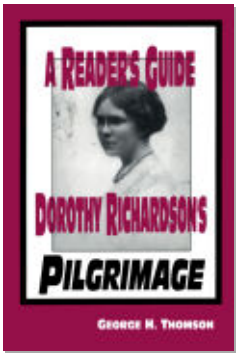
1. Preliminary Propositions



Chapter 1

Preliminary Propositions

THE READER OF *PILGRIMAGE* must from time to time need help. That is how I felt each time I read the text. And gradually I came to believe that the need might be met by making more explicit, than Dorothy Richardson had done, the sequence of "events" comprising the narrative. Such an attempt to clarify the text in a practical manner might help to confront difficulties which are inevitable given the nature of Richardson's enterprise.

First is the length of *Pilgrimage*, 2000 pages of actual text. Second is the time encompassed, twenty years from 1893 to 1912. Third is the variety of settings, from a German finishing school to a London dental office, and from a Swiss winter resort to a Quaker farm. Fourth is the range of characters, more than 600 of them, many captured in small vignettes, then heard of no more.

Were these characteristics found in a vast chronicle like *War and Peace* they would impress but not daunt the reader. A Tolstoy can make them manageable by panoramic overviews, well-designed transitions and exciting plot connections. But when presentation on so grand a scale is combined with an intimate subjective narration from which explicit overview and review are excluded, the result can be intimidating. Therefore, the preliminary propositions which follow are not about the obvious things like length and scope, but about the intimate personal qualities of Richardson's approach. These are the qualities that make her work unique and valuable and, when applied to so large a canvas, daunting.

Pilgrimage as subjective narrative

Pilgrimage is a subjective narrative. Next to her marriage at the age of 44 to a supposedly dying artist seventeen years her junior, the most extraordinary event in Dorothy Richardson's life—if we are to believe her 1931 interview with Louise Morgan—took place in a converted stone chapel in an isolated village in north Cornwall where, living alone late in 1912, she was trying to write the story of Miriam Henderson. She pictured her going up the stairs of her family home. She was seventeen years old. "But who was *there* to *describe* her?"[1] Richardson did not tell her interviewer the answer to that momentous question, but we understand the implication, that no one was there, only Miriam Henderson was there, only she by reliving the past could reenter and recreate the psychological experience of that moment. This insight was to shape the whole of Richardson's subsequent creative life. The resulting narrative was called *Pilgrimage*. It recounted volume after volume of subjective moments in time as they were then and are now (re)experienced by her heroine. But who was Miriam Henderson?

Pilgrimage as subjective autobiographical narrative

Pilgrimage is a subjective autobiographical narrative. Miriam Henderson, before she was 20, discovered that books were about their authors: "They were people. More real than actual people. They came nearer.... In a book the author was there in every word" (1:384). In her last essay, "Novels," published in *Life and Letters*, 56 (1948), Richardson wrote: "And is not every novel a conducted tour? First and foremost into the personality of the author who . . . must present the reader with the writer's self-portrait" (190). Some books, we know, are more explicit than others in portraying their authors. J. D. Beresford, one of Richardson's closest friends at the time she wrote *Pointed Roofs*, says flatly: "Miss Richardson sat down to write the story of her own life, in the person of Miriam Henderson, with the clearest possible conception of what she intended to do." And as late as 1990, the author's long-time friend Pauline Marrian assured me that for Dorothy Richardson the value of *Pilgrimage* lay in its truth to her own life and experience.[2]

The autobiographical nature of the work was first demonstrated by Gloria Glikin [Fromm]'s 1961 ground-breaking article in *PMLA*, and in 1977 spelled out in detail in her *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography*.

Pilgrimage as cultural autobiographical narrative

Pilgrimage is a cultural autobiographical narrative. It is a re-collecting of Richardson's own encounter with the history and culture of her period. The persons, places and times are actual, and usually recorded accurately. The scope of this encounter can only be demonstrated, as it has been in the case of Joyce, by a "*Pilgrimage* Annotated," a kind of "Reader's Guide, Part II" which I plan to complete in two or three years. Here I offer four examples of the narrative's precise invocation of its period.

