

Vittoriana Villa, *Scrivere il femminile. Saggio su Dorothy Richardson* [*Writing the Feminine: An Essay on Dorothy Richardson*] (Napoli: Giannini Editore, 2010). 143 pp. ISBN 978-88-7431-492-8.

*Valentina Paradisi*

If historically Richardson has been neglected in her own country, then this is even more true for Italy. She is still largely unknown, even in an academic context, and neither *Pilgrimage* nor her short stories have been translated. In this respect, Vittoriana Villa's monograph fills a gap. For the general reader, not necessarily an expert in modernist English literature nor yet a scholar in women's studies, *Scrivere il femminile. Saggio su Dorothy Richardson* is an opportunity to encounter the writer and her background for the first time. It is therefore not surprising that Villa's main bibliographical references, besides Gloria Fromm and George H. Thomson, are the now classic studies on Richardson by critics such as Elizabeth Bronfen, Horace Gregory, Gillian Hanscombe and Joanne Winning.

As the title suggests, Villa's analysis orientates itself around gender. In the field of Richardson studies, this approach is not new. For the few Italian scholars or students who are not encountering Richardson's work for the first time, the most relevant sections of Villa's study are probably the last two chapters of the second part: 'Una Londra tutta per sé' ('A London of One's Own'); and 'Leggere e scrivere da donna' ('Reading and Writing as a Woman'). Here Villa departs from a general overview to focus on two specific aspects of *Pilgrimage*.

In her introduction, Villa describes the mixed critical reception of Richardson's early writing. Moving from the reactions of Richardson's more famous contemporaries such as Virginia Woolf (with her reviews of *The Tunnel* and *Revolving Lights*), D. H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield, Villa recalls the key question posed by John Rosenberg in 1973: 'Why do masterpieces such as *Pilgrimage* disappear?'. According to Villa, a possible reason is that Richardson's work did not fit well into standard narrative

conventions. From her radical innovations both in the form and the content of the novel, to her constant crossing and recrossing of the boundaries between genres and linguistic conventions to define a new feminine point of view, Richardson eluded categorization. Even biographically, she did not fit in. Both one of the new (working) women in London and a writer, Richardson lived all her life on the margins: first on the wrong side of Bloomsbury, and then in a remote part of Cornwall. She experienced a brief moment of glory, but a much more extended oblivion, which lasted until her death.

Curiously, Villa makes no reference to Richardson's letters, which might have helped explain her life. Part I of the book is dedicated to her formation as a writer, analysing her works before and then outside *Pilgrimage*: her autobiographical sketches, short stories, essays, reviews and articles. Villa uses the less well-known work to introduce the reader to Richardson's key narrative devices and themes. The autobiographical sketches, written primarily by Richardson to introduce herself to publishers, provide Villa with an opportunity to investigate the key relationships between author, narrator and character, underlining how Richardson innovative use of form puts identity into question.

The most interesting aspect of this part of the book is Villa's close reading of Richardson's fifteen short stories. Richardson chooses short stories as a confined space in which to experiment with new narratological devices: the stories are often centred on a single event, which, according to Villa, is used to give an emblematic meaning to everyday life. In 'Visitor', for instance, Richardson surprises the reader by shifting the narrative focus from characters to inanimate objects: 'in a process of personification of objects and objectification of human beings which challenges conventional perceptions' ['in un processo di personificazione delle cose e oggettivazione delle persone che sfida le percezioni convenzionali'] (36). Richardson thus places the decentred subject at the narrative's margins, a theme that is as recurrent in women's literature and its criticism as the analogy between embroidery and text, which Villa also mentions.

