

LAURA MARCUS IN MEMORIUM

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Our friend Laura Marcus was many things, a scholar, a mentor, the Goldsmiths' Professor at the University of Oxford, a Fellow of the British Academy, a *bonne vivante*, an indefatigable socialiser, a founding member of the Dorothy Richardson Society, and an editor and contributor to this journal. The love and respect the academic community felt for her have already been expressed in several scholarly journals: Nicholas Royle in the *Oxford Literary Review*; Isobel Armstrong in *Women: A Cultural Review*; an editorial tribute in *Modernist Cultures*; and pieces by Santanu Das, Hermione Lee, Jo Winning, and Adam Guy (first given at a Zoom event during the Covid lockdown) in *Critical Quarterly*.¹ Together these begin to represent but cannot encompass the breadth of Laura's impact and influence. This short piece merely supplements what has already been said, focusing on Laura's contribution to Dorothy Richardson Studies and the role Richardson played in her work.

Laura's love of Virginia Woolf is well known. As Isobel Armstrong reminds us, the 'Time Passes' section prompted some of her most lyrical criticism.² Laura once said that if she were a novel, she would want it to be *To The Lighthouse*. If Dorothy Richardson was in some ways a lesser figure than Woolf in Laura's constellation, she was also the point at which Laura's unique combination of research interests—autobiography, film, modernism/ modernity, psychoanalysis, and feminism—met. In Richardson, Laura found the perfect object of study: Richardson's writings

¹ Nicholas Royle, 'Commemoration and Autobiography', *Oxford Literary Review* 44, no. 1 (2022): 42–63; Isobel Armstrong, 'Laura Marcus 7 March 1956–22 September 2021', *Women: A Cultural Review* 33, no. 2 (2022): 155–58; The editors, 'In Memoriam: Professor Laura Marcus', *Modernist Cultures* 16, no. 4 (2021): 568–69; Santanu Das et al., 'Laura Marcus (7 March 1956–22 September 2021) Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature and Fellow of New College, Oxford, 2010–2021', *Critical Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (n.d.): 3–26. In addition, a 'Polyphonic Memoir' has been compiled by Isobel Armstrong with the help of fifteen others, which will be published by the British Academy.

² Das et al., 'Laura Marcus (7 March 1956–22 September 2021) Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature and Fellow of New College, Oxford, 2010–2021', 6–8.

were the inspiration that that prompted some of her most brilliant scholarship, not least *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*, which won the James Russell Lowell prize in 2008.

It is easy to see why Laura's interest in autobiography might have drawn her to Richardson's long semi-autobiographical narrative *Pilgrimage*; and it seems strange now that Richardson is not mentioned in Laura's first monograph, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, criticism, practice* (1994), the three-word subtitle of which bears the unmistakable imprint of the 1980s' theoretical turn. Richardson was on Laura's horizon at an early stage. A report she wrote of a History Workshop discusses a paper by Jean Radford, commenting that it:

addressed the question of the relationship between self-analysis and autobiography; *Pilgrimage*, it was suggested, was Richardson's interminable self-analysis, her process of working through, which dissolved the conventional boundaries between public and private realms and thus created a space for the history of a woman's inner life. Auto-biography and self-analysis were linked through the concept of psychic history as a history of identifications with internalized figures - identifications which disrupt the notion of a unified, coherent authorial self. This is to question radically the conventional definition of autobiography as a coherent shaping of the past from the perspective of a unified self in the present. One important question remained open for me, however - the extent to which it is possible to compare the endlessly revised and often non-verbalised versions of self constructed through self-analysis with the conscious production which is a literary text.³

Pilgrimage would come to exemplify for Laura a fiction that embodied the 'instability of the postulated oppositions between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object' in autobiographical discourse.⁴ As she wrote in the *Blackwell Companion* in 2006, *Pilgrimage* 'creates a literary space of its own between the genres of the novel and of

³ Laura Marcus, 'Psychoanalysis History and Auto-Biographies', *History Workshop Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 203-4.

⁴ Laura Marcus, *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 7.

autobiography'.⁵ Returning to *Pilgrimage* again in *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction*, it becomes clear that it was Richardson's resistance to autobiography rather than its execution that fascinated Laura.⁶

Richardson's writing defies categories and Richardson herself always resisted classification. She transformed the novel, but denied she was writing either a novel or autobiography. Her circle embraced psychoanalysis but she, like Laura, was wary of its definitions. Richardson wrote ardently about the uniqueness of women's experience but claimed in a letter that the protagonist of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam Henderson, was not a feminist. She was a film enthusiast, but it was the experience of going to and being in the cinema that really interested her.

