

## RUSSIANS, SICKNESS, AND BEETHOVEN

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Rebecca Beasley, *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism 1881–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), ISBN 9780198802129, pp.560; Peter Fifield, *Modernism and Physical Illness: Sick Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), ISBN 9780198825425, pp.272; Nathan Waddell, *Moonlighting: Beethoven and Literary Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), ISBN 9780198816706, pp.272.

If not with the same frequency as hardy perennials such as T. S. Eliot or Virginia Woolf, where once she was lucky to get a mention Dorothy Richardson now appears routinely in academic monographs. New modernist studies deserve a lot of the credit, but that movement itself built on the work of feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s. Recently, their work has been given new emphasis by feminist and anti-racist activists, whose campaigns have fuelled demands for a history of the twentieth century that represents the diversity of its literatures. The cultural politics of the moment, or the culture wars as they are termed in the militaristic polemics of right-wing commentators, are not unimportant factors in Richardson's re-emergence, even as a proper examination of her work reveals that her writings raise as many questions as they do answers for a contemporary 'woke' generation.

### *The Russians are coming*

Such questions can only be answered in relation to a history that extends beyond literary studies, so it is encouraging to see Richardson making an appearance in three recent studies that place English literary modernism in relation to its cultural contexts. Tracking the history of the relationship between nineteenth-century Russian literature and British modernism, Rebecca Beasley's *Russomania* maps a divergence between the modernism of experience and the modernism of form, with *Pilgrimage* unexpectedly appearing as an example of the former. *Sick Books* (Fifield's subtitle is one of several pleasingly 'sick' jokes in the book) places Miriam's struggle for independence in the context of debates about dependence and care at the turn of the century, drawing extensively on Richardson's non-literary column in the *Dental Record*. Waddell's study, in which Richardson plays a minor but not unimportant part, examines how English literary

modernists responded to Beethoven's cultural status, sometimes reacting against a Beethovenian orthodoxy but more often using it to buttress their own experiments.

Of the three, *Russomania* is the weightiest—at 560 pages, it is as long as both the other two put together—but far from heavy going, combining the heft of an intellectual history with a sharp, compelling thesis. No aspect of the interactions between Russian and English literatures is left uncovered. Beasley's chapters are too wide-ranging to summarise, but include the simple life movement, English socialism, anarchism, the Whitechapel Group, Russian revolutionary exiles, Imagists, Symbolists, and spies—both Russian and British. Yet it is Beasley's argument as much as her scrupulous research that demands the reader's attention. The history of British literary modernism, she tells us, has been shaped by one influential faction of its proponents, notably the coterie involved with Ford Madox Ford's *English Review*. Ford and his circle favoured the formal innovations of French writers, with Baudelaire and Flaubert leading the way. It was axiomatic that an English modernist would prefer James and Conrad over Fielding, Scott, or Dickens. This preference for modernist form over modern content appears as common sense because it became the hegemonic version of what literary modernism was in England, but it ignores a counter movement for which Russia not France was the point of orientation. The style of only one Russian writer, Turgenev, came close enough to the French ideal to satisfy the *English Review*. Other Russian greats such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were relegated to an outdated nineteenth-century, realist literary tradition. Yet, many early twentieth-century writers in English preferred to orientate their work in relation to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky rather than French modernism. Beasley detects the legacy of nineteenth-century romantic literary criticism in this attachment, but also an alternative modernism which prioritised modern experience over modern form.

D.H. Lawrence is an obvious example. Dorothy Richardson's modernism, on the other hand, is usually understood to put form before content, and certainly form over plot. *Pointed Roofs* was styled as 'feminine impressionism', a description usually attributed to Edward Garnett. Impressionism was a good thing in the *English Review* but in *Russomania*, we find Garnett in the opposite camp, praising Turgenev in 1898 not just as an example of 'aesthetic perfection' but as a Russian writer for whom, as with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, 'life' is as important as 'art'. Two years before the end of the nineteenth century, Garnett was dismissive of

literary impressionism, accusing it of only giving ‘pictures of life’s surface’. Edward and Constance Garnett (the first translator of many Russian novels into English) were part of an English group of Russophiles, whose interests included political reform, the simple life, vegetarianism, and Tolstoyism. Though she was not part of the Garnett circle, these interests overlapped with those of the young Dorothy Richardson. Her exploration of the byways of London’s political, cultural, and religious ‘archipelago’ led her to a Tolstoyan/anarchist little magazine with an evolving title, the *Crank*, in which she published some of her first writings. The *Crank* provoked some of the heterodox ideas that would allow her to break free from social and literary conventions.

