

Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage

by Kathleen Tudor

In August 1976 a rather unusual literary event occurred--Popular Library published Dorothy Richardson's four-volume novel Pilgrimage. In the best paper-back tradition the cover of each volume has a photograph of a pretty blond girl of the simpering, big-eyed, full-lipped variety that one supposes is meant to entice the male reader especially. Ironically the heroine of the novel which it was once claimed had a "special dulness"(1) is a dedicated feminist and a rather dumpy young woman who worries about her big hands and wears pince-nez. Her novel life ended in 1913.

Pilgrimage has an interesting history. It was written by Dorothy Miller Richardson who was born in England in 1873. The first volume or "chapter" of Pilgrimage, "Pointed Roofs," was published in 1915 as a novel. Successive "chapters" were published as separate novels in 1916, 1917, two in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1925, 1927, 1931 and 1935. Duckworth published each of these except Clear Horizon (1935) which was published by J.M. Dent. Then in 1938, Dent brought out Pilgrimage in a four-volume edition which contained all previously published novels ("chapters") and as well a "last" chapter, "Dimple Hill," which had not been previously published. As it turned out the last chapter was

still to come and "March Moonlight" appeared in a new and final edition of Pilgrimage published in 1967. "March Moonlight" was published posthumously, the author having died in 1957 at the age of eighty-four. This extraordinary publishing history is important to any genuine assessment of Dorothy Richardson's place in the development of the novel as well as for an understanding of the novel itself.

There are other things that are remarkable about Pilgrimage apart from its publishing history. For instance, it was the first work of fiction to which the term "stream of consciousness" was applied, (2) the first "chapters" being published before the work of Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. "Pointed Roofs" was published two years after Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Times Past. Richardson was, Virginia Woolf conceded (not entirely graciously, I think), a founder of a new method of rendering consciousness:

There is no one word, such as romance or realism, to cover, even roughly, the works of Dorothy Richardson. Their chief characteristics, if an intermittent student be qualified to speak, is one for which we still seek a name. She has invented,

or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes. Other writers of the other sex have used sentences of this description and stretched them to the extreme. But there is a difference. Miss Richardson has fashioned her sentence consciously, in order that it may descend to the depths and investigate the crannies of Miriam Henderson's consciousness. It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything that she may discover in the psychology of her sex. (3)

If for no other reason, then, Dorothy Richardson deserves to be remembered and recognized for her contribution to the form of the modern novel. Perhaps the great changes would have occurred anyway, but one cannot help feeling that Virginia Woolf in particular, gained confidence or courage from seeing another successfully accomplish what she was just beginning to think about. D.H. Lawrence's linking of Proust, Richardson and Joyce make it quite clear that he saw her as an innovator in the same camp as Joyce and

Proust and all three were subjected to his spleen:

And Pointed Roofs, are they a gay little toy for nice little girls? And M. Proust? Alas! You can hear the death rattle in their throats. They can hear it themselves. . . . So there you have the "serious" novel dying in a very long-drawn-out fourteen volume death agony, and absorbedly, childishly interested in the phenomenon. "Did I feel a twinge in my little toe, or didn't I?" asks every character of Mr. Joyce or of Miss Richardson or M. Proust. (4)

The literary battles of the early part of the century are well behind us and, as Caesar Blake (5) notes, by 1938 everyone was so used to the new way of writing that they were hardly to be attracted by the novelty of the new form. Literary historians must write literary history but the reading public simply wants a good book. Will they get it in Pilgrimage? Popular Library is not given to preserving monuments (although their garish cover suggests otherwise). They must have decided they had a book which will be read--a good book. And I agree with them.

Pilgrimage is the story of Miriam Henderson, who, even at the age of seventeen when her story begins, is her own woman. Her father's people had been "shop" but Mr. Henderson proposed to

be a gentleman and invested in stocks and bonds until his fortune melted away. The road to ruin was pleasant at times and the young Miriam knew the joys of country house living, tennis, boating and flirtations. But the inevitable collapse came and the intrepid Miriam, the third of four daughters and the one her father called Charlie in his disappointment at not getting a son, sets out in the world to earn her own way. Like Lucy Snowe in Villette (one of her favourite novels) she gets herself a job as teacher-pupil in a foreign girls' school (in Hanover) and not only learns how to teach but also perfects her own German and French in the process. Miriam, however, is not really the kind of teacher Fraulein Pfaff wants--she is too independent in manner. At vacation time Miriam must return to England suffering from a sense of failure. After a time as a teacher in a girls' day school in North London (Backwater) and a short period as a governess with a wealthy family (Honeycomb), she abandons teaching forever, hating the power it gave her over minds "so soft and untouched." (Vol. 1, p. 390) But in turning her back on teaching, she also sets herself apart from the people she belonged to. Her move to London to become a dental receptionist for some Harley Street dentists is a conscious throwing off of the decorum and narrowness of the class which bred her: "Twenty-one and only one room to hold the richly renewed consciousness, and a living to earn, but the self that

