

David Stamm, *A Pathway to Reality: Visual and Aural Concepts in Dorothy Richardson's 'Pilgrimage'* (Tübingen; Basel; Francke, 2000)
ISBN pp.267, hbk, £57.98 ISBN 978-3772024382

Howard Finn

This review has been prompted by a number of references to David Stamm's *A Pathway to Reality* in recent papers submitted to the *Pilgrimages* online journal. These papers have come from writers outside Anglo-American academia, leading the journal to consider whether there are differing critical traditions in the form of distinctive national approaches to Richardson.

To Richardson's detractors the flaw with *Pilgrimage* is its excessively narrow perspective – thirteen volumes presenting the consciousness of one single character, Miriam Henderson. To Richardson's advocates *Pilgrimage* is instead an example of the universal in the particular – whole worlds can be accessed via the mediation of Miriam's mind. Or to put it in terms less frightening to literary criticism, *Pilgrimage* is an exemplary 'open work' or Barthesian 'writerly text', a text which fully facilitates the participation, experience and sensibility of the reader. It is unlikely that most informed readers of *Pilgrimage* read all thirteen volumes (several times) solely because they are interested in the social and historical circumstances of a young woman in *fin-de-siècle* London. The primary appeal of the series clearly lies elsewhere, in what it elicits from each reader. And presumably readers from different national, cultural and critical backgrounds will bring different interests to the text. Although the readership of *Pilgrimage* has been modest in terms of numbers, it has always been international, much of the early appreciation coming from the United States, Germany, France and Japan – which naturally delighted the internationalist Richardson. And this is certainly true today, when much of the interesting recent criticism is coming from outside Britain.

Initially *A Pathway to Reality* would appear to belong to a Germanic academic tradition which continues to privilege philosophy and an

Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies No.3 (2010) 91

acceptance of transcendentalist discourses. Stamm sets up an analysis of the representation of the senses in *Pilgrimage*, raising the anticipation of a broadly phenomenological approach. Of course such readings of *Pilgrimage* are not exclusive to the Germanic critical tradition – Canadian academic Shirley Rose’s seminal pieces written in the late 1960s and early 1970s remain a starting point for reading Richardson in terms of sensory perception in ‘real time’ (whether present or recollected) and Rose is frequently referenced by Stamm. Nevertheless, the notable recent readings of *Pilgrimage* influenced by broadly phenomenological approaches have been associated with ‘Germanic criticism’, through the work of Elizabeth Bronfen and Eveline Kilian in particular.

Stamm’s book is based on a Swiss academic dissertation (co-examined by Bronfen) and as might be expected is densely written, a document of the author’s accumulated reading and research, referencing passages from all volumes of *Pilgrimage* throughout and so assuming a ready knowledge of Richardson’s entire text on the part of the reader. The book is divided into three sections: firstly, the eye and the visual; secondly, the ear and the aural; thirdly, the unity of eye and ear. Early sections devoted to journeys and the visual by way of readings of *Oberland* and *Dimple Hill* do focus on Miriam’s sensory awareness, but it quickly becomes apparent that the study is grounded less in the perceiver and perception *per se* than in the objects perceived and which are grouped into four motifs: journeys; gardens; music; silence. These motifs are read primarily as metaphorical, charting the protagonist’s inner journey. In other words, the approach could be seen as belonging to a traditional German romanticism, that of the *Bildungsroman* and the quest and journey to selfhood. Although Stamm acknowledges that Richardson’s narrative is rooted in a concrete realism, he proceeds to read the ‘concrete’ objects perceived as essentially symbolic, requiring decoding according to their basis in intertextual allusions to the Bible, Dante, *Villette*, Emerson, Maeterlinck and many others. More generally, Stamm reads Richardson’s project within a context of romantic transcendentalism (accessed by Richardson through Wordsworth and Coleridge) and centred around mythic archetypes. For example, Stamm looks at all the representations of gardens in

Pilgrimage. Hanover, Barnes, Newlands, London, Bonnycliff, enclosed gardens, open gardens – only after reading Stamm is it evident just how many gardens there are in *Pilgrimage*. These gardens are variously places of ecstasy, refuge or oppression. But Stamm is less interested in gardens associated with the ‘bee-memory’ as a Freudian site of childhood anxiety or sexuality (as discussed in much recent criticism) than in the archetype of an Edenic paradise eternalised in its loss, in being exiled from it. Stamm proceeds to analyse foliage in similar terms of intertextual mythic archetypes before moving on to parks and trees. It is in the discussion of the latter that Stamm’s primary interest in the mythic rather than the phenomenological is confirmed as he explicitly positions himself in opposition to Shirley Rose:

As Rose points out, Dorothy Richardson seems to rely on the ‘impressionistic value of images, which function organically in her novel’ (1969:370). Her imagery in most cases directly reflects Miriam’s sensory impressions, the perceptions of the beauty of nature; she does not seem to attach any deeper symbolic meaning to it. Hence Rose denies the existence of ‘organizing symbols’ (1969: 370). Yet there *are* two trees that are named again and again: the poplars and the chestnut tree do grow into consistently expanding symbols in the overall context of *Pilgrimage*. The poplars, whose tall, vertical shape suggests a direct link between the earth and the sky, appear as signposts to heaven, as gateways to an earthly paradise. Dorothy Richardson uses this traditional image of a gate to another world, already found in the *Odyssey*, as a symbol that expands out of an almost unnoticed detail of simple visual perception. (106)

After an exhaustive symbolic reading of poplars and chestnut trees – ‘an Edenic tree of life’ (91) – the commentary progresses to a decoding of symbolic oaks and larches.