When Miriam is with the Corries, in *Honeycomb*, the arrest and trial of Oscar Wilde are feverishly talked about, but the precise details are kept from the nineteen year old Miriam, and from the reader. In *The Tunnel*, Miriam recalls a picture in "this month's *Studio*" (2:49), and Mr. Hancock is pleased by an article on "Japanese Flower Decorations" (2:52). Both the reproduced picture, *Flower Market* by Charles J. Watson, and the article by Josiah Condor are found in *The Studio* 9, October 1896. That the novel time is April 1896 shows that Richardson has selected a variety of appropriate material and compressed it into a single workday. In *Deadlock*, Miriam attends a J. M. E. McTaggart lecture at which she is handed a syllabus. This detailed outline of his series of lectures on metaphysics was published in 1934. It shows that where Miriam took notes, Richardson more providently kept the syllabus from which, in recreating Miriam's experience at the lectures, she quotes precisely on several occasions (3:157–59, 162, 171–73).

One more example: in the last book of *Pilgrimage*, Olga Feodorova sent Miriam a farewell card quoting Wells. Richardson wrote Henry Savage, 15 February 1951, commenting on Wells: "His *Sea Lady*, by the way, said only '*Perhaps* there are better dreams.' A quotation sent to me, on the day she took her life, by young Olga Sokoloff, a friend of Kropotkin's who then was living in St. John's Wood, & with whom she had 'much talkings'. Her whole story is being incorporated, briefly &, in a sense, illustratively, in a vol. of Pilgrimage begun in '39 & to which only recently I have got back in the hope of finishing it during my 79th year soon to be entered upon" (*WOM* 657).

Pilgrimage as realistic narrative

Pilgrimage is a realistic narrative. The events of Richardson's personal life and their interface with public life, with the events and culture

in and around the turn of the century, are precisely and accurately depicted. Ford Madox Ford, in *The March of Literature* (1939), defined Dorothy Richardson's style of realism in this way: "The chief characteristic . . . is an extreme, and almost Flemish, minuteness of rendering of objects and situations perceived through the psychologies of the characters and not, as it were, motivated by the temperament of the writer" (773). Richardson wrote: "with Ford's definition of realism I absolutely agree" (*WOM* 629). In all of *Pilgrimage* no passage better illustrates this minuteness of rendering than that at the opening of *The Tunnel* in which Miriam attacks the window of her new Tansley Street room. Following her maneuvers through nearly a whole page of text, the reader is compelled and fascinated:

> The little square four-paned frame swung free and flattened itself back against the fixed panes, out of reach, its bar sticking out over the leads. Drawing back grimed fingers and wrists striped with grime, she grasped the iron bars and pulled. The heavy framework left the window frame with a rusty creak and the sound of paint peeling and cracking. It was very heavy, but it came up and up until her arms were straight above her head, and looking up she saw a stout iron ring in a little trapdoor in the wooden ceiling and a hook in the centre of the endmost bar in the iron framework. (2:14–15)

The detail is precise and abundant. It speaks to us of Miriam's need for open windows, fresh air and light, and equally of her willingness to work within her circumstances to bring about conditions that will let her flourish. And from a literary perspective, the patient intricacy of the description affirms Richardson's fascination with the minutiae of the real world.

Pilgrimage as more than realistic narrative

Pilgrimage is more than a realistic narrative. When Richardson began in 1912 the first book of what was to become her life's work, she was intensely aware of the realist tradition in fiction, extending as it did from Balzac to Bennett and beyond. Its dominance, reinforced by the personal influence of H. G. Wells, helped mold her taste and influence her approach to writing. Her Foreword to the 1938 collected edition of *Pilgrimage* (1:9–12) says as much. She chose to attempt "a feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism." Her efforts were not without success; yet as her manuscript grew, so did her dissatisfaction. Consequently, she set it aside, but continued to write until she found

herself on a "fresh pathway," opened to her by the force of "contemplated reality" in which the past returned in all its vivid detail. By allowing this "reality" from the past to have "its own way" in her writing, Richardson arrived at a new fiction, inwardly focused and contemplative, far removed from the current realism of Wells and his contemporaries. It was feminine indeed, but not the equivalent of anything masculine.[3]

