

Shirley Rose

DOROTHY RICHARDSON: THE FIRST HUNDRED

YEARS A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW

The year 1973 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Dorothy Richardson, one of the major innovators of the modern English novel. When she died in 1957 at the age of 84, she had, unlike Joyce and Proust, long since outlived her literary time. Both the French and the Irish architects of modern fiction beheld a lasting edifice of criticism and scholarship develop out of their prodigious literary achievements. But Dorothy Richardson outlasted the critical interest and enthusiasm that greeted the early novels of her life's work, *Pilgrimage*.¹ She already had a secure but underrated position in the history of modern literature as the first English novelist writing in a manner that came to be called the stream of consciousness, a phrase to which she had strong objections. She was working coincidentally with Proust; and *Pointed Roofs*, the first of *Pilgrimage's* thirteen published "chapters" as she called the separate novels, appeared in 1915, the year before Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was published in book form.² Her work is unlikely ever to produce a critical mystique such as surrounds Proust, Joyce, Eliot, or Yeats. However, until there is a general awareness of the quality of her mind, the direction of her ideas, and the diversity of her interests, she will remain little more than a footnote in the criticism of the modern novel.

In the half century of Dorothy Richardson's writing career, she published twelve completed novels and, in addition, several chapters of a thirteenth; five book-length translations and other shorter translations from German and French; two books on the Quakers, a monograph on illustrative art; some one hundred and thirty-five essays, articles and reviews, of which about fifty are

on or related to dentistry or dental health, and about twenty-five on the art and social implications of the cinema. She also published more than thirty sketches and short stories, as well as a few short poems. Her work appeared in *The Dental Record*, *The Little Review*, *Poetry*, *The Adelphi*, *Vanity Fair*, *Close Up*, *transatlantic review*, *Life and Letters*, *Art and Literature*, and *Fortnightly Review*, as well as in the obscure radical periodicals, *Ye Crank* and *Focus*. Her subjects included socialism, feminism, general and dental health, dental and medical science, world affairs, Quakerism, films, literature, and always, the art of life.

Viewed as a whole, Dorothy Richardson's work expresses a social commitment rare among the English literary avant-garde. She was remarkably strong emotionally and spiritually; she was convinced of her intellectual and aesthetic position. Though sharing the period's major literary preoccupation with the inner life of characters, she showed no interest in overtly depicting neurotic, nihilistic, alienated, frustrated, perverted, or pseudo-sophisticated tendencies examined by some of her prominent contemporaries. Above all, her outlook is affirmative, paradoxically linked to a qualified rejection of superficial social pressures. This outlook, based upon the traditional principles of individual worth and responsibility, is the result of a personal inner stability and illumination. The unusual qualities of abundant vitality and conviction in contrast to the twentieth-century artist's general preoccupation with moral and physical decay may be responsible in part for the critical neglect of her work.

Dorothy Richardson was not primarily an experimenter. What she sought to do in the novel was to develop a highly individual approach, to perfect a personally satisfying intellectual and aesthetic style and method. Although she was a pioneer of the new stream-of-consciousness³ technique, nearly a quarter of a century elapsed before twelve parts of *Pilgrimage* appeared. During this period, the technique, if not entirely abandoned by novelists, came to be adopted as a specific device rather than as an inclusive mode. On the whole, critics left Dorothy Richardson conspicuously alone. The lapse of time between the publication of the separate chapters of *Pilgrimage* upset for the reader the continuity essential to a chronologically conceived and developed novel. To recognize the overall design of an as yet incomplete work, as well as to analyze the pattern of each individual part and its relationship to the whole, would require either a prodigious memory in a long-lived critic, or constant faithful rereading. As to this last requirement, there is no evidence

that critics other than Dorothy Richardson's personal admirers were sufficiently interested in her work to do so.

Criticism conditioned mainly by the aesthetic approach may fail to appreciate the variety of *Pilgrimage*. The dual nature of its concerns—that is, objective and subjective life, physical and mental activity, intellectual and emotional responses—is integral to both the novel's narrative and ideational structure. In applying herself to a consideration of varying modes of experience, technique is pushed to its farthest coherent limits. The world Dorothy Richardson creates has an objective reality to which she insists we attend. Yet her objective observation, for example, of time's continuity, and the subjective awareness of existence and experience removed from all concepts of time, are not conflicting ideas, but serve to affirm and confirm one another.

Dorothy Richardson's conception of subjective and objective reality in life and art shapes her social and aesthetic views. Concerned about the deterioration of the quality of life as a result of economic and class structure, she turned at first to socialism in the hope of remedy. Indeed, socialism plays an important role in the early years of Dorothy Richardson's writing career, and forms an important autobiographical element in the characterization of Miriam Henderson in *Pilgrimage*. While socialism may be objectified as a political and economic ideology proposing specific reforms in the social order, for Richardson, as indeed for others of this persuasion, particularly the early Fabians, socialism is akin to a religious experience, and as such has important subjective implications. Regarded in this way, its reforms, motivated ideally by a personal enlightenment, would perfect the human condition in aesthetic as well as in social terms. The continuous narrative use Dorothy Richardson makes of Fabian socialism in *Pilgrimage* under the fictive name Lycurganism constitutes a vital element in the intellectual content of the novel. Ultimately, correlative ideas about the relationship of men and women, emphasizing the difference between the masculine and feminine consciousness, and feminism *per se*, become central to her work.

