

DOROTHY RICHARDSON'S CONTRIBUTION TO ENGLISH FICTION

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The stream of consciousness novel in English is the result of a literary revolt. This school of fiction was started by a few writers in the first part of the twentieth century as a repudiation of the traditional novel in general and the Edwardian fiction in particular. "The 'great tradition' of the English novel is a straight, consecutive sequence of novelists dealing in broadly the same way with broadly the same themes. From Richardson and Fielding to Smollett to Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dickens, Trollope, and E.M.Forster, with Scott and Meredith on the near periphery, the themes consistently involve a balancing of property values, and ethical values, centering on the climatic decision of marriage, and treated by means of interwoven, temporally consecutive narrations."¹ This tradition was carried on by the Edwardian novelists also when the upheaval came from the avant-garde writers. According to Elizabeth Drew, "the old traditional forms had been challenged . . . and a new rebellious attitude against the conventional moral patterns of *the* elders was in the air."² This movement was pioneered by Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, Joyce being the torchbearer of this new school.

The term Edwardian novel generally refers to the works written in England between 1901 and 1910, during the reign of Edward VII. This term is usually applied to a group of writers that includes novelists like H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. These writers were united in their zeal to analyse the contemporary society and shared an interest in the practical side of life. They were too matter of fact to probe beneath the surface of society and concerned themselves with the portrayal of man in relation to society. Exhausperated by the outmoded novels with hackneyed themes produced by these novelists, writers like Virginia Woolf emphasised the need for a new type of fiction which would reflect the core of life itself. To these writers, reflection of life did not mean the portrayal of surface reality which their predecessors had attempted to do with their literary naturalism. On the contrary, the rendering of reality, to Virginia Woolf and her literary counterparts, was the reproduction of the essence of human nature.

In their rejection of traditional narrative techniques and definitions of reality, they were aiming to capture and examine human consciousness. This concern was best voiced by Virginia Woolf, when she summed up the objections of innovators like herself to the existing formula of writing fiction 'in the following manner:

Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless, we go on persevering conscientiously constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So_much of the enormous labour of

proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in his thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccably that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes more and more as time goes by; we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages **fill** themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?³

After emphasising this inadequacy of the traditional novel in general and the Edwardian fiction in particular, Virginia Woolf outlined the objectives of the new writers as follows:

Look within life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. The mind receives a myriad of impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment the importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? We are not pleading merely for courage and sincerity; we are suggesting that the proper stuff of fiction is a little other than custom would have as believe it.⁴

As it has been pointed out, "it is roughly true that the history of the novel has always been divided between those who were excited by their subject matter and those who were primarily concerned with the shaping of what they had to say. Needless to say, the constant preoccupation of the serious novelist is to find some form which most completely expresses the nature of the material he has before his mind."⁵ Several novelists started looking for a new form of fiction which would be able to convey life and reality as they comprehended it. Aided by the findings in philosophy and psychology and inspired by the French writers Edourd Dujardin and Marcel Proust, writers like James Joyce dedicated themselves to evolve a new kind of fiction which would enable the reader to comprehend life in the right perspective. The outcome of this search for a perfect form culminated in the origin and development of the stream of consciousness novel in English.

The credit of authoring the first stream of consciousness fiction in English goes to Dorothy Richardson (1873-1957) whose **Pointed Roofs**, considered to be the first stream of consciousness novel worth its name, was published in 1915. According to Shiv Kumar, "to Dorothy Richardson, although a minor novelist as compared

with Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, is due the credit of being the earliest novelist to make a consistent use of the stream of consciousness method."⁶

Though she "was the first novelist, antedating Joyce and Virginia Woolf, to use interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness",⁷ she was overshadowed by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf in the history of the stream of consciousness novel. Hailing from a poor family, she was obliged to earn her living from an early age and had an unhappy personal life as her lover, H.G.Weils, the novelist, had ditched her after a brief affair which ended in pregnancy. Then she became an assistant to a dentist and to supplement her income she started writing literary reviews for periodicals. After experiencing the rigours of life, ultimately she settled down to a life of peace and crativity. An autobiographical writer, she "transmuted her own personal experience into fiction by projecting herself in her heroine Miriam Henderson",⁸ whose life she portrays in her twelve volume series called **Pilgrimage**. A strong advocate of feminism, she began to look for a form which would adequately express feminine sensibility. Influenced by the writings of Jane Austen, George Eliot and the feminist thinkers of the day, "she brought out the stream of consciousness method into English fiction out of determination to match the masculine novel of objective reality with a feminine subjectivity."⁹ When she said 'feminine subjectivity' she was referring to the certain feminine reflections found in Jane Austen's novels of sensibility. Another important influence on her was "Henry James, who certainly might have taught her one part of the technique, that of 'keeping the reader incessantly watching the conflict of human forces through the eye of a single observer'.¹⁰ But she differed from Henry James in that she did not identify herself with characters other than the protagonist, whereas James keeps changing his point of view from one character to another. Improving upon Henry James's theory and Proust's new experiments, she devised her own technique.

Dorothy Richardson recognised the French novelist Marcel Proust's contribution and realised its potentialities and set her goal in that direction. While complimenting Proust for his efforts, she expressed her opinion about what she herself was attempting to do;

"in the novel, reflections and incidents should be featured; in a drama character and action. The novel must proceed slowly, and the thought process of the principal figure must, by one device or another, hold up the development of the whole."¹¹ Her "genius was essentially poetic with a strong leaning towards the symbolist mode of expression. Her basic intention was to render life not in distinct outlines but in terms of fleeting impressions."¹² With this objective in mind Dorothy Richardson started her twelve volume serial published as individual books between 1915 and 1935. The other volumes, the first being **Pointed Roofs**, are **Backwater** (1916), **Honeycomb** (1917), **Tunnel** (1919), **Deadlock** (1921), **Revolving Nights** (1923), **The Trap** (1925), **Oberland** (1927), **Dawn's Left Hand** (1931), **Clear Horizon** (1935) and **Dimple Hill** (1935).