Pointed Roofs was the result, a thoroughly subjective piece of writing that focused on the contemplating, observing mind of Miriam Henderson. In May Sinclair's words: "By presenting what happens in the mind, Miss Richardson seizes reality alive."[4] That reality embraces a mighty array of detail. Superficially looked at, Richardson would seem to have assumed that the inward truth of her heroine's development required for its validation an underpinning of outward truth in the form of realistic detail. But her motivation is more direct than that. When she recalled a scene from her past, it came back with a wealth of sustaining detail that was both a blessing and a burden: a blessing because the detail gave life and substance to each moment, a burden because it demanded many precise and authentic words to recreate such a moment. In these circumstances, the scene and the detail are one. There is no event independent of its specified particulars. The author is *simply* being faithful to the abundance of her given material.

Jean Radford, in *Dorothy Richardson* (1991), has suggested that the profusion of detail in *Pilgrimage* goes beyond what is required for significance or for "reality effect." Such profusion becomes another way Richardson defamiliarizes her account and breaks the mold of the reader's narrative expectations (17–19). This may be how *Pilgrimage* works for some contemporary readers. It is not, I think, what Richardson had in mind. In her essay on "Puritanism," in *Focus* 6 (October 1928), she lamented that its restrictive outlook had no place for great artists "who supply the deepest of our social needs, the need for the superfluous" (198). That need made Richardson a realist with a difference. Her approach through detail was implicit in her act of re-envisaging; it was the default mode for her reliving of the past. Its superabundance was a celebration of the rich profusion of life.

Moreover, that superabundance was not viewed as though it were in a state of perpetual flux. In the recurrent cycles of nature and in the solidity of the established city Richardson, like her heroine, perceived a relative stability and enduringness. Each year the spring is there for

Miriam, and each season her much-loved city is there for her. Promises of change and social engineering do not impress: "The pavements of these streets that had grown of themselves, flooded by the light of lamps rooted like trees in the soil of London, were more surely pavements of gold than those pavements of the future?" (3:235–36)

Pilgrimage as exactingly selective narrative

Pilgrimage is an exactingly selective narrative. The profusion of detail that marks the text may explain why a number of critics and reviewers have claimed that *Pilgrimage* tells us *everything* about Miriam Henderson. Here, for instance, is G. B. Stern in 1928: "We were allowed to see nothing that Miriam did not see, to feel nothing that Miriam did not feel. On the other hand, we were spared nothing that Miriam did see and feel. Nothing."[5]

The claim is absurd. The narrative offers a few moments, a few minutes, even on the rarest of occasions, an hour or two, selected from a scattering of days which in turn are selected from a total period of 20 years (7300 days) of Miriam's life. Richardson understood perfectly that her method was one of exclusion and compression. A manuscript fragment (Richardson Papers) relating to the Foreword summons up Proust, "who was said to have devoted hundreds of words to the description of a monade & hundreds of pages to an evening party. The France of Balzac & of Flaubert was hinting at the novel of the future wherein, by dint of severe selection & compression, an instant's experience might be more when adequately presented?" More? Less is more.

Pilgrimage as compressed & fragmented narrative

Pilgrimage is a compressed and fragmented narrative. More compression issues in more richness of effect, more concentration of focus. But what is being compressed? Miriam's, and Dorothy Richardson's, total range of experience. After all, life—even Miriam's life—is filled with repetition. She goes to work every day. She performs many of the same routines every day. If forty-three pages in *The Tunnel* are given over to one day at work, many of the details which have been packed into the single day cannot be repeated. The reader must be spared terminal boredom. Within the single day of work Richardson has conflated the unique and the representative. Or put another way, she has garnered the details of many days and compressed them into a single day. And the

day itself, of course, breaks down into a series of incidents, thoughtful moments, interruptions and passing scenes.