In a similar way the short story, 'Tryst', is based on the opposition between inside and outside, where the inside is a visionary and creative inner world and the outside a claustrophobic and enclosed domestic space. Women's condition is represented as constantly veering between these two extremes. According to Villa, the way the limit (between conscious and unconscious, body and mind, subject and object) is experienced and represented provides the main key to read stories such as 'Ordeal' and 'Death', where Richardson's attention focuses on the most decisive, at least apparently, existing limit, the one between life and death. The dying process, seen in its duration, gives Richardson the opportunity to describe 'feminine identities which have been deprived, during their lives, of access to words and self-acknowledgment' [identità femminili cui in vita è stato negato l'accesso alla parola e al riconoscimento di sé] (41).

Richardson's sense of the condition of women and her wider theoretical approach to femininity is again the prism through which Villa surveys a vast (almost two hundred) number of articles, reviews and essays published on Richardson over the last fifty years on a wide variety of topics. These includes work by Sydney Janet Kaplan, Lynette Felber and Sandra Kemp to name but a few. Villa concludes that often Richardson was unwilling to denounce women's oppression, preferring rather to 'identify the feminine as an absence, a gap in the cultural and symbolic structure' [individuare il femminile come assenza, come vuoto nella costruzione culturale e simbolica] (47), to be filled through the correct repositioning of women in art, literature and culture.

Richardson's most significant essays on these themes were all written in the first half of the 1920s: 'Talent and Genius', 'Women and the Future' and 'Women in the Arts'. Villa then uses reviews of books such as *Towards a Sane Feminism* by Wilma Meickle (1916) and *Woman's Effort* by Agnes Edith Metcalfe (1917) to contextualise Richardson's ideas on women's role in society. She finds her to be a kind of precursor to Irigaray in her thinking on sexual difference, proposing 'a reconciled and recomposed world, where woman is man's companion and fellow-pilgrim' [un mondo, pacificato e ricomposto, nel quale la donna sia companion e fellow-pilgrim

dell'uomo']. Such a world is only possible if women avoid falling into the trap of being assimilated by the masculine or by a Woolfian androgyny. Instead they must claim 'different ways of being in this world' ['modi differenti di essere al mondo'] (49).

If Richardson will later return with some coherence to the idea of difference, *Pilgrimage* is less clear about the possibility of a reconciliation between men and women, and thus more problematic than these early works, principally because of its temporal extension which mirrors a constantly changing mind. Before approaching *Pilgrimage*, Villa dwells upon the articles published in *Close-Up*, collected and translated by Villa herself in 2000 in the book *Spettacolo continuo/Continuous Performances* (Napoli: Liguori), the only existing translation in Italian of Richardson so far. These articles are written, in Villa's words, from 'an explicitly gendered point of view' ['un punto di vista esplicitamente sessuato']. Richardson works out 'the possibility of a feminist film theory' [una possibile teoria cinematografica femminista] (53-54). In this context, silent movies guarantee a sort of democratic openness, especially towards women. In recognizing the transition to talkies as a crucial point in the relationship between women and cinema, Richardson seems to anticipate, in a sense, Derrida's concept of phallogocentrism; but writing on cinema is also a way for Richardson to reflect on the relationship between spectator and performance, and hence on reception in general.

Richardson's ideas about reception, specifically about the reader's response to a literary text, are then further examined by Villa through her articles, 'About Punctuation' (1924) and 'Adventure for Readers' (1939). Villa suggests interesting, if not new, connections between Richardson and much later crucial texts such as Roland Barthes' *Le bruissement de la langue* (although she might also have mentioned his 'L'écriture et le silence', in *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*), Hans-George Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* and Julia Kristeva's *La révolution du langage poétique*.

The second half of the book concentrates on *Pilgrimage*. Villa starts with Richardson's Foreword, which divides neatly into *pars destruens* and *pars construens*. Richardson first refuses the inherited

cultural and literary systems and their old approach to 'masculine' and 'feminine' novels; then she frames the form and method of her new novel, but also the proper language to use, declining the stream of consciousness metaphor and preferring terms such as 'interior monologue' and 'slow motion photography'.

