

Brian McFarlane: 'The Getting of Wisdom': Not 'Merry' at All

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HENRY Handel Richardson is not an author noted for her lightness of touch, so that when she describes *The Getting of Wisdom* as a 'merry little book',¹ as Nettie Palmer tells us she did repeatedly, we may be forgiven for questioning her evaluation. True, many of its episodes are comically intended, but its implications are essentially painful, much nearer in kind and intensity to those of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* than might first be supposed. Like the *Mahony* trilogy, which it precedes, it also seems to begin as a *milieu* study; unlike the trilogy, it seems to end on a note of hope and resilience. As in *Mahony* and, indeed, *Maurice Guest*, the *milieu* gradually ceases to be the focus for the author's powers, a fact which most commentators on the novel have noted and which Richardson herself confirmed.² I want to suggest that, despite Laura's exhilarating run down the avenue at the end, *The Getting of Wisdom* is at heart grim in its view of life; that the run is, in the over-all view of the novel, not much more than a gesture on the author's part—and a misleading one.

Dorothy Green, in her relentlessly biographical approach to Richardson's fiction, an approach which sheds disproportionately little *critical* light on the novels themselves, is right in claiming that '*The Getting of Wisdom* is an amusing book in many ways, but it is not the merry tale its author claimed it to be'.³ She does not, however, pursue this idea as far as she might. There is comedy in, for instance, the way Laura imagines her arrival at school and the ironic contrast of the actual arrival, but it is not the comedy that stays in the mind. Rather, there is a much more acutely felt sense of oppressiveness as the school closes in on Laura and of the abrasiveness of most of her contacts there. Richardson has no sparkling gift for comedy; the comic episodes are only just amusing; and what really matters to her is the pain associated with Laura's growth. I do not think Mrs Green (or any other discussion of the novel I know) has adequately stressed the darkness of the book's vision of that growth.

Richardson is a novelist whose powers are most notably drawn by the spectacle of disintegration, failure, and decay. Her responses to the more positive aspects of human life—like the colonial success stories in *Richard Mahony*—usually sound more dutiful than persuaded. If one describes *The Getting of Wisdom* as a growth towards Laura's (even partial) self-knowledge, I think one is not giving sufficient weight to the bleakly pessimistic undertow to the novel. The 'wisdom' Laura gets is largely a matter of the corruption or the subduing of her own best instincts. Her 'desire to please'⁴ quickly leads to humiliation and the recognition that 'divergence from the norm' (p.46) is to be avoided at all costs. She is at first an oddity, but a likable oddity. Quickly, though, she learns the wisdom of conformity and does her best to practise it. This wisdom involves her in subterfuges (both small and large), in currying favour by siding with the stronger party (she joins, for example, in the laughter against the girl whose uncle runs a newspaper, p.96), in lying to impress others and to feed her vanity, in the growth of jealous distrust in personal relations. Her 'natural, easy frankness [is] all but ... successfully educated out of her' (p.121).

The drama of *The Getting of Wisdom* is chiefly painful: an instinctive honesty of response is seen to be a dangerous attribute; to be wholly yourself is apt to make you disagreeable to others and a trial to yourself; to learn to cope with the world is found to be largely a matter of learning to deceive others—and, on occasion yourself; 'the getting of wisdom', at least as it happens at the girls' boarding school, is not an expansive process but one of diminution. Nettie Palmer invokes *Huckleberry Finn* as a comparison;⁵ so should I, but not to the same end. Huck does genuinely grow from his experiences. He doesn't entirely shake off the impulse to conformity, but Twain has shown us enough evidence of the way Huck meets the imaginative challenges of the river and the moral challenges of life on its banks to give us some hope that Huck may grow to be wholly himself and perhaps to be a whole man. There are real points of comparison between

the two books—the two protagonists are, for instance, continually being made to distinguish between the appearance and the reality of situations—but, though *Huck Finn* seems to end on a note of confinement and *The Getting of Wisdom* on one of release, my sense of the novels as a whole leads me to feel that the reverse of these endings would be more truly reflective of the tone of each novel.