The result is somewhere between the product of the still camera and of the camcorder, a series of windows on experience, each vivid and detailed, but isolated. Thoughts, feelings, and memories flood the scene, by turn distancing the focus or plunging it into close-up, until expansion exhausts the moment or the episode. Curtain. A new episode. Frequently with no transition either in Miriam's thinking or in the reader's expectations. Even within an individual book the non-transitions can be abrupt. And between books, gaping holes in time emerge, like the three years between *Interim* and *Deadlock*. The scenes of Miriam's life, opened up and amplified, are typically isolated, their relationship one to another implied only. And the characters within the scenes are isolated too. We as readers must reach across voids of time to discover their relationships to each other and to their own pasts.

In sum, *Pilgrimage* is subjective, autobiographical, realistic, rich in superfluous detail but, in its choice of moments in time highly selective, and in its elaboration of experience severely compressed. And *Pilgrimage*, it needs no saying, is long. In these circumstances I have found the most effective way to comprehend the underlying structure of the narrative is to focus on its presentation of time. For through a discrete reliance on time and the ordering of events Richardson confirms the coherence of her narrative.

Pilgrimage as implicitly orderly narrative

Pilgrimage is an implicitly orderly narrative. At first glance, it is true, the representation of time seems vague and oblique, duration and its markers—minute, hour, day and month—surfacing for a moment on the narrative stream as fragments of thought only, subordinated always to the fluid subjectivity of Miriam Henderson's contemplating mind. Yet beneath the passing flow is a grid of precise temporal and factual reference which affirms the realism of the narrative. This prevailing truth to fact is not seriously compromised by the partial exceptions of *The Trap*, *Clear Horizon* and *March Moonlight*, in which accuracy sometimes gives way to carelessness or legerdemain. The exceptions only add to the reader's challenge in grasping the fact-based coherence of the narrative.

Apart from the long sequences of reflection at the beginning of

Revolving Lights and *March Moonlight*, in which events recalled from the past intermingle with and dominate the narrative of the present, the time scheme of *Pilgrimage*, once brought into focus, is fairly simple. Indeed it is usually chronological. That this should be so may seem surprising until one takes into account the author's historical situation. The ability of narrative to manipulate time had been richly apparent in the novel ever since *Pamela* and *Tristram Shandy*. And from the late 90s onward, Joseph Conrad had led the way among modernist explorers in the art of temporal orchestration. For Richardson this tradition in narrative, like so much else in verbal practice, had the look of male ingenuity and exploitiveness. To avoid being tarnished by this masculine egotism, soon to be carried to new heights by James Joyce, Richardson found it necessary to be plain, to eschew the showy displays of her male counterparts. The almost unlimited possibilities for temporal manipulation inherent in stream-of-consciousness narrative were foreclosed to her. The reordering of events in *Pilgrimage*, flowing naturally from Miriam's thought processes, must appear free of contrivance. The contrast with Joyce's *Ulysses* is obvious; the contrast with *Remembrance of Things Past* is almost as marked. For Proust magic lies in the interplay of memory, and especially of involuntary memory which opens suddenly onto the past, with some present experience. For Richardson memory, by a kind of involuntary total recall, re-envisages whole scenes, whole sites from an earlier time. For her the magic is the compelling force of her own past life reborn in the act of revisiting. Proust's text is an essay on the intermingling of past and present in which floating tectonic plates of time bump and slide one over the other, whereas Richardson's text, for all its gaps and absences of explicit markers, is in overview a chronological reconceiving of her heroine's life.

At the more local level, of course, Richardson finds many occasions to exercise a modest ingenuity. On the second page of *Pointed Roofs* Miriam looks back warmly to the days at her school during the previous summer. And once in Germany, her opening two weeks in Hanover come to us through a series of reflections on the past. But this detailed manipulation of time will be explored in Chapter 2. Here we are looking at the larger perspective in which the pattern of events shows itself as predominantly chronological.

In saying this I do not mean simply to contradict the various feminist critics who argue, as Lynette Felber for instance has, that "Richardson's

narrative . . . is developed vertically, through variation and reiteration, rather than horizontally: each new example of a pattern, instead of moving the plot forward, represents a synchronic development by further intensifying the effect and further suggesting insight into the initial experience."[6] I mean only to qualify such claims by altering the negative force of "instead of moving the plot forward" to the more positive "as well as moving the plot forward." The decisive feminist argument for the reiterative and synchronic character of Richardson's text would be made stronger by such a generous acknowledgment of multiple functions.