Villa then takes us through the thirteen chapters of the novel, thirteen steps in Miriam's pilgrimage, summarising their main events. Using a narratological approach, Villa explores *Pilgrimage's* time structure, differentiating between Miriam's inner 'vertical' time, and objective 'horizontal' time (drawing on Bergson). She looks at the question of point of view and narration and the question of genre. Richardson's novel is situated in relation to the Bildungsroman and the Künstlerroman, but also to adventure novels and chivalric romances via the theme of the quest. After that, Villa addresses Miriam's gender and its construction as a form of 'in-between-ness'. More interesting is when Villa shows how Miriam's constant walking works as a sort of mirror for her thoughts, in particular in *Revolving Lights*, where her 'movement of walking or of stopping between one step and another' relates to her 'continuous flow of thoughts with sudden breaks' ['il movimento del camminare o di un arresto tra un passo e l'altro e il fluire incessante o colmo di pause dei pensieri di Miriam'] (100). The two processes seem almost synchronised.

The section concludes with two short essays: the first dedicated to the representation of London; and the second to the writing process. As already mentioned, for more experienced readers of Richardson, these are probably the most interesting and original pages of the volume. In 'Una Londra tutta per sé' ['A London of one's own'] Villa moves from the theme of journey and movement to situate Miriam in a dimension of displacement and unbelonging. But as long as she builds up a relationship with the metropolis, personified as a companion and interlocutor, equivalent to Richardson of Woolf's room of one's own, Miriam is able to assert a new feminine independence. Taking possession of a new space 'through crossing the borders, margins, roles and codes of social life' ['come oltrepasamento di bordi, confini, ruoli e codificazioni del vivere sociale'] (107) becomes a metaphor for the building of

personal freedom so long sought. Miriam as a *flâneuse* replies, more than fifty years later, to Baudelaire's *passante*: she is not a vanishing fragment amongst the urban crowd any more, but herself an inquiring subject within the same crowd. Miriam plunges into the city identifying with it, letting it enter her room, deleting the borders between outside and inside. *Pilgrimage's* London is open and empathetic, not Eliot's waste land but a place for work and emancipation, epiphanies and growth, as if Miriam was Nora Helmer (as suggested by Jean Radford) finally escaped from her doll's house.

In the second essay, 'Leggere e scrivere da donna' ['Reading and Writing as a Woman'], Villa concentrates on Miriam as a reader and writer. Reading enters the stream of life again through the crossing of borders: Miriam forgets herself, imagines she is living inside the book's pages, conflates the outside landscape with the scene she is reading at that moment. According to Villa, all the 'images associated with reading refer to semantic fields such as growth, attention and infinity' [immagini associate alla lettura rimandano ai campi semantici della crescita, dell'attenzione, dell'infinito] (119). But Miriam as a reader is, for Villa, first of all a female subject who interacts with the books she reads (and later writes) stating a difference. Miriam through her reading process deconstructs a language that is never neutral, as Barthes said, a process that culminates 'in the awareness that reading means to deal with lies, concealment, silences' ['nella certezza che leggere vuol dire avere a che fare con menzogne, occultamenti, silenzi'] (126). In this sense, the act of writing will necessarily destroy the language and structures in which those lies and silences are situated. In many of the meta-narrative passages, which occur more frequently towards the end of the novel, the author-narrator and character start to achieve a common identity with women who write on women and inscribe themselves in language, but with new words. This, concludes Villa, amounts to a proper *écriture féminine*, as described by Hélène Cixous.

It may be right to approach Richardson for the first time through a 'feminine' lens, as Villa suggests to her readers. Richardson herself indicates, in many passages, this way of reading her work, and it is

mostly thanks to feminist critics that she has been critically rehabilitated. It is to be hoped that there will soon be an Italian public ready to appreciate the complexity of her work and the variety of her interests (from illustration to psychoanalysis, from religion to socialism, from Darwinism to medicine), to read her correspondence and to situate her in a wider European literary network, not only as a woman writer but as a writer *tout court*.