was with her in the room was the untouched tireless self of her seventeenth year and all the earlier time." (Vol. II, p. 16) She remains with the dentists for about ten years earning little more than a pound a week, living in a rooming house (Mrs. Bailey's most of the time), eating at ABC's, reading at the British Museum, attending free public lectures, reading great quantities of books, learning about socialism and dozens of other "isms" of the day, and above all maintaining her integrity and her freedom. The year is 1896.

This period of work and study includes, too, several love affairs more than one of which could have ended in marriage except that in each case Miriam rejects the life that the men she met would make for her: "Any interest in generalities, any argument or criticism or opposition would turn into a towering rage. All men were like that in some way. They had each a set of notions and fought with each other about them, whenever they were together and not eating or drinking. If a woman opposed them they went mad. He would like one or two more Mendelssohns and then supper. And if she kept out of the conversation and listened and smiled a little, he would go away adoring." (Vol. II, p. 28) She early became an agnostic and is aroused to fury over the Christian conception of religion not only because of the paucity of its spiritual values, but also because she felt that

it was an institution which perpetuated male dominance. Although the Fabians ("Lycurgans" in the novel) claim her allegiance for a while, she is finally repelled by what she calls the "crisp cocksureness of the socialist intelligentsia." Her conviction grows that her real destiny is to write and finally she gives up her job to do so. Shortly after this decision is made the novel ends. Miriam is in her late thirties, the year is about 1913.

Dorothy Richardson's story and Miriam's are almost identical, the novel ending when Miriam is about 38 and Dorothy Richardson a little older. When she was forty, Richardson began writing Pointed Roofs, the first "chapter" of Pilgrimage, after giving up her job as a dental secretary and recovering her health abroad and in the English countryside. She had written articles for a Dental Journal, and had had a number of "middles" and sketches published in off-beat magazines. The odd poem and several book reviews and essays appeared, again, in journals of an off-beat character such as Ye Crank. She was a friend of H.G. Wells and of a few other literary figures in London but her poverty and daily labour kept her in a world separated from the cultured, well-to-do Bloomsbury, on the edge of which was Mrs. Bailey's boarding house. Just after Pointed Roofs was published she became acquainted in her St. John's Wood boarding house with an eccentric young artist who was

fast dying of drink, tuberculosis and general inability to cope with ordinary life. Because she thought he was going to die, she agreed at 44 to marry Alan Odle who was 28. He had six months to live--but he died at 65. The marriage was a happy one. They were dreadfully poor. She wrote her books; he painted and drew. They lived in Cornwall because cottages were dirt cheap but part of the year they returned to rented rooms in London. Even at the time of her death, Dorothy Richardson had little more than a few hundred pounds a year and the modest recognition which she had received in the early years of her writing was accorded her by only a very few faithful followers. She seemed undisturbed by this and remained her own woman to the end.

Dorothy Richardson was a feminist but she did not arrive at that position without considerable conflict. Part of her struggle, as illustrated in the character of her heroine Miriam, included the need to overcome her contempt for other women. Strongly influenced by a father who despised women, she fluctuates in her youth between her desire to dissociate herself from all that characterizes the lives of the women she knows and a genuine abhorrence of the masculinity she associates with her father. She is never merely anti-men as is sometimes alleged against her. The young Miriam remarks "I don't like men and I loathe women," (I, p. 3) and it fills her

with fury "to be regarded as one of a world of little tame things to be summoned by little men to be well-willed wives." (I, p. 29)

The pilgrimage on which Miriam embarked has as its goal the integrated self. Aware from an early age that she is "different," she comes slowly and agonizingly to understand that the difference arises from the conflicting tendencies in her own being. She expresses these differences by identifying herself as both masculine and feminine and seeks then to bring about some kind of harmony between these apparently opposing principles. An ambivalent sexual makeup (obvious to the contemporary reader in Miriam's relationship with Amabel though Doro-

thy Richardson seems to have been unaware of the sexual overtones in her description of their "affair") corresponds to the inner ambivalence and the nature of the conflict is further emphasized by the opposing nature of the cultural differences in the background of the parents. Miriam's relationship with her father is itself ambivalent where she is not only a son to him but also the daughter closest to him. To her mother she is daughter, son and husband. She is what Virginia Woolf called a "woman-manly" woman and Pilgrimage describes the journey of the divided self to a state of androgyny, the condition that Dorothy Richardson saw as essential for the artist.