Pilgrimage as demanding narrative

Pilgrimage is a demanding narrative. Richardson's method precluded her offering any kind of overview of the parts comprising the whole in her vast novel. Miriam cannot know the future. And if her narration is to be believable she cannot set herself to orchestrate neat bridges between the varied sites of her past and present experience. Nor can she lay out background as traditional narrative does. Richardson in 1921 expressed the frustration of her hands-tied approach in a letter to her fellow novelist, E. B. C. Jones:

> It has been "horrible" to refrain from objective descriptions of her family {Sarah by the way just 24, Eve 23, Miriam & Harriett 17 & 16 respectively—& Miriam rather dumpy & not tall—about 5.4'—it was a short person who called her tall—but she did not observe that, only that somebody called her tall.} & surroundings. {*WOM* 49–50}

But whatever the frustrations, Richardson remained firm, adhering rigorously to her method. As time went on, however, she seemed grudgingly to move towards the position that readers needed some practical help. In an unpublished letter of 20 January 1944 to Flora Coates, she wrote:

> I freely admit the demand for an equivalent degree of concentration from the reader. I also recognize the probable helpfulness of some sort of summary, for later volumes, of those already written. Something comparable to the précis heading the chapters of novels published serially in magazines. I fear, in the present case, such a procedure is impracticable. . . . Within the text of my book, which is not a novel . . . the handing out of direct information is . . . excluded. This, in one direction, is a severe handicap, but also the necessary price of what I have tried to do.

The aim of this reader's guide to *Pilgrimage* is to ameliorate the severe handicap without destroying what the author has tried to do, namely to keep the reader on the stretch, perpetually suspended and sustained in the immediate now of Miriam Henderson's experience.

Pilgrimage as exacting narrative

Pilgrimage is an exacting narrative. Venturing on a study of its overarching chronology is not without paradox. While the approach is thoroughly conventional, it nonetheless constitutes a fresh pathway in Richardson criticism, a path that calls for persistence in negotiating the complex disposition of the terrain. Richardson had a brilliant mind which enabled her to absorb substantial chunks of text rapidly and incisively. She endowed her heroine with the same powers. Hypo Wilson speaks wittily to Miriam about precisely this aspect of her reading: "You're just going to sit down and munch it up. Miriam's a paradox. She's the omnivorous *gourmet* " (3:351). But Miriam is more than that. She is an ecstatic capable of a kind of pervasive contemplation of deeply quarried blocks of experience, whether literal or literary, any detail of which can be invited to appear in her consciousness. She touches upon this capacity near the end of *March Moonlight*: "While I write, everything vanishes but what I contemplate. The whole of what is called 'the past' is with me, seen anew, vividly. . . . Contemplation is adventure into discovery; reality. What is called 'creation'[,] imaginative transformation, fantasy, invention, is only based upon reality" (4:657).

Richardson assumed a collaborative reader, endowed like herself with powers of sustained concentration, ready to venture into the elaborate "reality" of her text and quarry it at will. Such was her expectation. If we as readers cannot attain to her level of competency, we must work instead. We must dig in, survey, explore the realistic underpinnings in the hope that the more thoroughly we come to terms with the whole of *Pilgrimage* in its structure and time scheme the more open we may find ourselves to the narrative's primary qualities of psychological immediacy and spontaneity, and its gift of life's superfluity, captured with the precision of a snap-shot and the impact of a roving camera.

Notes

1. Louise Morgan, "How Writers Work: Dorothy Richardson," *Everyman*, 22 October 1931, 400.

2. See Beresford, "Experiment in the Novel," in *Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature* (London: Humphrey Milford and Oxford University Press, 1929), 45. Pauline Marrian made this statement during a long conversation in her London home, 17 October 1990. Compare Richardson's remark in a letter to Bryher, 8 May 1944: "I remember . . . my astonishment when Pointed Roofs was greeted as a 'Novel'." See *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson*, Gloria G. Fromm, ed. (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 496; hereafter cited in the text as *WOM*.