Turn-of-the-century criticism of Russian literature, positive and negative, emphasized its artlessness, its lack of mediation in representing life as experienced by its people, rather than as pronounced by the State. Richardson’s experimental fiction can be read as a similar attempt to represent ‘life’. Formal innovation is the means, but not necessarily the goal. Experience rather than form for the sake of form impelled what she described to Lita Hornick as an ‘investigation of reality’. And Miriam’s politics are more than incidental to the narrative. As Beasley’s genealogy reveals, in this alternative strand of modernism, the relationship between nineteenth-century radicalism and artistic experiment was tight.

Even so, in Beasley’s careful reading of the literary relationship between Miriam and Michael Shatov Richardson’s modernism does not fall easily into either the category of ‘art’ or of ‘life’. This makes *Pilgrimage* quite different from *À la recherche du temps perdu*, or *Ulysses*. Unlike Proust and Joyce, Richardson is suspicious of style for style’s sake, believing that experience has to take precedence over art for art’s sake. The consequence is that *Pilgrimage* opens itself to the accusation not just of artlessness but of ‘stylelessness’.

Following Fredric Jameson, Beasley suggests that the ‘density and opacity’ of Proust and Joyce is the ‘product of their understanding of language as an autonomous system’, an understanding Richardson did not share. It is a convincing argument, but Richardson was asking many of the same questions, even if she came up with different answers. All three writers respond with long narratives that, partly because of their length, are able to map a distribution of the sensible (to use Jacques Rancière’s phrase) between the extremes of an ideal order and messy social experience. For Richardson, an ideal sense of ‘Being’ lies behind a superficial reality rather

than in language, but it is still there, accessible to Miriam in ‘a chain of happy moments that cannot die’.

The idea of language as an autonomous system is signalled in Beasley’s introduction—where she is in dialogue with Jameson, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Susan Stanford Friedman and Emily Apter—and forms part of the theoretical underpinning of her study. Ultimately, she pits the book against universalising theories of world literature in favour of a form of critical self-reflexivity that positions national traditions in relation to one another, but foregrounds what Emily Apter calls their ‘untranslatability’ as much as their equivalence. *Russomania* is keyed into the broad currents in European intellectual history, but its concern is with the detail of these interactions as they occurred at the time. In this respect, it bears comparison with another recent intellectual history, Ken Hirschkop’s *Linguistic Turns*, which follows the development of ideas of ‘pure language’ or ‘language as such’. Both Hirschkop and Beasley remark on a divergence in the twentieth century between idealised (stylish) concepts of language systems and the messy, unstylish uses of language by the predominantly, but not exclusively, national mass movements that revolutionised European societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Full of intriguing detail, *Russomania* is so complete a history that it seems greedy to want more. Yet, who would not want to know more about the lecture on ‘The Russian Love Song as a National Characteristic’ by Anna Laura K. Bezant read at a meeting of the pro-Tsarist Anglo-Russian Literary Society in 1898; or the Brotherhood Church in Hackney where the Social Democratic Party of Russia held its 1907 conference, attended by Gor’ky, Lenin, Plekhanov, Stalin, and Trotsky. Luckily, Beasley’s meticulous footnotes and bibliography offer the reader all the information needed for further investigation.

### *Sick books*

In fact, Beasley’s thesis is so persuasive that it is difficult not to start seeing all of English modernism through her lens. Reading the first chapter of Peter Fifield’s *Sick Books*, On D.H. Lawrence and intensity, one thinks immediately of her readings of *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, which place his novels in the camp of experience over form. Though Fifield’s focus is on illness, like Beasley he is not constrained by formal definitions of literary modernism, arguing that the remit of modernist studies should be expanded to include ‘middle-brow’ and (following Kristin Bluemel)

'intermodernist' texts. In both studies, the approach is literary criticism as part of a cultural history rather than formal analysis alone.

Though he doesn't labour the point, Fifield's primary interest is in literary modernism as a form of phenomenology:

The period's intense concentration on interiority, non-normativity, and the varied experiences of the embodied consciousness calls for a critical response that accounts for the ill subject quite as much as the healthy.

