

Mhairi Pooler, *Writing Life: Early Twentieth-Century Autobiographies of the Artist-Hero* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, The English Association, 2015), ISBN: 978-1-78138-197-7.

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*Writing Lives* is a study of the relationship between writers and writers' selves. The first and last chapters are excellent surveys of the traditions of autobiography and of the parent genre, the *Bildungsroman* and its subgenres. The middle chapters outline, in a convincing and refreshing way, how each of Pooler's four authors experiment within and against these traditions.

Pooler examines the autobiographies of Henry James, Siegfried Sassoon, and Edmund Gosse alongside Dorothy Richardson's autobiographical novel *Pilgrimage*. The rationale for this mixture of 'factual' and fictional life writing is that each work of autobiography (James's *A Small Boy and Others*, *Notes of a Son and Brother* and *The Middle Years*; Gosse's *Father and Son*; Sassoon's autobiographical trilogy *The Old Century and Seven More Years*, *The Weald of Youth*, and *Siegfried's Journey*) is, according to Pooler, novelistic as much as autobiographical. Richardson's thirteen volume novel series, conversely, is fiction informed by 'traditional autobiographical models' as structuring principles (6).

Pooler adopts the term 'creative autobiography' to describe the works she examines, a term which she insists 'blurs but, significantly, does not remove the boundaries between documentary and fictional delimitations' (15). It is at first unnerving to be presented with a single phrase as a descriptor of four sets of very different texts, but this study comes into its own in the distinctions the phrase allows the author to draw. The 'mixed autobiographical forms' of these works are various, and Pooler ably demonstrates how each author experiments with 'a form of life writing that is equally a life story, artist's manifesto, aesthetic treatise and modern autobiographical *Künstlerroman*' (3).

The first chapter, 'The Writer Reading' charts the history of the *Bildungsroman*, its history and development, and its offspring: particularly the *Künstlerroman*. Pooler conducts an interesting and profitable investigation, which takes in German Romanticism and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*; Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*; Wordsworth's *The Prelude*; Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and Ludwig Tieck's *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen*. The discussion of these texts sets the tone for the rest of the monograph. Three lines of enquiry, the exploration of the development of 'creative autobiography' via spiritual autobiography, the tale of coming into being of the hero/ine as artist, and the autobiography as a form which interrogates itself, prevent the label 'creative autobiography' from overly blurring the distinction between 'documentary' and fiction.

The autobiography proper, Pooler concludes, is a quest narrative, informed and influenced by fictional quest narratives and the *Künstlerroman*. She offers a good discussion of the nature of influence, and Richardson's characteristic dodging of all accusations of being influenced. The quest here, however, is a quest to recover, reconstitute, and represent the past self: a kind of retrospective documentation of the self achievable only through memory, which itself is unreliable. Each author is given a chapter to themselves in which each concern is addressed. Pooler explores how authors work within the frameworks of established autobiographical forms, how and to what extent these consciously influence the writer, and the aesthetic strategies they use to capture and create the past self as subject. The recovery of a past self through memory is a complex, almost impossible task for each author, and Pooler draws out the complexities of each strategy with some skill. She deftly interweaves her themes so that the resonances between her chosen authors are drawn out.

In *Pilgrimage*, Pooler finds the strategy to be linguistic and formal. She looks at Richardson's experiments with consciousness, her writing process as a journey to the 'living centre' of her being (148), her psychological and mystical concept of memory as spatial and as present, and the debts *Pilgrimage* owes to the *Bildungsroman* and other autobiographical forms. The chapter on *Pilgrimage* ends with a consideration of language and formal structure in

Richardson's work ('Miriam's recognition of language's fluctuating ability to communicate her unchanging, intimate self' 170) which is particularly illuminating. There is a fascinating discussion of punctuation in the first editions of *The Tunnel* and *Interim* as child of, and reaction against, the distinctive style of Henry James. Pooler claims for *Interim* that its 'syntactical looseness [...] strives to encapsulate a cerebral life similarly communicated in James's tightly formed sentences' (168). This is, Pooler says, the product of Richardson's famous intention to produce a feminine form of masculine realism.

In charting influence and tracing the development of genres, Pooler is lucid and engaging. This monograph should be a reference point for anyone who has wondered about the exact relationship between *Pilgrimage* and the *Bildungsroman* and where the line can be drawn in her text between autobiography and fiction.