

Janet Fouli (ed.) *Powys and Dorothy Richardson - The Letters of John Cowper Powys and Dorothy Richardson* (London: Cecil Woolf Publishers, 2008), pp.272, hdbk, £35.00 ISBN 978-1-897967-27-0

*Florence-Catherine Marie-Laverrou*

Any reader of the work of either John Powys Cowper or Dorothy Richardson is likely to be thrilled by the publication of the long awaited correspondence between these two literary figures and to be thankful for the daunting task accomplished by Janet Fouli. She has managed to collect the letters on both sides over a period spanning almost twenty-five years (1929-1953): 76 letters written by Powys and 64 letters and 40 postcards written by Richardson. Both were formidable letter-writers. Richardson once wrote to Powys: 'in the course of a year I must write, in letters alone, the equivalent of four of my books.' (DMR 71 p.203)

On occasion the letters are missing on one side or the other, for example Richardson's letters for 1931, 1932 and 1933 and Powys's letters for 1942, 1943 and 1945; but Fouli has tracked down the extracts from Powys's diaries and the letters he sent to other correspondents which help to fill in the gaps. In fact the years when Powys's or Richardson's letters are missing throw into relief the quality of their dialogue when the reader is able to read both sides. It is this dialogue that creates the most fascinating aspect of their correspondence.

Although they did not meet very often, their friendship was genuine, probably because, as underlined by Powys himself Richardson made him 'feel free of all restraint' (JCP 30 p.85). The reader has the impression of listening to a never-interrupted conversation between the two writers, whether the letters follow one another at a quick pace or not. Indeed with the passing of time they both start to adopt a more conversational style of writing (to begin with Richardson was more formal), sometimes adding one thing after another in a haphazard way or 'pell-mell' to use one of her words.

*Pilgrimages: A Journal of Richardson Studies* No.3 (2010) 79

Through the years, each seems to have become more attentive to the other's concerns until they came to care for each other in a quite touching way. Powys and Richardson responded and commented on each other's opinions on literature or more trivial matters. Their interest in their respective companions (Phyllis Playter and Alan Odle) means that the reader is made acutely aware of the ups and downs of their private lives: their health problems; Dorothy's gift for languages and John Cowper's hopelessness at them; their numerous moves; the impact of the 1939-1945 war on their lives and work; as well as their companions' moods and qualities (Richardson felt a great deal of admiration for Phyllis and Powys viewed Alan Odle as the reader for whom he wrote his books: ' 'Tis queer how a person writes with another person (particular 1 solitary) in mind' [JCP 54 p.149]).

But even these concerns do not get to the essence of their correspondence or of their friendship. They were different as individuals, but they shared what Powys referred to in some letters as a certain 'vein of "profanity"' (JCP 7 p.33) as well as certain 'sacred moments of their lives' (JCP 13 p.44), such as his 'elementalism'. This is obvious in the numerous passages describing in detail, and with relish, the first stirrings of spring, the birds they fed, their respective walks or the landscapes they loved. In such passages everything comes to life even though their 'reactions are so entirely differently oriented' (DMR 13 p.90). It is also the case when they tell each other, with great gusto, anecdotes about certain odd, but vividly rendered, characters they have met.

The two authors also exchanged books and views about the poets, novelists or philosophers they liked or disliked. The reader comes across well-known names (Rabelais, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Brontë, Pater, Dickens, Joyce, Wells) as well as forgotten ones. One recurrent name is that of Virginia Woolf. Both authors seem to have resented the way her works were praised, feeling it was at the expense of Richardson's own work. Powys is particularly outspoken and harsh in that respect, opposing Richardson's 'natural' style to Virginia Woolf's, which he finds 'contrived and class-conscious'. Woolf, Richardson claims, 'for all her femininity, is a man's, almost a male, writer.' (DMR 59 p.180).

