

Grace Tomkinson

DOROTHY M. RICHARDSON, PIONEER

THE DEATH two summers ago, in a nursing home in England, of Dorothy M. Richardson, in her eighty-fifth year, attracted little attention. There were brief notices in the papers, one rather inadequate article in an English review mentioning her contribution to the modern novel, and an announcement in the *Times Literary Supplement* that her sister-in-law wished to collect her letters for publication. She had outlived her generation. Those whose names had been grouped with hers as "the growing points of the future" in fiction were all gone. I saw nothing on either side of the Atlantic to convey what an impact her work had made on the serious young writers of her time and, indirectly, of today.

She was such an unobtrusive person that this might not have distressed her. She had lived long enough to realize the evanescence of fame and how the valiant warriors of yesterday are thrust into the sidelines while others, using perhaps their own weapons, carry on the fray. She has been called one of the world's worst self-advertisers, and though her work has been discussed and analyzed for over forty years, very little personal information about her has come out. How many can recall seeing a picture of her? Even her age, mentioned casually in one of several letters I had from her, seems to have been a matter for guess-work—and invariably inaccurate. She was a dedicated artist, living and working quietly, more to please herself than any audience and showing no craving for publicity or any particular recognition.

She and her husband, the artist Alan Odle, divided their time between Cornwall and London till the second World War disrupted their pleasant pattern of living. After that they remained in Cornwall. She wrote from there in 1946: "My husband and I both feel that our London is not only transformed but belongs now to a new generation." She added: "I'd like very much to go up for a while but present conditions are a little too difficult for the aged." Living there at the time, I knew just how difficult they were, with food, light, and heat rationed and travelling any distance a hazardous ordeal. Two years later Alan Odle died suddenly "as he would have wished, in the open, in his beloved Cornwall."

She faced her changed world alone but able to write: "Thankfulness flooded me in the knowledge that he was spared illness and suffering."

It may be far-fetched to think of Miss Richardson as a warrior, but she was no literary mouse. It takes a special kind of courage for a writer to make such a revolutionary break with the traditional patterns as she did in her first book, *Pointed Roofs*. It was also daring of Duckworth, her publisher, to bring out a novel with no love interest, no suspense, no comedy or tragedy, and nothing faintly resembling a plot. An awareness of the risk taken is revealed in the introduction by the well-established novelist, J. D. Beresford. He needs several pages to "prepare the reader" for a book that "cannot be ranged either with its contemporaries or with the classics of this kind", one that has an unanalyzable quality of "unexpectedness" that may annoy the "superficial critic." He ends by leaving all further praise "to those who may have the insight to comprehend it."

A surprising number had that insight. His faith and the publisher's proved justified, though they could hardly have looked far enough ahead to picture the slender story of Miriam Henderson (an intelligent, sensitive girl of eighteen, teaching in a school in Germany) to be followed over a period of twenty-three years by eleven others. All recounted the experiences of the same girl in slightly varied circumstances. While *Pointed Roofs* never became a best-seller, it was immediately taken seriously by discerning critics (if not by the superficial ones). The series, called *Pilgrimage*, soon crossed the Atlantic, imported by the astute young publisher Alfred Knopf, as prestige novels (certainly not money-makers).

Virginia Woolf, in one of her famous Cambridge lectures, declared that "on or about December, 1910, human nature changed." She was exaggerating to prove a point. Human nature remained the same but men's ideas had, around that time, begun undergoing extraordinary changes. The 1914-1918 War is often credited with drastically altering England, but storm warnings had been posted before that, especially in the arts. The time was historically right for things to happen. Abstract painting, Imagist poetry and free verse, aesthetic dancing and other phenomena were about to startle the accepted arbitrators of good taste. The date chosen by Virginia Woolf happened to be that of the first Exhibition in London of Post-Impressionist artists when non-art by such "apostles of ugliness" as Matisse, Picasso, Cézanne, and Van Gogh was foisted off on the public as Art.

The disturbing innovations of that time have become so much a part of our culture that it is hard to imagine our world without them. There were "angry young men" as there are now (and always have been), rebelling against the established order. Then they were striving to break

away from the hypocrisy, the ugliness and rigidity of Victorianism. Now they want to free themselves from the smugness, the drabness and constriction of the new era so hopefully and idealistically created by anti-Victorianism. The commendable aim in both cases is to clear away the debris left by an earlier and seemingly inept period. Artistic anti-Victorians objected (not without reason) to the cluttered vulgarity of their world. They tried to simplify and beautify it by discarding their parents' ideas just as they had hurled out their treasured accumulation of anti-macassars and aspidistras. One of the first to turn on the literary aspidistras was Dorothy M. Richardson.

Pointed Roofs came out in 1915 along with two other autobiographical novels which dealt shattering blows to tradition: Proust's *Du Coté de Chez Swann* and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (which had been appearing in the columns of *The Egoist*). It was an eventful year for English fiction, though its significance was not fully realized at the time. Against a background of a country involved in a great war D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* was published (and banned) and Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, appeared. Incidentally, Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage* also appeared. Walter Allen in *The English Novel*, grouping the experimental writers, Lawrence, Joyce, Richardson, and Woolf, says: "None of the best living novelists has escaped in one way or another, the influence of at least one of the four." Miss Richardson was never to become as well known as the others, but she was the most original, and her accomplishment in *Pilgrimage* is carefully weighed and considered in every study of the novel.

