

Deborah Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) pp.176, pbk, £12.99, ISBN 978 0 415 28543 8

*Bryony Randall*

The Routledge Critical Thinkers series, to which this book belongs, aims to ‘offer introductions to major critical thinkers who have influenced literary studies and the humanities.’ (Series Editor’s Preface, p. vii) Only a decade ago, certainly two, it would have been extremely unlikely that Dorothy Richardson would have appeared in such a series. As Richardson scholars know, it is only in recent years that Richardson has taken her rightful place as a ‘major critical thinker’ in the field of modernist literature (and indeed philosophy, social science, gender theory, and so on). This volume is, then, another noteworthy landmark in the rehabilitation of Richardson; just as Richardson was spoken of in the same breath as Woolf and Joyce in the early twentieth century, so Parsons places all three thinkers on the same level of significance in relation to the formation of what we have now come to call a modernist aesthetic – a significance which, in the case of Richardson, remained buried for decades. The audience for this volume is also important in terms of its potential impact. The books in this series aspire to be those ‘you [the reader] can turn to first when a new name or concept appears in your studies’ (xii); if students in the early stages of their engagement with modernist literature do indeed turn to this volume, and ones like it, then an understanding of modernist literature and culture in which Richardson plays a highly significant role will, in time, become the norm to next generation of modernist critics.

Rather than addressing each writer in turn, Parsons arranges the book under four headings: A New Realism; Character and Consciousness; Gender and the Novel; and Time and History. This enables her to draw out the important links, as well as the equally important divergences, between both the fictional and non-fictional work of the three writers. These main sections are preceded by an introductory section offering the rationale for

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choosing these three writers, and in particular emphasising their dissatisfaction with the novel as a genre, or at least its incarnations in the late nineteenth century. This section also, almost incidentally, provides an extremely lucid, clear introduction to the term 'modernism' itself, which will be accessible to those approaching the term for the first time without excessively simplifying its complexities. Parsons makes no attempt to homogenise these three individuals. Their disparate backgrounds, literary outputs and aesthetic, philosophical and political positions are rightly emphasised, putting the reader in search of easy definitions of 'modernism' or 'the modernist novel' on notice: such a quest is not only fruitless but misses the point of a full understanding of modernism. Having said that, Parsons does suggest that one position all three writers share is that they were 'fundamentally resistant towards the systematising of rational thought' (14). They are, paradoxically, similar in their resistance to approaches which might attempt to draw up fixed schema of samenesses and differences. Similarly, Parsons herself resists those critical approaches which have taken 'their statements on the representation of the relation of art and life [...] as clear manifestos for modern fiction'; 'ultimately', she says, 'they question more than they answer, no fixed paradigm or critical concept of 'the modernist novel' emerging directly from their work.' (15).

Richardson figures particularly prominently in the first of the four following sections, under the heading 'A New Realism'. This section sensitively and briskly outlines the realism-modernism-postmodernism structure, while keeping alive the overlaps between these categories. The status of *Pilgrimage* as a new kind of realism is thus taken seriously, and the particular qualities of its prose; Parsons suggests that the novel offers 'Miriam's description of herself to herself' (30), which (like all the best critical coinages) seems at first entirely obvious, but put thus offers an extremely precise and useful way of specifying the way in which the narrative of *Pilgrimage* differs from other texts, in particular those preceding it. The clarity and precision of the comparisons drawn between texts in this volume is particularly admirable, and is not lost in the summary boxes provided at the end of each section, which manage to provide a précis of key points without losing their

subtly. These summary boxes are one of the features of the book that will make it particularly useful for students – and thus also teachers – of modernism, along with boxes interspersed throughout the main body of the text which define or discuss key terms or figures, and which thus function ‘as a kind of glossary’ (ix) – here, these range from ‘free indirect discourse’ and ‘stream of consciousness’ to ‘Henri Bergson’ and ‘Sigmund Freud’ to ‘Epiphany’ and ‘Moments of Being’.

While avoiding any special pleading for Richardson, Parsons’ fully comparative approach does allow for consideration of the reasons for her fall into obscurity. For example, Parsons draws attention to the effect of Woolf’s decision not to mention Richardson in either version of her essay best known as ‘Modern Fiction’ (1925); Joyce features prominently in Woolf’s essay, yet Woolf had been reading both Joyce and Richardson just before writing the first version. As Parsons notes, this omission is not only surprising, but ‘[g]iven the subsequent influence of the essay in canonical accounts of the modernist novel, it has also had the effect of obscuring Richardson’s own role within the development of the modern novel’ (47). A similar moment, an instance of Parsons’ ability to pinpoint what seems absolutely obvious once she has articulated it, comes in a discussion of *A Room of One’s Own* where once again ‘Richardson and her contemporaries are conspicuous by their absence’, and yet Woolf’s account of ‘the development of women’s prose in the twentieth century [particularly her fictional novelist Mary Carmichael] strikingly resembles the two reviews she did write on Richardson’s *The Tunnel* and *Revolving Lights*.’ (93). This is not, of course, to say that Parsons simply lays the blame for Richardson’s relative neglect at Woolf’s door, but it makes vividly apparent some of the relationships buried between the surface of the modernist canon.

The narrative of Richardson’s disappearance is also implied in a discussion of the significance of Richardson’s experiments in graphic style and punctuation – less frequently discussed than, for example, the familiar story of Joyce’s elided speech marks in the original version of *Dubliners*. Here, Parsons observes that ‘[b]y the publication of the collected edition of *Pilgrimage*, for which the

text of the original books was reset with more conventional speech marks, paragraphing and line breaks, [Richardson] was admitting with defeat that her attempt to write “feminine prose” had resulted in a textual “chaos” for which she was “justly reproached”, and yet ‘James Joyce, who in the final section of *Ulysses* would make a similar yet far more famous attempt, would suffer no such recrimination.’ (34). Parsons does not say so explicitly here, but the implication that a distinction was made, and perhaps continues to be made, on the basis of the author’s gender, is clear. This issue is amplified in a later comparison of *Pilgrimage* and *Ulysses* in the section entitled ‘Gender and the Novel’. Here, Parsons observes that ‘For all the critical comparisons of Joyce and Richardson’s formal rendering of female interior monologue, Molly Bloom and Miriam Henderson are two of the most profoundly dissimilar women characters in modernist literature: the “stream of consciousness” of the former instinctive, passive and earthly physical, that of the latter self-conscious, individualist and hypersensitively aware.’ (100). It is observations such as this – making a very striking and clear comparison between texts, yet opening rather than closing the question of their relationship – which make this book so very valuable not just as an addition to any undergraduate reading list on twentieth century literature, but also as a prompt to the modernist critic to re-examine their thoughts on the relationships between Joyce, Woolf, Richardson, and indeed other theorists of the modernist novel.