If Laura was drawn to Richardson's ambivalent relationship with autobiography, she was equally drawn to an interest in film that went beyond film itself. In her introduction to the section on Richardson in an anthology of articles from the avant-garde film journal, *Close Up* (1927-1933), Laura writes that in Richardson's film writing her primary concern 'was with the ways audiences responded to different aspects of cinematic representation, communication, and viewing and with the cinema-goer's changing, developing relationship to the new art of the film'.⁷ 'Continuous Performance', her regular column in *Close Up*, was out of step with the 'aggressive avant-gardism' of the journal's editor, Kenneth Macpherson, and with the other contributors' aspirations for 'a mass audience for a minority culture'.⁸ Richardson, Laura suggests, was not just writing about cinema, but about the culture of modernity. It's a point she expands on in *The Tenth Muse*. The passage where Laura compares Richardson's model of cinematic reception with those of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer is worth quoting at length as an example of what Isobel

⁵ Laura Marcus, 'Dorothy Richardson: *Pilgrimage*', in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, ed. David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 440–41.

⁶ Laura Marcus, *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷ Laura Marcus, 'Introduction, Continuous Performance: Dorothy Richardson', in *Close Up: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 150.

⁸ Marcus, 152.

Armstrong has calls ‘a kind of thick description that becomes a phenomenology of the topic she explores’:⁹

Richardson’s models of cinematic reception were, at one level, at odds with the neo-Marxist theories of Kracauer and Benjamin. Her aesthetic ideal and goal would appear to be precisely the contemplative concentration to which the ‘culture of distraction’ opposed itself. She celebrated ‘distance’ (in a complex negotiation with the journal’s identification with the aesthetic of the ‘close-up’, including the regular column by Jean Prévost, ‘La Face Humaine à L’Écran [‘The Human Face on the Screen’]) as a way of ‘focussing the habitual’, so that ‘what had grown too near and too familiar to be visible is seen with a ready-made detachment that restores its lost quality’. The terms in fact find their echo in those of Benjamin, for whom the photographic ‘aura’ was: ‘A Strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be’. She argued for the kinds of unifying devices—including musical accompaniment to the silent film—which prevented the intrusive knowledge of the heterogeneity of the cinematic apparatus. She described the cinema’s role in ‘the preparation of vast new audiences’, in particular women audiences, in terms of an accommodation to the conditions of modernity, not as a prelude to their overturning.

Yet we might also find in Richardson ways of thinking about cinematic reception, and about culture more generally, which were as ambivalent and in a sense anarchic as they were idealist. This emerges most strongly in the ‘Continuous Performance’ articles in which she focused most fully on conditions of spectatorship. The terms of speech and silence were, as we have seen, central to Richardson’s writings on cinema, and the ‘audible running commentary’ of the spectators she described was elided with her ‘continuous performances’ as spectator and commentator. In ‘The Front Rows’, she described the responses of the small boys sitting in the front rows of the stall, and argued against those anti-cinema campaigners who decried their presence there [...]

[...] Richardson again addressed the ‘audible running commentary’ of the spectator in a piece on the young woman who talks in the cinema. Such a woman in refusing a position of identification with the ‘silent, stellar, radiance’ of the female star shining from the ‘surface’ of the screen, also refuses the position of

⁹ Armstrong, ‘Laura Marcus 7 March 1956–22 September 2021’, 156.

the passive spectator. (The article indeed functions as a counter to Kracauer's 'The Little Shop Girls Go to the Movies'.) As in other 'Continuous Performance' articles, Richardson implied a distinction between the progressive dimensions of female spectatorship and the retrogressive images of femininity projected on the screen. While the woman who talked in the cinema destroys the 'possibility of which any film is so delightfully prodigal: the possibility of escape via incidentals into the world of meditation or of thought' Richardson was not altogether mourning the loss of aura in modernity. 'The dreadful woman asserting herself in the presence of no matter what grandeurs unconsciously testifies that life goes on, art or not art and that the onlooker is part of the spectacle'.¹⁰

In comparing Richardson's feminist critique with Benjamin and Kracauer, Laura quietly positions her as a theorist of modernity, attuned, as most male theorists are not, to women's active and disruptive role in twentieth-century societies. When Laura wrote that *Pilgrimage* has a 'cinematic consciousness' that developed, like cinema itself, out of 'the optical devices of pre-cinema', she was describing a deep relationship with technological modernity.¹¹ 'It is striking', she writes, 'that for Woolf, H.D., and Richardson, autobiography was closely linked to the history of optical technologies. Richardson's filmic aesthetic developed with the long production of *Pilgrimage*. By the publication of *Dawn's Left Hand* in 1931, Bryher, in a review in *Close Up* recognised that 'in each page an aspect of London is created that is like an image from a film, substitutes itself for memory, to revolve before the eye has we read'. But Richardson's 'cinematic consciousness' always went well beyond film. Writing to thank her Richardson responded gratefully, 'And what can I say about your review in C.U., emphasising the aspect no one else has spotted?'.¹²

When she died Laura was about to edit Richardson's correspondence from the years she was contributing to *Close Up*. Sadly, we will never have her detailed insights on those letters. What remains is her work and most precious our many memories of her. I will end with one of my favourites: the memory of her unveiling the plaque to Richardson in Woburn Walk

¹⁰ Laura Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 357–59.

