

DOROTHY/MIRIAM IN SUSSEX: BETWEEN MEMORY AND PROMISE

Eva Tucker

It is 1907. Dorothy Richardson is 34 and things have fallen apart for her. She put it most succinctly years later in December 1934 in a brief CV sent to Sylvia Beach:

The sudden collapse of a happy home in ample surroundings flung D.R. on the world at the age of seventeen [...] Before overwork [...] brought breakdown, she had planned a book on the inviolability of feminine solitude, or alternatively, loneliness.¹

The memories of those ample surroundings had ceased to sustain her at this point, though they were never extinguished. In a letter to her friend Peggy Kirkaldy, written on 22 August 1943, she makes clear just how good that life had been.

My Pater, a connoisseur in most things, kept an excellent cellar [...] I still see him, on dinner party days, climbing upstairs tenderly carrying cobwebby bottles the maids were not allowed to touch, & the array of variously shaped wine glasses flanking the [?] of table napkins on whose other side stood equally fascinating finger bowls waiting for diners I was too young to join. But every day there was wine for the elders, coming, however, only from the cellaret in the dining room sideboard, & single glasses only on the table.²

Dorothy's friendship with H. G. Wells which, at his insistence, she had reluctantly allowed to turn into an affair, had resulted in her miscarrying his child. A letter which I had in August 1983 from her much younger friend Pauline Marrian (who was only 3 in 1907) throws some light on how Dorothy felt about this:

¹ Gloria Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p.281.

² *Ibid*, p.479.

As for the loss of the baby [...] she [...] was curiously inarticulate in expressing it – it was too big and too private [...] She was not one of those odd people to whom pregnancy is just a bore [...] she'd missed out on motherhood but not altogether – and that was a little triumph.³

By 1907, too, Dorothy had manoeuvred her two closest friends Benjamin Grad and Veronica Leslie-Jones into a love affair which culminated in their marrying that year, though they were both more in love with her than with each other. She was beginning her recuperation in Sussex with Benjamin's Quaker friends the Penroses. It was not quite her first introduction to Quaker life, in 1896 Benjamin had taken her to the Quaker Meeting in St.Martin's Lane in London but that remained an isolated occasion for the time being. Both Benjamin and Veronica visited her at Windmill Hill. In *Dimple Hill* Rachel Mary sees Mr Shatov 'out on the dewy lawn alone, believing himself unobserved . . . *dancing*. A lonely little Jew, jigging about on her lawn, solemnly, clumsily and yet with appealing grace'.⁴ Veronica's visit was less successful. As Amabel in *Dimple Hill* she murmurs 'How [...] can any one *exist* in the country without servants and a carriage?' (IV, 521).

Dorothy went to the wedding in October.

Soon after the wedding she left for Switzerland where she stayed at the Pension Hironnelles in Chateau d'Oex near Montreux. It was there that she came across the *Saturday Review* which a fellow guest lent her. It was a prestigious weekly, contributors included Max Beerbohm, but Dorothy was not impressed by George Dewar's nature articles in it. She remembers her reaction in a letter to Bryher written on 28 October 1938:

coming upon a mildly Richard-Jeffriesian 'nature' middle,
& feeling that everything essential had been left out, I
wrote between eleven & midnight, in my blessedly warm &

³ Private communication.

⁴ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* Vol. IV (London: Virago, 1979), p.521.

electric-lit and table-furnished Swiss bedroom, A Sussex Auction.⁵

It is the first of her Sussex pieces. She sent it off to the editor Arthur Bauman without an address, hardly expecting it to be accepted. By the time it came out, anonymously, in June 1908 she was back in Sussex with the Penroses, Quakers ‘full of plant love and natural history’ (IV, 603). There she begins to relax into ‘a country life wherein, upon a taken-for-granted background of undisturbing and subservient natural beauty, leisurely people of a single class have easy access to each other’ (IV, 521).

Gloria Fromm in her biography of Dorothy Richardson points out that these sketches, which Dorothy called ‘middles’, are written both from the point of view of observer and participant.⁶ This dual approach continued for the whole of Richardson’s writing life, reflected in the leaps from the first to the third person in *Pilgrimage*.

‘A Sussex Auction’ and ‘A Sussex Carrier’ are the most lively pieces, because in them she describes people – and animals – as well as the scenery. In ‘A Sussex Auction’, she observes ‘a trio of beautiful Sussex heifers, their silky sides panting and their beautiful scared eyes glancing round the circle’.⁷ Does Dorothy think they are scared because they know they will end up as beef? Or is she expressing her own fear of spiritual extinction, as it were, in her new surroundings? Years later, towards the end of her life, she is able to remember cows in greater tranquillity as ‘Red brown Herefords [...] Every line of their confident great shapes rebuking contempt for anything or anybody’ (IV, 614). I can’t help thinking the confidence is hers rather than the cows!

She sees the country girls who hover round the group of prospective buyers at the auction as ‘in bondage’.

⁵ Fromm (ed.), op. cit, p.354.

⁶ Gloria G. Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), p.61.