Virginia Woolf's essay, 'On Being Ill', is a key reference point. The embodied experience of being ill, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, is a central element of life, at once tediously routine, terrifyingly exceptional, and surreal. Illness, like modernist form, induces a sense of defamiliarization. Yet sickness is so familiar that the literature of illness, far from being a false witness, can support Roy Porter's call for a history of medicine from below. When they represent illness, modernist texts represent an aspect of what it is to be an embodied subject. Yet perhaps because serious illness and high mortality rates were such an everyday part of life in the early twentieth century, they are not usually singled out for comment by critics. Fifield thrusts the frequency of illness in modernist texts to our attention, tracing the disturbance it creates beneath their surface. Sometimes these disturbances reinforce existing prejudices, for example when T.S. Eliot, in characteristically anti-Semitic mode, associates Jewishness with disease. But for Woolf the sickroom, so often the scene of melodrama in Victorian novels, provokes a strange, solitary creativity. What Fifield wryly describes as 'a sickroom of one's own', generates a new kind of writing that makes 'singular, individual experience [...] the principal task of the [modernist] novel'.

This path can lead to the romanticisation of illness, but if *Sick Books* recognises that possibility, it doesn't succumb to it. In Fifield's horrifying summary, Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* is a compendium of the acute, chronic, and fatal illnesses that plagued the interwar years: 'Robert Carne suffers from angina pectoris, Mrs Holly dies shortly after childbirth, Gertie Holly dies of a relapse following a mastoid operation, Lily Sawdon dies of cancer, Nell Huggins has rheumatism, Mr Brinsley has died of double pneumonia, and Midge Carne is one of numerous children who catch measles'. Nonetheless, the novel is much more than a series of unfortunate events. Holtby reimagines the melodrama of the Victorian sickroom in a

consciously feminist mode that focuses on the role of women's labour in the care of the sick.

Fifield concludes the book with Holtby, picking up his theme from the penultimate chapter, "You ought to be supported by the state!" Dorothy Richardson and the Politics of Care'. Addressing her journalism in the *Dental Record*, Fifield unearths the little-known sociological Richardson, opening the way to a reinterpretation of some of the critical orthodoxies about Miriam's supposed hermetic subjectivity. He argues that critics have misunderstood Richardson's feminist egoism, assuming she advocates a route to women's liberation through radical individualism. It is true that Miriam's struggles to free herself from the expectation that her primary role is to care for others—for her sisters, her parents, the children she teaches, her lovers, and the patients and practitioners in the dental surgery where she works. To break the social and psychological ties that bind her to others demands a radical self-love, which she knows will be viewed as selfishness or irresponsibility. But for Miriam, egoism is part of a process, in which disengagement is a necessary stage before she can re-engage of her own volition.

This process, which never finishes, plays out throughout *Pilgrimage* and in its middle-sequence of chapter-novels, *The Tunnel*, *Interim*, and *Deadlock*, the setting is a dental surgery, which acts as much as a microcosm of patterns of social dependence and interdependence as the sanatorium in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Richardson's 'dental novel' represents a response to the modern medical institution, which, even where it had been given a literary treatment—Fifield cites W.H. Henley's collection *In Hospital*, the infirmary in *Middlemarch*, and Conan-Doyle's medical stories—has not had the modernist response it demanded. Fifield draws on Richardson's articles in the *Dental Record*, arguing that the 'layman' of her regular column is, like Miriam herself, a liminal subject, a focalisation that moves between the point of view of the practitioner and the patient 'in the teeth of [...] professional individualism'. The aim is 'a middle voice [that] speaks both within and without the profession, at once lay and expert, curious and disinterested, literary and technical'. In his reading of *The Tunnel*, Fifield finds the margins of Miriam's developing voice difficult to trace, the lines between her experience and that of the patients is blurred in a model for care founded on an 'affective merging of patient and clinician'.