Her new approach had to be given a name, and it was variously termed realist, imagist, or impressionist writing. Later the method was referred to as "internal monologue," "interior vision," and "unheard and unspoken speech." Edith Wharton called it, less respectfully, "unsorted abundance" of thought and impression. Eventually Dorothy M. Richardson became known as the first to use, intentionally and consistently, the "stream-of-consciousness" technique. Much thought has been given to the origin of that metaphor. It was one chosen earlier, after some deliberation, by William James. It seems first to have been pinned by May Sinclair, who was not greatly appreciative, on Miss Richardson. Her characteristic opinion of it was that "amongst the company of useful labels devised to meet the exigencies of literary criticism, it stands alone, isolated by its perfect imbecility." She mentions the phrase "contemplated reality," but the other still clung.

The method was not, of course, new with her. Traces of it have been found in Sterne, Dickens, Melville, Samuel Richardson and others,

including Henry James. Later the big names associated with it were to be Proust, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, with Miss Richardson's less spectacular accomplishment sometimes overlooked. She tells us in a foreword to the four-volume collected edition of *Pilgrimage* that she had been determined to produce "a feminine equivalent for the current masculine realism" or to convey a more accurate picture of a woman's mind than any male writer had succeeded in giving. She set herself a difficult task in identifying herself absolutely with her heroine, seeing everything through her eyes. Since nothing of absorbing interest (except to Miriam) happened, the appeal of the books was bound to be limited.

Interest in them was, however, maintained. May Sinclair wrote: "These novels show an art, method and form carried to the most punctilious perfection," and immediately seized on the method for her novel, *Mary Olivier*. By the time *Honeycomb*, third in the series, had appeared, it was being hailed by the London *Nation* as "the most remarkable novel of the year from the critic's standpoint. . . Miss Richardson has contrived like nobody else to forge an instrument by which the feminine method of apprehending life reveals itself in unerring divination." When ten of the "chapters" (as the author called them) were published, John Cowper Powys, in a small book on Miss Richardson, called Miriam "the most completely portrayed woman in literature and immensely worth portraying." To find her "superior in intellectual interest one must turn to such famous figures as Hamlet and Faust."

Critics continued to praise Miss Richardson, though not always so extravagantly. By that time her imitators had begun to have imitators, and not all of them suspected where the influence began. It would be interesting to know more of the reaction of her famous contemporaries, some of whom she knew well: H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, E. M. Forster, Somerset Maugham, and the Bloomsbury set. We do learn through Miriam's reflections something of what Miss Richardson thought of them. We hear of "the self-satisfied, complacent, know-all condescendingness" of James and Conrad. Wells' books are "a witty exploitation of ideas." And men's novels are "unable to make you forget them, the authors, for a moment." But she does discover in Henry James' *The Ambassadors* "a new way of statement" and decides that it was James, after all, "who had achieved the first completely satisfying way of writing a novel."

If Katherine Mansfield found any inspiration in *Pilgrimage*, as might be assumed, she does not seem to have acknowledged it. She observed that the author had "a passion for registering every single thing that happens in the clear, shadowless country of the mind" and felt that she

lacked discrimination in selecting her impressions. Virginia Woolf shrewdly studied the methods of the pioneers and profited by their mistakes. She wrote in her Diary, in 1920, "I see immense possibilities in a form I hit upon more or less by chance two weeks ago." She mentions "the danger which ruins Joyce and Richardson to my mind" and asks: "Is one pliant and rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without its becoming as in Joyce and Richardson, narrowing and constricting?" Two pages later she speaks of starting *Jacob's Room*, her first stream-of-consciousness novel.

Those who know Miss Richardson's work can trace her influence on later writers who may have come by it second or third-hand and never have read *Pilgrimage*. They might, in fact, have difficulty in finding the complete series on this side of the Atlantic, though public libraries in England are well stocked with them. When found, they might not prove easy reading. I discovered them in Iowa in 1924 through a novelist friend. I read eagerly through the volumes then published and pursued the others as they appeared, wherever I happened to be, in the United States, Canada, or England. I have been re-reading portions of them ever since, but others have found them quite unreadable. Even J. D. Beresford, who undertook to help launch *Pointed Roofs*, confesses that it made no impression on him till the second reading. And Leon Edel, who gives Miss Richardson considerable space in *The Psychological Novel*, confesses that he had a similar experience.