Moving from the eye and the visual to the ear and the aural, a chapter on music follows a similar trajectory, starting out with a set of conceptual distinctions between different types of listening experience but then, after acknowledging that social and gender

issues are implicit in most of the music episodes in *Pilgrimage*, turning to a discussion of the symbolic importance of music in the narrative. The form of *Pilgrimage* is likened, reasonably enough, to a set of musical thematic variations, albeit punctuated with Wagnerian leitmotifs and producing a Wagnerian endless deferral of resolution (136, 150), while *Revolving Lights* is structured on the four movement form of Beethoven's 7th Symphony (143), generating a commentary replete with observations such as 'what Beethoven does in music, Hypo wants to do in relationships' (147) and so forth.

Given the book's title, it is to be expected that the final section of *A Pathway to Reality* will posit a destination, a resolution in which Miriam overcomes alienation and arrives at 'reality' in the form of a selfhood, achieved through a communion with being, and the vehicle for this is a synaesthesia not just of eye and ear but of 'visual, aural, olfactory and tactile sense impressions all at the same time' (214). However this synaesthesia is not actual but symbolic, something conceived emotionally and intellectually by Miriam, not literally experienced by her senses. Such epiphanic moments are a feature of the whole series, for Stamm reaching an early peak in *Oberland*, the book which he sees as the highpoint of the whole series – though as a Swiss critic he might be open to the accusation of bias. And so selfhood and reality as a unity of the senses and a unity of being and becoming is the projected goal of the end of the series, gestured towards in *Dimple Hill* and *March Moonlight* with the Quakers and the figure of Jean representing an ideal of oneness and silent communion.

The point here is not so much to criticize Stamm or readings of *Pilgrimage* in terms of mythic symbolism, but to consider whether current critical antipathy to 'mythic' approaches is merely a product of recent Anglo-American academic fashion. Such interpretation of mythic symbolism was a staple of post-war literary criticism – Caesar Blake's 1960 book *Dorothy Richardson*, reading *Pilgrimage* as a mystic quest through a Biblical symbolic landscape, being a typical example. But in contemporary modernist criticism there is a widely held assumption that overt symbolism should be left to Eliot, Pound and the poets and downplayed in

the novel – unless self-reflexive and ironic as in Joyce. Hence the common view that *To the Lighthouse* would have been a perfect novel if only Woolf had left out the lighthouse. Yet given the importance of mythical frameworks to the modernists (construed as applicable to the novel by Eliot's 'mythic method') it is obvious that novelists, including Richardson, *did* provide intertextual frameworks of symbolism to underpin their narratives. In Richardson's case there is the additional consideration of the importance of spiritual autobiography and Quaker narratives – in a spiritual autobiography by Bunyan or his contemporaries there is no opposition between the concrete or real and the symbolic – rooms, passage ways and staircases are both real spaces and privileged sites of spiritual struggle – and this duality is undoubtedly carried over into *Pilgrimage*. A regular critical strategy is to acknowledge sympathetically the mystical dimension of *Pilgrimage* and the fact that this may be manifested in a network of detailed symbolism, but to contextualise this fact by noting that it was common for emancipated women in *fin-de-siècle* London to be drawn to mysticism and that the mystical and religious discourses of the time contained radical social, political and psychological tendencies in displaced form under particular conditions of oppression. Given that Richardson's ideas, sensibility and experiences are manifested in a concrete realism, readers today are free to engage with the ideas, sensibility, experience and realism and ignore the period mysticism and symbolism. But the downside of recuperating a text like *Pilgrimage* into a standard materialist historicist reading is that the essential 'otherness' that Richardson sought to represent may be lost.

Philosophical, formalist and psycho-analytical approaches (i.e., those that are open to the unconscious) can usefully supplement historicism, by allowing the otherness of the text – including its ahistorical 'presence' – to be sustained. Approaches reflecting particular cultural perspectives can also defamiliarize the reading of *Pilgrimage* in interesting ways. Which brings us back to the issue raised at the outset: it would be misguided to demand literary criticism adhering to some more or less spurious stereotype of German, Japanese or any other ostensibly 'national' aesthetics, but given that Richardsonians today are dispersed across many

nationalities, it might be hoped that readings of *Pilgrimage* will increasingly reflect the perspectives of different cultural and critical traditions.