Such blurring is founded not on individualism, but a principle of interdependence, even as there is a recognition that the responsibility for care is not fairly distributed. As Fifield makes clear, the context here is the contemporary debate about the need for a welfare state.<sup>1</sup> In *Pilgrimage*, that debate is pursued through the character of Eleanor Dear:

[...] in the poor and chronically ill Miss Dear, *Pilgrimage* fleshes out contemporary ideological arguments over responsibility for welfare provision, underwriting them with the rich experience of the ill and [...] their variously obligated and emotionally moved acquaintances [...] illness is thus cast as an experience not only for the suffering individual, but as a social phenomenon grounded in care, its meanings determined by a range of forces including class, context, and character.

Fifield concludes that the representation of illness comes at the 'intersection of *Pilgrimage's* twin functions of *bildungsroman* and social chronicle'. The novel operates a productive exchange between 'self-development and group dynamics'. For Richardson as for modernist writers more generally, individualism is an element in a larger social exchange.

#### *Beethoven, Beethoven, Beethoven*

Fifield remarks that in *Pilgrimage* English national identity 'is routinely expressed in terms of an opposition with continental and especially German culture', giving as an example the national disparity in musical performance noticed by Miriam when she arrives in Hanover in *Pointed Roofs*. In *Moonlighting: Beethoven and Literary Modernism*, Nathan Waddell picks out the same example, the first in a series of significant performances where Miriam displays her virtuosity. Waddell starts his study, however, not with *Pilgrimage* but with the performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in the opening scene of *Howards End*. The mystery of what that performance actually means in the novel might be taken as the problem Beethoven presents in early twentieth-century culture as a whole. Such is the enigma, Waddell tells us, that one critic suggests the description of the

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Adam Guy's article making a parallel argument about the dynamics of care in *Pilgrimage* was published within a month of Fifield's monograph—this is clearly an expanding field of investigation. Adam Guy, 'Who Cares about the Stream of Consciousness? On Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*', *Literature Compass* 17, no. 6 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12573>.

music given in *Howards End* seems hardly to relate to Beethoven at all, instead seeming closer to the lush romanticism of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, perhaps the dominant musical presence in literary modernism. But *Moonlighting* is interested not so much in musicological analysis as the question of what Beethoven meant to literary modernists. It unpacks the image of Beethoven: of Beethoven as cultural symbol, of Beethoven as cultural monument. Readers hoping for a theoretical discussion of the relationship between Beethoven's experiments in music and twentieth-century formal innovations of literary modernism will be disappointed. Theodor Adorno, the pre-eminent philosopher of modernism, who also wrote extensively about Beethoven, is only mentioned in passing. *Moonlighting* is a cultural history of the Beethovenian, what might almost be termed Beethovenianism, as much as Beethoven himself.

The cult of Beethoven began in the nineteenth century, when he became a symbol of masculine artistic genius. But there was always more than one Beethoven. Waddell distinguishes between the orthodox, 'conventional Beethoven' and the 'difficult' experimental Beethoven: the Beethoven who represented music, and indeed, art itself, as an ideal, and the Beethoven who refused Victorian domestication. No wonder literary modernists, seeking to remake the culture, were drawn to his music. It represented both tradition and a break with the past. And Beethoven seems to have been ubiquitous at the beginning of the twentieth century. Copies of his sonatas lay inside every middle-class piano stool. His image was reproduced in busts that adorned mantelpieces. His glowering scowl was so familiar that everyone knew what was meant by a Beethovenian 'look' and novelists could confidently use it as a reference point.

Waddell gives as an example the character George Taylor in *Pilgrimage*, whom Miriam describes as having a 'feminine consciousness, though he's a most manly man with a head like Beethoven'. The inspiration for Taylor was the Tolstoyan, anarchist, pacifist, vegetarian publisher, Charles Daniel. But what did it mean to have a head like a mantelpiece Beethoven? Waddell suggests that many modernists leant on Beethoven's status to support their own artistic ambitions while at the same time playing with the different cultural valences of both the man and his music.

This means that literary performances of Beethoven's music mean more than one might first expect. *Moonlighting* is particularly enlightening in its commentary on representations of women performing Beethoven. Beethoven's reputation meant that women were only expected to play his

music as supplicants, that is a certain kind of Beethoven, and certainly not 'difficult' Beethoven. Lucy Honeychurch in *A Room with a View* and Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out* challenge this orthodoxy because they are able to play Beethoven's late piano sonatas with verve and skill. Both perform the last sonata, Op. 111 in C Minor, displaying an ability that challenges the perceived gap between the male professional musician and the female amateur. Waddell gives Lucy Honeychurch and Rachel Vinrace good grades for their performances, but his prize for best female pianist in a modernist novel goes to Miriam Henderson: 'neither Forster nor Woolf write about independent, rebellious young women with a penchant for Beethoven in a language that quite gets past a categorizing impulse fashioned and strengthened by a long sequence of male musicologists [...] Richardson did.'

