is overlooked, he argues (3). Stewart seeks to rebalance the discourse of narrative analysis by attending more closely to what he calls the ‘drift of the signifier’ (22), to the ‘ascriptive matter of narrative writing’ (220), to the ‘thingness of language’ (211) in nineteenth-century narrative.

The book is by no means an easy read. Stewart’s prose is itself often opaque and his detailed analyses often seem to obscure the woods by looking so obsessively at the individual trees (or indeed branches or leaves) of language. But it is nevertheless a remarkable and impressive book, and one that reminds us that the best kind of reader is not necessarily one who seeks to abstract the gist of a novel in order simply to retell its plot. Stewart celebrates reading that gets caught up in the stuff out of which novels are made – in the sticky, slippery, unstable texture of language, in words themselves.