3. For a discussion of these points, see "Dorothy Richardson's Foreword to *Pilgrimage*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 41 (Fall 1996).

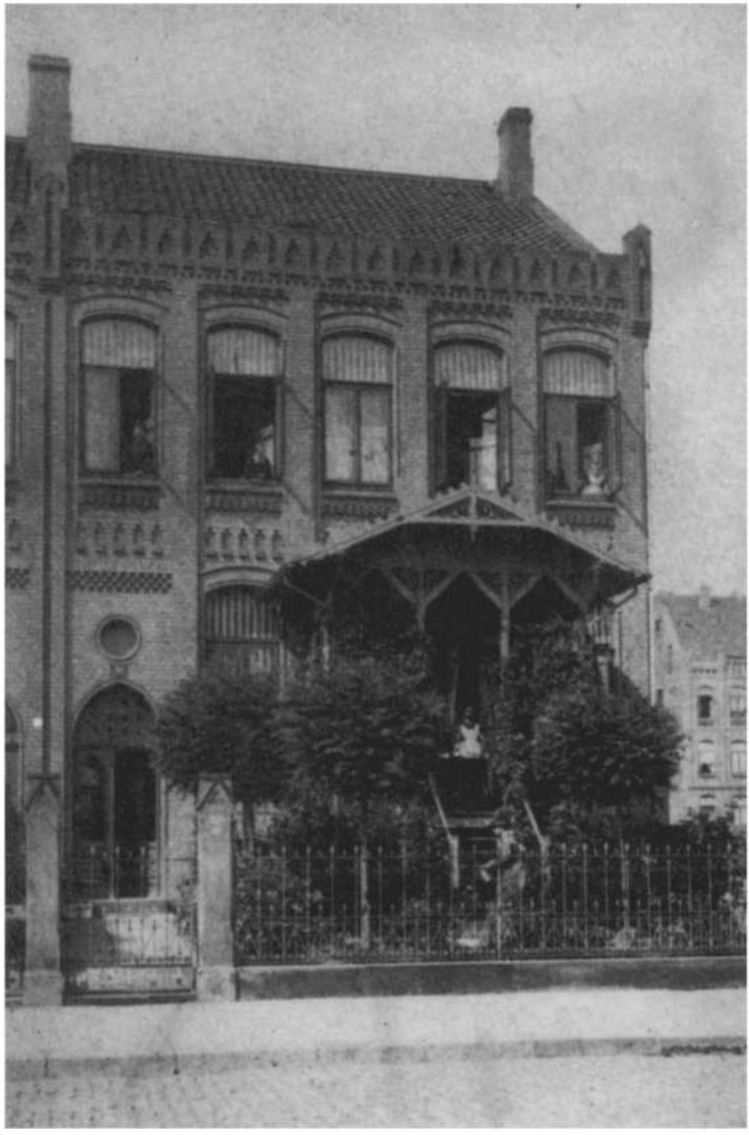
4. "The Novels of Dorothy Richardson," *Little Review*, 5 (April 1918), 3–11; also *The Egoist*, April 1918, 57–59; and with slight revisions as the Introduction to *Pointed Roofs* (New York: Knopf, 1919). Reprinted in *The Gender of Modernism*, 442–48. The quotation is from p. 9 (*Gender*, 446) of this admirable survey of Richardson's first three novels.

5. "Saga Novels and Miss Richardson," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 11 March 1928, 1.

6. Lynette Felber, *Gender and Genre in Novels Without End: The British Roman-Fleuve* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 101.

1. Dorothy Richardson in 1873

2. Graduating Class of 1890, Miss Sandell's ladies school.
Dorothy Ricahrdson is standing at back right; the future wife of H. G. Wells,
Amy Catherine Robbins, is next to her.



3. No. 13 Meterstrasse, Hanover The girls-school of *Pointed Roofs*

4. The sitting room of the "Wimpole Street" dental practice.