

WHO'S AFRAID OF DOROTHY RICHARDSON?

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Hilary Newman, *Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson: Contemporary Writers* vol. 49 of *Bloomsbury Heritage* (London: Cecil Woolf, 2016) pp.43. ISBN 9781907286506

Plenty of readers are afraid of Virginia Woolf, but how many are afraid of Dorothy Richardson? While Woolf, in the company of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, has become associated in the popular consciousness with difficulty and elitism, a representative of those deliberately obscurantist literary experiments of high modernism, Richardson has never quite managed to inspire the same sort of dread or, indeed, contempt. In Alan Bennett's 1978 play *Me, I'm Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, an adult education teacher discovers that one of his students has defaced one of his visual aids, a portrait of Woolf. After questioning the class, one student complains to the teacher that Woolf seems a 'gormless-looking cow'. It would be hard to imagine, perhaps thankfully, Richardson suffering the same fate by becoming a figure to be lampooned in a play about class and education.

At the same time, few writers have inspired adoration like Woolf has. More so than any other modernist writer, she has been taken up and marketized by the heritage industry, with her house at Rodmell becoming a popular tourist destination, and her face and book covers appearing on shopping bags. Richardson, on the other hand, despite the best efforts of many scholars, does not enjoy this kind of popularity and fandom. It is encouraging, then, to see Hilary Newman's recent addition to the *Bloomsbury Heritage* series of pamphlets offering an introduction to both Woolf and Richardson, casting them as two vital innovators of literature in the early twentieth century. Surveying a wide range of materials, and drawing on letters, reviews, and essays, as well as their fictional writing,

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Newman offers a neat overview of the lives and work of these two important figures in British literary modernism.

Newman begins by locating Woolf and Richardson in a moment of personal and cultural experimentation: uncertain about the kinds of writers they want to be, they are also aware of themselves being in a time of wider artistic innovation, when many writers around the world are, in Richardson's words, 'using "the new method"'. Richardson, like Woolf, 'refused to follow the conventional ingredients of the novel.' Indeed, Newman dives straight in to address the issues of form, genre, and categorisation, which the new methods of Woolf and Richardson were creating. Neither of these writers, she reminds us, were comfortable with the term 'novel' as a description of their own literary experiments. Both were actively involved in 'protesting at its current form.' It is to Newman's credit that she does not shy away from these complications, suggesting that this uneasiness with the novel form animated their experiments. While general introductions of this kind can all too often mistake modernist novelists as concerned only with the life of the mind, Newman explains that Richardson's and Woolf's works are characterised by a double bind of self and world, pointing out that their commitment to depicting individual psychologies is matched by an interest in how people operate in society. In the case of Woolf, she 'increasingly revealed an interest in the inner lives of her characters and depicted the consciousness of ordinary people. With these, she combined a growing interest in how the individual is shaped – and often crippled – by social conventions and values'. Here, then, we get hints of the political as well as the psychological concerns of their work.

The book's first and comparatively long section on 'Writing' acts as a guide to the challenges that can be encountered when reading Woolf and Richardson for the first time. It contextualises the experiments they were making in character, narration, and sentence structure, and advises on how to approach the texts. This very broad section, which is packed with quotations, is followed by two brief

and quite specific sections on Childhood and Illness, both of which are concerned with coincidences in the biographies of these two figures. Woolf and Richardson holidayed in St Ives as children, and, for Newman, their writing is equally concerned with the persistence of childhood memories and experiences in adult life. Both suffered the deaths of their mothers in 1895, and, again, their writing is interested in exploring the nature and experiences of mental and physical illness.

In a section on 'Sexual Relationships and Feminism', Newman hesitantly proposes that 'one must proceed with infinite caution in this area' of their lives, before suggesting 'that neither woman was sexually passionate.' It is here that Newman broaches the significance of intimate and perhaps queer relationships between women in their work, along with their complex feelings about gender, and their engagements with women's political struggles. Constrained by space, this discussion may be a little too simplified, even for a general introduction such as this. That said, it does well to raise these issues as important questions and themes in their work.

Newman brings her book to a close by pondering the fact that Woolf and Richardson never met. She puts it plainly: 'they probably saw themselves simply as contemporary novelists who shared some of the same preoccupations.' While they were just as interested in reforming the novel as they inherited it in the beginning of the twentieth century and in finding an adequate form and language for writing women's experiences and the psychic life, we are ultimately reminded, then, that these writers are not the same, were not friends, and did not always approve of each other's work. With this in mind, it is worth returning to Woolf's own thoughts on Richardson from her review of *The Tunnel* in 1919: 'She is one of the rare novelists who believe that the novel is so much alive that it actually grows.'¹

¹ Virginia Woolf, 'The Tunnel', in *A Woman's Essays*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1992), 15.

Yet, for Woolf, there remained ‘a slight sense of disappointment’, that Richardson remains ‘distressingly near the surface’ in her explorations of reality.² But hopefully, with the help of Newman’s book, more readers will be able to enjoy what Woolf admired about the work of her peer and judge it for themselves.

² Woolf, 16.