The Pilgrimage "tells rather the conventional story, partly by inference to references to things past, partly by direct impressionism, of Miriam Henderson through an eighteen year period during which she progresses from the awkwardness and confusion of adolescence to the calm of maturity."¹³ To survey the gist of the series, **The Pilgrimage** deals with the life of Miriam Henderson, who is an

autobiographical character. When the novel opens, Miriam's family is facing a crisis because Mr. Henderson, Miriam's father has become bankrupt and Miriam and her three sisters are left to fend for themselves. Miriam, seventeen, secures a job in a school in Germany but her sojourn in Germany is short as she loses her job. Back in England, she becomes a teacher and meets Perne and Bloom, who become her close friends. She is drawn towards a young man called Ted but their love doesn't materialise because Ted is jealous of her friendship with another friend, Max. But Max is also lost as he dies in an accident. Soon Miriam goes to Brighton to look after her mother, who is dying of cancer. After her mother's death, Miriam proceeds to Wales where she becomes an assistant in a Dental clinic. Here, she comes into contact with Dr. Hannock and Dr. Orly. Through them she meets new people and forms new relationships.

One such relationship is her association with Shatov, a Russian Jew. Shatov proposes to her but Miriam is not able to accept the proposal as Shatov happens to be a Jew. She comes into contact with "Hypo" Wilson and falls in love with him and becomes his mistress as he is already married. But the affair ends shortly because of Wilson's hypocrisy and insincerity to Miriam. Miriam becomes more disturbed than ever and goes to Dimple Hill desiring a life of solitude. There she finds freedom from self that she has all along dreamed of. Finally she returns to London, a mature woman, and is happy to see Shatov married to a close friend of hers. When "Hypo" Wilson returns to her, she sends him on his back as she is mature enough not to be deceived by others or by her own desires.

From this gist of the story, it will be obvious that the entire novel rests on the portrayal of Miriam, the protagonist's inner life. Dorothy Richardson depicts the entire proceedings of this series as the mental impressions of Miriam. "All that she cares to record is that of which alone she is certain, impression following impression in the 'stream of consciousness' in the language appropriate to something so logically inconsequent. She tells us that 'in 1913, the opening pages of the attempted chronicle became the first chapter of "Pilgrimage", written to the accompaniment of a sense of being on a fresh pathway, an adventure so searching and, sometimes, so joyous as to produce a longing for participation/"¹⁴

Thus, **The Pilgrimage**, is the psychic biography of Miriam Henderson. The title **The Pilgrimage** symbolically suggests the evolution of Miriam's self from immature anxiety to calm sobriety. Its structure is "thematic and not chronological. . . The thematic structure is always implicit and is given no explicit support from the conventional devices of narrative, characterization, chronology or the delineation of milieu."¹⁵ The flow of reflections in the protagonist, Miriam Henderson's mind is rendered through interior monologues. This novel "contains in the accepted sense no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe; there is only Miriam Henderson, living from day to day, experiencing, feeling, reacting to the stimuli of the outside world and things; life for Miriam is precisely an incessant shower of innumerable atoms."¹⁶ As Miriam grows from an adolescent girl into a mature woman her evolution is presented from a subjective point of view. Though the author uses the third person pronoun 'she' while describing Miriam's reflections, the entire concentration is only on the thoughts, memories and impressions of Miriam. To cite an example, when Miriam thinks of her proposed visit to Germany, Dorothy Richardson introduces a long interior monologue, taking the reader into Miriam's psyche. Miriam's expectations, her

likes and dislikes, memories of her past and anxiety about her future are all at once presented in the form of broken musings:

There would be a garden and German springs and summers and sunsets and strong kind arms and a shoulder. She would grow so happy. No one would recognize her as the same person. She would wear a band of turquoise-blue velvet ribbon round her hair and look at the mountains . . . No good. She could never get out to that. Never. She could not pretend long enough. Everything would be at an end long before there was any chance of her turning into a German woman. Certainly with a German man she would be very angry at once. She thought of the men she had seen-in the streets, in the cafes and gardens, the masters in the school, photographs in the girls' albums. They had all offended her at once. . . ,¹⁷ .

The entire narrative is carried forward only by such reflections and impressions of Miriam. In this regard, May Sinclair pointed out that the novel is a series of indeterminate narrative woven round the protagonist Miriam Henderson and observed, "the moments of Miriam's consciousness pass one by one overlapping; moments tense with vibration, moments drawn out fine, almost to snapping point . . . there is no drama, no situation, no set sense. Nothing happens. It is life going on and on. It is Miriam's stream of consciousness going on and on."¹⁸ May Sinclair used William James's phrase to "denote the new method of rendering consciousness in itself as it flows from moment to moment."¹⁹ But Dorothy Richardson said that the term "fountain of consciousness"²⁰ would be more appropriate to describe the thought current of her heroine, Miriam. But William James's phrase applied by May Sinclair has become the most commonly accepted term, not only for Dorothy Richardson's technique but also for the new form of English fiction.

Though Dorothy Richardson introduced this technique to English fiction, she did not conduct any experiments with 'time' like Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Moreover, her contribution is none too significant when compared to Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and today she is only of historical importance. As it has been pointed out, "critical neglect of her works is all the more remarkable in view of the adulation accorded to fellow pioneers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Certainly Dorothy Richardson has never received the attention her position warrants."²¹

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