⁷ ‘A Sussex Auction’, *Saturday Review*, 13 June, 1908, p.755.

Even those among them who are as yet detached enough to see and feel the beauty of the day, whose perceptions are as yet unentangled, undimmed, see only in proportion as the shadow of fate draws alluringly on, heightening and sharpening those glories before it blots them out.⁸

Surely here she is endowing the country girls with her own sensitivities, so recently exposed to the shadow of fate. Poor Dorothy, for whom fate has blotted out so many glories!

In *Dimple Hill* Miriam describes the auction with some irritation:

The effort to forget oneself and one's interests in order to please Richard by being interested in slag-distributors, swath-turners and threshers, rib-rollers and reaper-and-binders. The longing to see and hear them at their work rather than lying there for horrible sale at the hands of the nimble-tongued auctioneer [...] No one noticing the passage of the clouds, the ripening of the afternoon light; save perhaps those village girls hovering on the outskirts of the moving crowd. (IV, 541)

In 'A Sussex Carrier' she moves from the particular, 'Travellers have been known to resort to the roof, but it is generally piled—to astonishment—with trugs or trug-makers materials, with beehives or hop-poles, and all kinds of smaller furniture'; through the general, 'Townspople, Londoners in particular [...] are apt to lose themselves in comparisons and confusions and to miss the magic'; but peaks earlier with the cosmic: 'charioteer of pilgrims [...] so to say the most cosmic manifestation of Hinker's public activities available.'

The use of the term 'pilgrim' foreshadows the direction her writing was to take.

In *Dimple Hill*, while the other passengers are simply travelling from A to B, Miriam is 'flitting self-contained within the moment between two lives' (IV, 432).

⁸ Ibid.

By the time 'A Sussex Carrier' and 'Haytime' appeared in 1909 Dorothy had resigned from her job at the dental surgery determined to make her way as a writer. The Sussex pieces are stepping stones into that career. She was settling into the calming routine of life with the Penroses at Windmill Hill; recovering in the serene rhythm of their days geared to the farming year. Unlike her London friends, they did not agonise about the meaning and origin of life. They encouraged her to think of herself as one of them, gave her light jobs to do, like snipping off bunches of grapes in the glass houses.

In a letter I had in August 1983 from Joan Jenkins, daughter of Arthur Penrose (the Alfred of *Pilgrimage*) she confirms how accurate Dorothy's descriptions are: 'Most of the glasshouses had numbers on the door but one was Jubilee and had a vine in it until about 1938'.⁹

That Jubilee glasshouse gets a mention in 'The End of Winter' which is perhaps the most objectively descriptive of the Sussex pieces. On a windy night 'supplied with a flickering, swinging lamp you go through the dim old hall and long empty room to the door of the Jubilee [...] the sleeping plants cast their fragrant spell'.¹⁰

Dorothy was always questing for 'finding the *same* world in another person that moved you to your roots' (IV, 333), what Emerson called 'the active soul'. She had found that in London with Benjamin Grad and Veronica Leslie-Jones and to some extent with H.G. Wells. Would she find it again in a rural setting, perhaps in Robert Penrose (Richard in *Pilgrimage*)? He was fourteen years older than her, had a 'Mephistophelian smile' (IV, 472), was generally helpful to her round the house and countryside, took her on his marketing trips and, of course, to the auction. But her heart was not strong enough yet for the give and take of deep involvement. Melancholy, apprehensiveness, are still the dominant moods.

⁹ Private communication.

¹⁰ Dorothy Richardson, 'The End of Winter', *Saturday Review*, 19 February 1910, p.235.

In 'Haytime', 'eglantine [is] beginning pallidly to utter its tardy challenge' and the sheep sorrel has 'a menacing flush'; yet 'Early or late it must come the broad open time [...] bringing the saving grace of the struggle, escape from rural bondage [...]'.¹¹

The succeeding Sussex pieces fluctuate between depression and elation, between melancholy and joy. Sometimes Dorothy can step completely outside herself and see things with an objective eye as in 'A Village Competition': 'Proudly and affectionately, the "stuff" is brought in carts and hand-trolleys, in cases and boxes, on tea trays and dinner plates, and in unsupplemented human hands'.¹²

But even here there are 'the bankrupt and stranded' – laughing girls, each of whom 'must in the end play her part alone'.¹³ Dorothy is back to self reference, i.e. it is Dorothy who is bankrupt and stranded, constantly aware that she has to play her part alone.

In 'A Haven', 'the hour is rich with the promise of healing [...] And one day when the measure is full, when the wind and the rain and the thick salt air have done their work and your heart is strong, the sun comes'.¹⁴

But that hope is fleeting. By December, in the piece called 'The Wind', 'lingering leaves' stand 'for their moment of lonely individuality, opaque and dry'.¹⁵ Lonely individuality is the hallmark of the whole of Richardson's work. Occasionally, the opacity and the dryness clears. 'Your days have dropped and dropped since high summer to this serenest of all the sweetness of the year, this full moment between memory and promise'.¹⁶ That thought is echoed years later in *March Moonlight*: 'the immortal moment between taking stock of one's surroundings and becoming

¹¹ Dorothy Richardson, 'Haytime', *Saturday Review*, 31 July 1909, p.132.