Dorothy Richardson sees the novel as a psychological portrait of its author which the reader in his contemplative role apprehends through the created world of the book. Her close attention to the writer's attitude toward the actual world as well as to the created world of his novel influences her views on the creative consciousness and the reader's apprehension of the creative consciousness. At the same time, the shaping forces of her own consciousness emerge.⁴ In the first five novels of *Pilgrimage*, patterns of Miriam Hender-

son's conscious awareness of intellectual and creative worlds and her determined quest for a satisfactory means of aesthetic expression form a subtly intricate design. The "pilgrimage" increasingly comes to mean the journey of the artist not only to self-realization but, more practically, to the discovery of a unique creative form and expression.

Dorothy Richardson's views on the nature of consciousness are fully elaborated in the later novels of *Pilgrimage* and in miscellaneous essays where the emphasis is on the quality of the feminine consciousness and its capacity to apprehend reality in spatial rather than in temporal terms. Time and timelessness, crucial concerns of the modern writer, are accepted by Dorothy Richardson as actually compatible and collaborating aspects of existence and experience in life and art. Unlike Bergson, however, she maintains that reality, the essential element in phenomena, is in fact apprehensible by the human consciousness. The sense and the intellect, on the one hand, are affected by and respond to flux; through their action we become aware of process or the state of becoming. The reflective consciousness, on the other hand, using the material of memory, apprehends the perpetual present of experience; through its action we are aware of immutability and the state of being. Rejecting the concept of creative evolution as descriptive of reality, Dorothy Richardson maintains that reality resides in the intrinsic changeless centre of being, of which the synthesizing capacity of the feminine consciousness makes us aware.⁵

Great literary art is the result of a supreme encounter of intellect and imagination, bringing into intimate contact the profoundly reflective and creative qualities of the artist's consciousness and unconsciousness in moments of equilibrium. "Literature", Dorothy Richardson tells us, "is a product of this stable human consciousness, enriched by experience and capable of deliberate, concentrated contemplation".⁶ In producing a book, she says elsewhere, literary genius supplies mankind with "the domestic pet among the arts", whose close and companionable relationship to the reader makes it "humanity's intimate. . . . It is mobile and companionable, allowing itself to be carried in the pocket to the ends of the earth".⁷ Always for Dorothy Richardson the comprehensive view of the art-life collaboration prevails.

Not in the utter nakedness of the pendulum swing, and not in the sharp equality and opposition of action and reaction, but in mankind's glorious stability do we find the explanation of the coming and going of the fruits of genius, of the way they appear and disappear, have their day and apparently cease to be; until the cessation proves to have been no more than night leading to another day.⁸

The harmony of existence and the perpetual present of recollective experience are affirmed by the contemplative human consciousness, while the abundant variety of art is testimony to the changelessness of human genius.

NOTES

1. Eleven of the separate parts of *Pilgrimage* were published singly between 1915 and 1935: *Pointed Roofs* (1915), *Backwater* (1916), *Honeycomb* (1917), *The Tunnel* (1919), *Interim* (1919), *Deadlock* (1921), *Revolving Lights* (1923), *The Trap* (1925), *Oberland* (1927), *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931), and *Clear Horizon* (1935). The twelfth novel *Dimple Hill*, was first published in the collected edition of *Pilgrimage*, London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1938, and simultaneously in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf. In 1967, ten years after Dorothy Richardson's death, Dent reissued the collected edition (with a brief introduction by Walter Allen), including the incomplete thirteenth novel, *March Moonlight*, in print for the first time.
2. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was serialized in *The Egoist*, February 1914 - September 1915. It first appeared in book form in 1916.
3. William James's term was applied for the first time in a literary context by the novelist May Sinclair to the first three novels of *Pilgrimage* in "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson", *The Egoist*, V (April 1918), 57-59, and *The Little Review*, IV, 12 (April 1918), 3-11.
4. An analysis appears in my article, "The Writer as Pilgrim", *Criticism*, XII, 1 (Winter, 1970), 20-37.
5. An analysis of Dorothy Richardson's concept is contained in my article, "The Unmoving Center: Consciousness in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*", *Contemporary Literature*, X, 3 (Summer, 1969), 367-382.
6. S. Kunitz, ed., *Authors Today and Yesterday* (New York, 1933), p. 562.
7. *John Austen and the Inseparables* (London, 1930), p. 13.
8. "The Return of William Wordsworth", *The Adelphi*. New Series, 1, 3 (December, 1930), Review Supplement, xvi-xix.