

Dorothy Richardson and Romain Rolland

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Jean-Christophe, published in France in ten volumes, 1904-1912, and translated into English by Gilbert Cannan in three volumes, 1910-1913 was a very well received and highly regarded novel when it appeared. In 'Dorothy Richardson's Foreword to *Pilgrimage*', I have suggested that its intense focus on the inner life of one individual and its spacious treatment may have influenced Dorothy Richardson to undertake the detailed and prolonged representation, through thirteen books, of the consciousness of Miriam Henderson.¹ I want now to take up that suggestion in more detail by asking what we may suppose Dorothy Richardson learned from her reading of Rolland's novel.

First, an extended narrative representing a developing artist's inner life was a possible subject for fiction. Second, a fully developed inward focus need not mean that every one of life's details must be described. Tact in certain areas is permissible, even desirable. For example, *Jean-Christophe* is never explicit about his sexual encounters, not even to the degree that Richardson is in her account of Miriam's intercourse with Hypo. As for the more mundane bodily functions, Rolland goes one better than Richardson, failing even to mention them. Third, light is the indispensable symbol of underlying divinity in the life of the hero, even when that life is in its early phase of rebel and atheist. See for instance the scene of *Jean-Christophe* in front of Rembrandt's 'Good Samaritan'.² Or that scene in which he avows his love for the light of Paris: 'The delicious light of Paris! That was the first thing that *Jean-Christophe* had loved in the city: it filled his being sweetly, sweetly: and imperceptibly, slowly, it changed his heart. It was to him the most lovely music, the only music of Paris'.³ 'Light,

¹ George H. Thomson, 'Dorothy Richardson's Foreword to *Pilgrimage*', *Twentieth Century Literature* 42, 3 (Fall 1996): 344-359, esp. 355.

² Romain Rolland, *Jean-Christophe* 3 Vols, trans. Gilbert Cannan (New York: Modern Library, Random House, 1910, 1911, 1913), Vol.II, pp.171-72.

³ *Ibid*, p.186.

the blood of the world, that flows in space like a river of life...'.⁴ The equally pervasive role of light in *Pilgrimage* need not be rehearsed here. Its importance to Miriam is apparent from the first, and its significance as a harbinger of the divine, even when veiled by the anarchism and atheism of her early London years, can be seen by the alert reader. Richardson was in no need of support or inspiration from Rolland when it came to the role of light, but she must surely have felt a sisterly comradeship with this already famous author.

Rolland then configures a spacious and detailed narrative focused on the consciousness of a developing artist, an artist who early on thrills to the power of light. Richardson was very likely inspired and sustained by Rolland's example, but at the same time she was even more likely to have been powerfully warned of what must be avoided if she was to create a narrative true to her own experience.

In Rolland's novel, the life of the male hero, however inward and spiritual, is still a history of egotism. The manifestations of the unconscious and of the Force, which somehow manifest God, the outbreaks of uncontrolled and apparently uncontrollable violence, these may transcend Jean-Christophe's egotism, but they go hand in hand with it. Moreover Jean-Christophe's egotism is fully apparent in the narrator. The imagery, the rhetoric, the universality evoked by the narrator are grandiose: 'Each one of us in turn climbs the Calvary of the age. Each one of us finds anew the agony, each one of us finds anew the desperate hope and folly of the ages. Each one of us follows in the footsteps of those who were, of those before us who struggled with death, denied death—and are dead'.⁵

Male egotism finds its fullest expression in the monumental centrality of the artist:

So, according with the unvaried rhythm of the universe, there was formed about him the little family of genius, grouped about him, giving him food and taking it from him, which

⁴ Rolland, Vol.III [1913], p.361.

⁵ Rolland, Vol.I [1910], p.295.

grows little by little, and in the end becomes one great collective soul, of which he is the central fire, like a gleaming world, a moral planet moving through space, mingling its chorus of brotherhood with the harmony of the spheres.⁶

H.G. Wells was all the example Richardson needed to warn her off satirical engagement with social organization and politics. But in Rolland she must have found the warning doubly reinforced. Not only did Rolland fall prey to these preoccupations, for example in the detailed and overly emphatic satire on French intellectual and artistic life in Paris ('The Market-Place,' Volume II), most of the detail irrelevant to the development of Jean-Christophe, but succumbed as well to an apocalyptic and transcendent vision of these forces:

It is for ourselves that we worked, and our reward lies in the creation of a race of men who shall surpass us. We amassed their treasury, we hoarded it in a wretched hovel open to all the winds of Heaven: we had to strain every nerve to keep the doors closed against death. . . . Our sufferings have saved the future. We have borne the Ark to the threshold of the Promised Land. It will reach that Land with them, and through us.⁷

Here Richardson might behold the social and political inflated by male egotism and transformed into universal forces of history and religion.