The Richardson-Powys correspondence is a treasure trove of information about two writers' struggles and set-backs in life and art: Powys' legal problems (he was sued for libel); and their difficulties with publishers in the United States and in England. Powys claims to be deeply affected each time Richardson has to postpone the writing of *Pilgrimage* in favour of translation work or proof-reading to make ends meet. His endeavours to publicise her works in the United States were genuine, but not particularly effective. By contrast, Richardson sounds more practical and more lucid when she lists what has to be done concerning her husband's illustrations for one of Powys's books (DMR 34 p.127-128). Yet eventually even these drawings were turned down.

The letters also cover some of the ideas and aesthetic questions that most mattered to them as writers and it is perhaps these passages that are most rewarding for the reader. For, while assessing or criticising the other's views, each of them exposes his or her own. Richardson does not concur with Powys's concept of the First Cause and expresses her reservations in detail, especially when scrutinising his *Pleasures of Literature*, the book she liked most. Her critique prompts him to refine his conception of religion. On the other hand, he is very much interested in the distinction she draws between 'becoming' and 'being' although he has difficulty in agreeing with her opting for 'being' instead of 'becoming'. They repeatedly broach the subject of the differences between the sexes and give each other much food for thought: Richardson held that Powys's conception of women was wide of the mark: '[she] quarrels over my description of what women's feelings are in love' (p.64).

As far as their respective styles are concerned, their differences were clear. Powys is quite frank and honest about his own difficulties with style and openly admires Richardson for hers: 'I have no style to be recognized by a sentence as [...] you have as Miriam' (JCP 10 p.38). When Richardson, however, decides to proof-read *Mornyn*, he is both grateful and ill-at-ease. He writes down in his diary: 'I like my *slip-shod* style. I *deliberately* use it.' (p.132) and ends up telling her as much. One of his stylistic

characteristics (his reiteration) is as conspicuous in his letters as it is in his novels and cannot have been palatable to Richardson.

Their friendship had its roots in Powys's deeply ingrained admiration for Richardson's works (he read them aloud to Phyllis and vice versa) and for Miriam, *Pilgrimage's* heroine. He seems to have never wavered in his admiration and he lavished his praise on her, sometimes excessively, in numerous letters. He refers only once in his diary to Phyllis's words about 'the limitations of a work entirely based upon Memory' (p.145). He wrote the first monograph ever written on Richardson (pp.30-31), published in 1931, and always encouraging and congratulating her. Richardson herself was far more reticent. She tended to prevaricate and her words of praise are few and, except in the case of *The Pleasures of Literature*, probably not always sincere (DMR 50 pp.155-160).

In this respect the appendices provided by Janet Fouli are helpful as they enable the reader to put some of her statements in the letters into perspective. Appendix 2 is based on a series of extracts from the unpublished letters where Richardson explicitly voices her opinion on Powys referring to *Owen Glendower* as a 'pot-boiler' and stating: 'Miller's adoration of J.C.P.'s work is as mysterious to me as is J.C.P.'s of my own, endlessly reiterated in innumerable letters. For it is not reciprocal. Alan loved his work and behind him, eagerly reading, I used to hide by quoting A., my own difficulty in getting through anything beyond *Wolf Solent*, bits of *Glastonbury* and *The Pleasures of Literature*, embodying his life-work as lecturer and, for me, his one solid contribution.' (Appendix 2: DMR on JCP, p.247).

Although Richardson dedicated one of her chapters, *Dimple Hill*, to him, Powys was probably aware of her reservations – this is illustrated by his asking for Alan Odle's opinion rather than hers – but he does not seem to have borne a grudge. He bowed to her quality of writing and it is moving to see him at times trying to adopt her point of view to judge his own work especially when he does not seem to be flattering her: 'But I am copying *you* in the sense of – I mean I am labouring *after* you – in the sense of trying to give not quite 'imperfectly realized' *surroundings*!' (JCP 27 p.79).

It is a pity Richardson's missing letters are not supplemented by notes or summaries of what happened in her life at the time; the correspondence is as a consequence probably most enjoyable by those who already know quite a lot about the two authors. Nevertheless, whether one's interests lie in the story of literature, or in Richardson, or in Powys, or in both, this correspondence is invaluable and the editor deserves our thanks for giving us such a gem.