¹¹ Marcus, 'Introduction, Continuous Performance: Dorothy Richardson', 153.

¹² Marcus, *The Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period*, 130–31.

in 2015. And, as she does it much better than I could, I will allow Michèle Roberts's *Negative Capability: A Diary of Surviving* to do the telling:

Woburn Walk, running east-west just south of the Euston Road and now closed to traffic, remains a short, pretty street of terraced Georgian houses, set with some fixed benches in the middle, the few shops discreet and unobtrusive. A crowd about thirty-strong had collected, old and young, mostly women but a few men too. I felt exhilarated at milling about with other people in the street: liberation, freedom from having to keep to the pavement, able to spill out, take over public space [...]

[...]W. B. Yeats lived for a while in the house opposite Dorothy Richardson's, moving in at the same time she did. His plaque had been up for ages; English Heritage had installed many plaques to men but few to women. The Marchmont Society, a separate body, took responsibility for putting up plaques here in Bloomsbury. Now, thanks to the pressure exerted by locals such as Nick Murray, made aware of their omissions they had begun trying to rectify them[...]

We Dorothy Richardson fans blocked Woburn Walk. Passing tourists paused, took photographs. People stood in groups chatting, waiting. A red cloth veiled the plaque, ready in place above the front door of Sutherland's antique shop. Ricci from the Marchmont Society fiddled with the sound system. He'd run a line into the shop, whose owner had obligingly made a socket available.

I looked up at the house opposite, the one with the plaque to W. B. Yeats, whose long first-floor windows, screened at waist-height by a small ironwork Juliet-style balcony, stood open. A dark-haired woman in a bibbed white apron appeared in this oblong space, the room beyond her in shadow. She hung a piece of thick ribbed silk, dark rose-pink, over the balcony railing. It looked like an animal carcass that you'd see hooked up in an old-fashioned butcher's shop. She began delicately manipulating it, carefully tearing at one end of it, cutting and separating it into pinkish-red streamers. Why was she doing this? What was she making? A costume for flayed Marsyas? For Actaeon torn to death by Diana's hounds? She stayed up there working, half in the street half out of it, seemingly oblivious of the small crowd of Richardson fans milling about down below. She must have been aware of us, our movements and chatter, but concentrated calmly on her work, cutting and teasing and pulling the thick silk fabric in her hands. I felt I was the only one of us aware of her. I tried to catch her eye but failed. Perhaps she was an extra in Mrs

Dalloway. Perhaps she had risen up out of an early draft, she was a cut paragraph on Woolf's studio floor. A shimmering image from the early twentieth century, summoned by the modernist brouhaha in the street below.

With a click and a tick of the mike, the ceremony began. Ricci made a speech about the Bloomsbury Society and the Marchmont Society, and all the good things they do, followed by two other men, who spoke about Dorothy Richardson. One of these, an academic, said sheepishly that there really ought to be a woman making a speech too. I said loudly: yes!

Ricci then called on the renowned Richardson scholar, Professor Laura Marcus, to step forward and unveil the plaque. She raised her hand and pulled the cord and the red cloth tumbled satisfactorily down. Everyone applauded.

We were then marshalled to pose in a group in front of the plaque to have our photo taken for the local paper. The woman on the balcony opposite went on serenely tearing and cutting at her carcase of ribbed pink silk. I nudged the young women standing next to me: look at her up there! Look!¹³

I don't know if Laura got a chance to read Roberts's diary, but it is easy to imagine how much she would have enjoyed the London scene, the references to Woolf, the anonymous woman on the balcony, insurgent feminism in the street, and her own central role in honouring Richardson, surrounded by her admirers. She would probably have laughed too. She had a wicked sense of humour. It was Laura who, tongue-in-cheek, adapted the old gay identification, 'Friends of Dorothy', as a toast at Richardson Society events. We will remember her as a friend of Dorothy, among friends of Dorothy, and we will continue to read and reread her work on Richardson in sadness, in pleasure, and in awe at her erudition. Laura Marcus, scholar, mentor, friend of Dorothy, and friend to so many of us, we miss you.

¹³ Michèle Roberts, *Negative Capability: A Diary of Surviving* (Inverness, Scotland: Sandstone Press, 2020), 43–46.