But how important was Beethoven to Richardson? Waddell cites her repetition of his name, 'Beethoven, Beethoven, Beethoven', in a contribution to the *Little Review* in 1929. The triple naming comes in a not entirely serious answer to the question: 'What things do you really like?', to which her reply is:

The cinema. Cafes. Any street any garden. Mornings. Sundays. Brown bread and Cornish butter. Soap. The cinema. Onions. Split greengages. Cigars. Berkshire bacon. The cinema. Munich Lager. Conversation. Dry champagne. Planter's punch. Gilbert and Sullivan. Bach. Antheil. Bach. Wagner. Beethoven. Beethoven. Beethoven. Bach. Bach. The cinema. Quaker meetings.

The list should probably be treated in the same way as the lists in *Blast*. Both serious and irreverent, it is aimed at once at the general public and those with insider knowledge. There are autobiographical references that most readers would not have picked up: 'Berkshire bacon' makes reference to her birthplace, Munich lager to time spent in Germany and Switzerland, and Cornish butter to the six months each year she spent in Cornwall. 'Cigars' may be a coded reference to the Sapphic culture of the 1920s, meant to be recognised only by friends such as Bryher and H.D (and possibly also the magazine's editors, Margaret Henderson and Jane Heap). Readers of *Pilgrimage* would certainly have recognised the importance of cafés, streets, soap, Quaker meetings, and of course music. But, in the context of disguised and open signals, the reiteration of Beethoven may be as much an example of ambivalence to cultural authority as reverence: as in 'Beethoven, Beethoven, well *of course* Beethoven, oh and Bach, and

Bach'. In other words, the list offers as much evidence for the ambivalence about Beethoven as for his authority—the same ambivalence Waddell finds among other modernists.

There are other reasons to doubt Beethoven's importance for Richardson. *Pilgrimage* is packed with musical performances, allusions, and references, most of which are not to Beethoven. *Pointed Roofs* alone makes reference to Gilbert and Sullivan, Mozart, Wagner, Robert and Clara Schumann, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Grieg, and Schubert as well as numerous songs, classical and popular, popular hymns and street music. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that Miriam's performances of Beethoven in *Pilgrimage* come at significant moments in the narrative, and, as Waddell proposes, those moments have a significance that resonates with other parts of the text, not least the other performances.<sup>2</sup> Do the multiple musical performances and references in *Pilgrimage* suggest a possible musical analogy for Richardson's experiment in prose? Waddell follows Gloria Fromm and David Stamm in suggesting that *Revolving Lights* is composed like a musical work, a Beethoven symphony possibly, perhaps Symphony no. 7. Should the whole of *Pilgrimage* be considered in the same light?

*Moonlighting* opens up many such questions, but it is worth returning, as Waddell does at the end of his book, to the opening of *Howards End*. If the meaning of Beethoven's music, and even the narrator's stance, remains an enigma, then what goes on in the audience provokes a comparable mystery. When Helen Schlegel, leaving the concert early, mistakes a stranger's umbrella for her own, she triggers a series of cultural and social misunderstandings that culminate in his death. For Richardson, audience response, including audience activity that might be classified as an interruption, or even nothing to do with the performance, was as important as the performance itself. Her articles for the avant-garde film magazines, *Close Up*, focus almost exclusively on the spectators. Perhaps for Richardson and for other literary modernists, the modernist Beethoven was simply what modernists made of him.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Miriam's performances of Beethoven see Elizabeth Pritchett, 'Vital Texts: Democratic Intertextuality in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915-1938/67).' (PhD, Keele, 2017).

None of these monographs is exclusively about Richardson, but the prominent role her work plays in all three books shows that not only is there an audience for Richardson, *Pilgrimage* has many audiences. Cultural and literary historians of intercultural contact, medical humanities, and histories of music all now draw productively on Richardson's work. This is something to celebrate, just as these fine studies should be celebrated as contributions to modernist studies that go well beyond the sub-field that is the concern of this journal.