The recounting of Miriam's mental activities does tend to grow monotonous after a time, with nothing in the way of a narrative to hold the interest. But few good books sustain the same level throughout, and the high spots of *Pilgrimage* are worth waiting for. The series has been called emotionally thin and Miriam's viewpoint rather prim and spinsterish at times. What I found slightly exasperating was being given a fairly complete picture of her mind and yet knowing very little about her actual life. We are left with even more tantalizing scraps of information about the other characters. It is particularly frustrating, when the author has such talent for illuminating the material or situations she does choose, to have one's interest aroused in her family or friends and never have their story (or scarcely a single incident) followed through. She would make dull reading for anyone who demands suspense and action or whose taste is for the currently fashionable school of fiction which thrives on violence, clinical detail, and any deviation from the normal.

The fact that the stream-of-consciousness novel is so close to poetry adds nothing to its popularity today. Dorothy M. Richardson began writing at a time when there was an exciting revival of interest in poetry

and an audience eagerly awaiting it. H. D., Richard Aldington, and the rest of the Imagist poets began publishing when she did. Others outside that group were bringing new colour to their verses by the use of vivid symbols or pictures and had a loyal following. Rupert Brooke's *Collected Poems* appeared in the same year as *Pointed Roofs*. A keen zest for life in its ordinary little details was in the air. There are many such poetic passages in *Pilgrimage*. A shop window, for instance, is lovingly described as "a soft fresh tide of sunlit colors. . . . clear glass shelves laden with shapes of fluted glass, glinting transparencies of mauve, amber and green, rose-pearl or milky blue." Or a tea-table: "strawberries in a shallow, wide bowl, a squat jug brimming with cream, dark-wedding-cake hiding a pewter plate."

Perhaps no heroine who thinks as much as Miriam does (and admits it) could hope to be popular. And in contrast with some of the cynical, world-weary characters inhabiting books today, she is too much in love with life. Her capacity for wonder, in a world as sated with wonders as ours, seems extraordinary. For her even inanimate objects are charged with delight. The St. Pancras bells, whose music floats into her dingy little room in Euston Road, "clamored recklessly with Miriam's shout of joy as they banged against the wooden walls of the windowpane." Miss Richardson was at one time interested in the Quakers, and *Dimple Hill*, last of the series, is concerned with them. She, herself, had that inner mystical quality associated with them, or what has been called "an intensity of rapt contemplation."

"Intense" is a word that describes Miriam. She is so sensitive as to extract shocks of ecstasy from everyday things. Her "almost insupportable happiness" is contagious. When she drives across the Common on a clear spring day, we know how "her blood leaped and sang," and we are carried magically back to spring days in England with the parks brilliant with golden laburnums and masses of rich, dark tulips. We share her joy in London: "To walk along the radiant pavement of sunlit Regent Street forever . . . with every footstep she felt she could fly. . ." We can also be plunged with her into bitterness and despair, though the recounting of that may be mixed with wry humor. While we are crushed with her by the obnoxious Fräulein Pfaff's criticism of her diffident English manner in *Pointed Roofs*, we have to smile at the headmistress' pompous pronouncement: "The teacher shall be all sunshine, encouraging all effort, all lovely things in the personality of the pupil."

The humour in *Pilgrimage* is always incidental, often in character description. A soloist at a seaside Pavilion, who "floundered in from the side in a pink silk dress," had "bright, large teeth and the kind of mouth

that would say 'chahld' for 'child'. . . She took a deep breath. 'Bring back — the yahs — that are DEAD!' she screamed violently." No one has a more wickedly perceptive ear for English speech: "The middle class jargon is mincing, a genteel aspiration with a desire to keep the mouth closed, hence 'refaned' and 'nace'." It springs, she suggests, from an instinctive desire to avoid all sounds that might discompose the countenance.

"I have just discovered," Miriam writes her sister, "that I don't read books for the story but as a psychological study of the author." And one might read *Pilgrimage* as a revelation of Miss Richardson's peculiarly feminine viewpoint. She can see her own sex with detachment, as when she turns a ruthless eye on some elderly females: "refined shrews, turning in circles like moths on pins, mindless, heartless, the prey of the professions, priests, doctors, lawyers. . . ." She can be coldly disenchanted about her world, as when she remarks: "Individual life cannot begin till the illusion of all the wonderful people presently to be met is vanquished." But she observes it also with compassion. She knows the country as well as the city and speaks of "local people who have lived always in the white glare of village publicity, carrying about with them, from the cradle to the grave, their known personal records."

One of her most sympathetic and unforgettable pictures is of a little group of Quakers reading the Bible. We hear, with a new awareness,

the very sound of the Old Testament, the wistful sound of Hebrew piety trustfully patient within a shadow pierced here and there by a ray of light ahead, till the emotion creating this Scripture became current and the forms seated in the golden lamplight, fellows of those who brought it forth, sharers of their majesty, bringing both humility and pride. . . .

We may still be a little too close to it to appraise accurately Miss Richardson's contribution to fiction. And following Miriam's reveries through the whole twelve "chapters" is an achievement not everyone would be anxious to repeat. Yet one reading is not enough. The books may be profitably opened at random, like a volume of poetry, to reveal some striking phrase or paragraph that gives a sharpened intensity to one's own experiences. They will never be devoured to see "what happens next," but they do offer the thoughtful reader a rewarding series of impressions, so vividly realized and communicated that his own life is enriched.