

Louisa Treger, *The Lodger* (London: Thistle, 2014), pp.260. ISBN-13: 978-1-1-910198-22-3

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Our imaginative relationship with a literary work does not end when we finish it, nor is it limited to its rereading. Every text has an afterlife, part conscious, part unconscious. It persists, sometimes as a mood, sometimes as a strong sense of a character, more often as half-forgotten fragments – scraps of text, fleeting impressions, fugitive echoes, that participate in the unconscious everyday and seep into our dreams.

For the writer, such afterlives are the raw material of new invention. Most literature is, to a greater or lesser extent, a rewriting of earlier texts. Nowhere is this more true than in contemporary popular romance. A classic example, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, is just one of many rewritings of *Jane Eyre*, the urtext of gothic romance. Popular fiction is omnivorous in its appetites. Louisa Treger's romantic novel, *The Lodger*, consumes the young Dorothy Richardson's life, as she thrives as a single woman in a boarding house in London, negotiating three lovers, Benjamin Grad, H. G. Wells, and Veronica Leslie-Jones – experiences that would become part of *Pilgrimage*.

Modernist texts have not been immune from reworking, although it has usually been the author not the work who has drawn the attention of later writers. A biopic, such as *Tom and Viv* (1994), for example, draws on the already existing self-mythicisation intrinsic to much modernist art, while flattering the intellectual pretensions of its audience. In some cases, such as Colm Tóibín's masterful rewriting of Henry James's life the ambivalence of the fiction is transferred successfully to the life.¹ In others, for example David Lodge's less successful fictionalised account of James's life, *Author, Author*, the result is a wooden retelling.²

¹ *The Master* (Picador, 2004)

² (Secker, 2004)

Dorothy Richardson has not made many entrances into later fictions. Although she does appear romping with H. G. Wells in the bracken in another of Lodge's novels, *A Man of Parts*.³ But the truth is that novels such as *The Master* or Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* are the exceptions. Biofictions, like biopics, usually appropriate rather than challenge the standard conventions of the realist novel. The dense allusiveness of modernist literature means that its afterlives are difficult to pin down. As a writer who has often fallen below the radar, Dorothy Richardson's influence on twentieth-century literature has proved pervasive rather than direct.

How then are we to judge Louisa Treger's novel unashamedly romantic fiction? The novel is written in the familiar language of the emotions. When 'Bertie' (H. G. Wells) makes a tender gesture towards his wife, Dorothy feels 'a pang of envy and longing'. Later, feelings 'surge[d] within her, sweeter than anything else, yet more shameful'. Veronica's kiss 'unleashe[s] a fiery torrent of longing'. If we were to look to *Pilgrimage* for a point of connection, we might point to Miriam's own reading of romance in *Backwater*, when her guilty, night-time consumption of the romances of Rosa Nouchette Carey, Margaret Hungerford, and, below, Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée), displaces a programme of bible reading, bringing a new-found, embodied sense of a pleasurable self:

[...] the red-bound volumes became the centre of her life. She read *Moths* and *In Maremma* slowly word by word, with an increasing steadiness and certainty. The mere sitting with the text held before her eyes gave her the feeling of being strongly confronted. The strange currents which came whenever she was alone and at ease flowing to the tips of her fingers, seemed to flow into the book as she held it and to be met and satisfied. As soon as the door was shut and the gas alight, she would take the precious, solid trusty volume from her drawer and fling it on her bed, to have it under her eyes while she undressed. She ceased to read her Bible and to pray. Ouida, Ouida, she would muse with the book at last in her hands. I want bad things—strong bad things. . . . It doesn't

³ (Harvill Secker, 2011)

matter, Italy, the sky, bright hot landscapes, things happening. I don't care what people think or say. I am older than anyone here in this house. I am myself. (I 286)

However, if this passage suggests something confirmed by Richardson's letters and journalism, that she had no truck with a high-brow dismissal of popular culture – 'I adaw melodrama – no really I adore it', she wrote to the novelist E. B. C. Jones in 1921 – *Pilgrimage* is a romance in the older sense of a quest, not in the contemporary sense of a love story.⁴ If compared with the modern popular genre it reads more like an anti-romance. Miriam lacks a single object of desire. She achieves her first, half-conscious, sense of sexual self on her own through the medium of women's writing, not from a man. The deferral of satisfaction that readers experience when reading *Pilgrimage* is not in anticipation of a future consummation. We are encouraged to linger in the moment, piecing together the traces of the past and the echoes of the future.

It is perhaps appropriate then that *The Lodger* ends with only a hint of Richardson's future husband, the artist Alan Odle. The final scene is set in the Café Royal, his favourite haunt, but he does not appear. Instead Dorothy's presence amongst London's bohemian crowd symbolises her success as a writer.

In the end, however, it would be foolish and a little pompous to measure *The Lodger* against Richardson's achievement. Treger does not pretend the novel is biographically accurate or an attempt to follow Richardson's inimitable aesthetic. *The Lodger* is a light-hearted, imaginative intervention. It is fun and if it keeps the spirit of Dorothy walking through the streets of Bloomsbury, why not?

⁴ Gloria Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens GA: Georgia University Press, 1995), p.53.