Society and politics are not the only subjects in Rolland's narrative jeopardizing a sustained focus on the central character. Secondary characters are sometimes just as distracting. Rolland will abandon his hero for pages on end to fill in the characteristics and destiny of a character who has just entered the story. And in one instance he gives over an entire book, 'Antoinette' (Volume II, Book 2), to an account of the background and life history of a woman who is going to have no further part in the narrative. Richardson could certainly have learned from *Jean-Christophe* that such digressions are

⁶ Rolland, Vol.III [1913], p.52.

⁷ Ibid, p.461

disconcerting and disruptive. As for her own digressions, she sees to it that at the very least they always reflect Miriam's own interests and obsessions.

Although Rolland was all too often distracted by society and politics, his essential concern remained the inner experience of an artistic genius who from a very early age actually produced works of music. Yet in describing the act of creation, Rolland's narrative is less than satisfactory. That is because it is somewhere between extremely difficult and plainly impossible to describe in a prose narrative the creative process at work as it issues in a musical composition, a difficulty exacerbated by the abstract nature of music. When confronted with this dilemma, Rolland waxes imagistic, abstract and general. Richardson, having learned her lesson well, is much more circumspect. Miriam begins by explaining in some detail the secondary creative process of translation.⁸ Later she defines the state-of-being necessary for creation but without yet tying it to that activity: 'she was once more in that zone of her being where all the past was with her unobstructed; not recalled, but present, so that she could move into any part and be there as before'.⁹ Only on the last page of *Pilgrimage* does Miriam, again invoking the same state of unobstructed recall, approach the task of creating the novel we have just read.

When Rolland speaks of the qualities of Jean-Christophe the artist rather than of the process by which he creates his music, he is more successful.

And also, unknown to himself, he had the strange curiosity of the artist, that passionate, impersonal quality, which is in every creature really endowed with creative power. In vain did he love, suffer, give himself utterly to all his passions: he saw them. They were in him but they were not himself.¹⁰

⁸ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, 4 vols (London: J. M. Dent & Sons; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), III, pp.142-44.

⁹ Rolland, Vol.III [1913], p.322.

¹⁰ Rolland, Vol.III [1910], p.348.

Richardson expresses this same truth in a more conscious form: Miriam in each essential situation asserts her inviolable self, a self which must at last stand clear of all entanglements.

Of the many things Richardson may be supposed to have learned from the example of Rolland, whether positive or negative, one stands out above all others and comes logically at the last: *avoid narrative closure*. If Richardson had not already in 1912 when she began *Pointed Roofs* held firmly to such a conviction, the appearance in 1913 of Volume III of Cannan's translation of *Jean-Christophe* would have forcibly impelled her to conclude that no conclusion is the best conclusion. The last book of *Jean-Christophe*, 'The New Dawn', is radiant with formulations of unjustified closure. For example, the marriage of Olivier's son and Grazia's daughter, the children of two of Jean-Christophe's dearest friends, is made to carry for the hero an overwhelming significance: 'All that we have suffered, I, my friends, and so many others whom I never knew, others who lived before us, all has been, that these two might attain joy'.¹¹ Nothing in the character of the two young people, nothing in the history of the many other couples in the narrative justifies such a momentous expectation of fulfillment. And for another example, see the extraordinary passage quoted above: 'We have borne the Ark to the threshold of the Promised Land. It will reach that Land with them, and through us'.¹² Richardson, for reasons I have suggested in *A Reader's Guide to Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage*,¹³ showed some slight propensity to touches of closure in the final pages of *March Moonlight*, but otherwise resisted the inclination sturdily. Endings, finalities were not true to life. That was her creed.

¹¹ Ibid, p.482.

¹² Ibid, p.461.

¹³ George H. Thomson, *A Reader's Guide to Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage* (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1996), pp.53-56.