¹² Dorothy Richardson, 'A Village Competition', *Saturday Review*, 7 August 1909, p.166.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Dorothy Richardson, 'Haven', *Saturday Review*, 9 October 1909, p.441.

¹⁵ Dorothy Richardson, 'The Wind', *Saturday Review*, 4 December 1909, p.691.

¹⁶ Ibid.

involved in them [...] because the memory and the promise and the clear vision of these is contained within it, so deeply moving' (IV, 561).

As far as the Sussex pieces are concerned, it is more a question of promise than memory. Unlike her later writing, where the distance in time between what is being described and the moment of writing becomes increasingly great, in these essays she is drawing on the most immediate past. However, later in life, rather surprisingly, Richardson asserts that there is a sense in which memory does not exist for her. In a letter to Henry Savage on 18 March 1950 she writes:

For me, there is no such thing as memory. The things that have "happened" in one's life, all the outstanding moments, prepare themselves, so to speak, for immortality even as they pass, are investments paying increasing dividends as "time goes on".¹⁷

This thought is echoed in *March Moonlight* when Miriam thinks that 'the whole of what is called the past is seen anew, vividly' (IV, 657).

When 'Strawberries' came out in 1912 (incidentally that is approximately the year the narrative of *Pilgrimage* ends), Dorothy was back in London, no longer in her beloved Bloomsbury but in St. John's Wood, at the outset of a new life.¹⁸ At the same time in *March Moonlight*, Miriam is glad to be in the city where she feels most at home, a city which allows one to be anonymous. She admits that she prefers 'the more distributed life of the townsman, its exemptions and protected solitudes' to the 'enclosure [...] tests and exposure' of country life with the Penroses (IV, 568). She had got increasingly impatient with Richard in feeling 'resentment towards his eternal, self-protecting facetiousness' (IV, 562); and already in *Dimple Hill*, she is reminded 'that the depths of her nature had been subtly moulded long ago by [the church's] manifold operations and could never fully belong to the household on the hill' (IV, 451). At the end of *Dimple Hill*, Miriam says to

¹⁷ Fromm (ed.), op. cit, p.636.

¹⁸ Dorothy Richardson, 'Strawberries', *Saturday Review*, 22 June 1912, pp.778-779.

Amabel: 'even while I pine to stay, I pine, in equal measure, to be gone' (IV, 552).

However, on a sweltering London summer's day she longs for a breath of fresh air, even though, for the moment, the thought of haytime in far away meadows brings no healing vision. Then suddenly:

there comes a long cry, echoing down the empty street far below: "Straw . . . berries . . . English straw . . . berries!"

It pierces like an arrow to the heart of memory, releasing a tide that sweeps away London'.¹⁹

So at this early stage in her writing career Richardson refers explicitly to memory, even if at this point it is quite short term memory. In the earlier piece 'December', too, she says 'in this down-sheltered southern strip memory prompts a quest' and she has 'a sudden vision of the summer's fragrant bean-rows'.²⁰ In 'Strawberries' memory enables her to step out into the countryside, under a stormy sky with a pannier half full of strawberries. 'The first signal comes from the north, the first pale flame shooting across the grey [...] the wheels of the open storm rattle deafening across the vault'.²¹

Tumultuous weather enraptures Dorothy, exposure to the elements sweeps into *Dimple Hill*:

Tumult, wild from the sea, sweeping headlong, gigantic, seizing the house with a yell, shaking it, sending around it the roaring of fierce flames. Rattling the windows, bellowing down the chimney. Rejoicing in its prey.

The wind, is the best lover. (IV, 539)

Her three year stay in Sussex had given Dorothy the strength and courage to find her feet as a writer. The influence of the Quaker way of life was lifelong though she never became a signed up

¹⁹ Ibid, p.778.

²⁰ Dorothy Richardson, 'December', *Saturday Review*, 25 December 1909, p.786.

²¹ Ibid.

member of the Religious Society of Friends. Her first published book was *Quakers Past and Present*.²² The Sussex pieces find what may perhaps be called enhanced echoes in *Pilgrimage*. They mark the beginning of the crystallisation of inner and outer events in her writing. Who knows whether she had copies of those *Saturday Review* essays beside her on the table when she was writing *Dimple Hill* and *March Moonlight*? She had been greatly encouraged by the *Saturday Review*'s ready acceptance of those pieces and, indeed, by the editor's suggestion that she try her hand at a novel. She was not to know that when *Pointed Roofs* came out in 1915, the anonymous reviewer would say: 'The book charted the dissection of an unsound mind. It lays bare the workings of a sick imagination'.²³

We know that she did not falter for a moment in her quest to find words for those cosmic clicks when seeker and sought become one which illuminate the whole of *Pilgrimage*.

²² Dorothy Richardson, *The Quakers: Past and Present* (London: Constable, 1914).

²³ *Saturday Review Literary Supplement*, 16 October 1915, p.viii.