Like *Maurice Guest* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, *The Getting of Wisdom* accepts as a fact that life is a stultifying process; most people don't notice this (itself a grim comment on Richardson's view of most people); those like Laura who do are doomed to appear indecorous, wilful, and prickly, when they push against its constraints. More often and more disturbingly, even the Lauras of the world try to do what the world expects of them, and in doing so become less wholly alive, less wholly themselves. I do not mean that they ought to develop independently of the society in which they live, but that Richardson seems not to believe in or, at least, is unable to show an exciting interaction of individual impulses and social claims. When the former are not merely destructive, they are likely to be naggingly constrained by the latter. The incipient artist, which is how Richardson wants us to see Laura by the book's end,⁶ must always aspire to distinguish the true from the false in her society. So, it might be added, must anybody who wants to be grown up; but there is a special onus on those who want to recreate certain aspects of living in art. In a sense Laura's awareness of her difference, what Richardson has described as 'the taint of her calling',⁷ tends to shut a good deal of life away from her. She achieves a valuable detachment but perhaps at the expense of a fruitful involvement. Jane Austen was a sharp critic of aspects of her society even as she drew strength and support *from* that society; Richardson's vision of her world seems to offer nothing steady or steadying, so that Laura finds little but empty decorums and callous snobberies, in and outside the school. Unconsciously pursuing her true self in *The Getting of Wisdom*, Laura is in the end solitary: that is where her discriminations (and Richardson's) have left her. She has seen too many relationships and attitudes exposed and crumbled; and, in the process, *she* has not necessarily been strengthened and refined.

That final run down the avenue seems an insubstantial 'upbeat' ending when set against what has gone before. By this I mean that Richardson has not adequately persuaded us of the power of Laura's native resilience to rise above the stunting experiences of her schooldays. Too much of the life the novel depicts is seen to be petty and venal, its vistas short and commonplace—and acknowledged as such by the author—for us to accept easily either the run or the more explicitly stated faith in Laura's future:

And Laura? ... She went out from school with the uncomfortable sense of being a square peg, which fitted into none of the round holes of her world; the wisdom she had got, the experience she was richer by, had, in the process of equipping her for life, merely seemed to disclose her unfitness. She could not then know that, even for the squarest peg, the right hole may ultimately be found; seeming unfitness prove to be only another aspect of a peculiar and special fitness many a day came and went before she grasped that, oftentimes, just those mortals who feel cramped and unsure in the conduct of everyday life, will find themselves to rights, with astounding ease, in that freer, more spacious world where no practical considerations hamper, and where the creatures that inhabit dance to their tune: the world where are stored up men's best thoughts, the hopes, and fancies; where the shadow is the substance, and the multitude of business pales before the dream. (pp.233–4)

The eye lights hopefully on 'even for the squarest peg, the right hole may ultimately be found', but almost immediately this is qualified by 'many a day came and went before. ...' In the world as Richardson envisages it, individual fulfilment, on a level beyond the material, is so rare that one doubts if she believes in, can *imagine*, its possibility at all. Nothing of what she has shown us about Laura, whose aspirations are 'large, vague, extemporary' (p.233), can persuade us of the 'astounding ease' with which they will later 'find themselves to rights'. Everything we have learnt about Laura points to a disturbing future for her: the result of a clamping down of her own most interesting possibilities or of pursuing them and finding herself, in consequence, at odds with her world. On the basis of what the book shows us—that is, the nature of Laura's short-lived triumphs and her aching humiliations—we are forced to see Richardson's outlook as deeply pessimistic.

For Richardson, growth is inevitably associated with the idea of decay. Nothing new perhaps in that; but I think it constitutes a major limitation in her work. It limits her view of human possibilities, and, though

she is honest in facing this, she is also tempted into the unpersuasive laboriousness of the passage I have just quoted. Her vision is a dark one and her attempts to offset this with a determinedly positive approach fail to reconcile us to the much more vividly created picture of Laura as a congenital misfit in a world unresponsive to sharply individual 'thoughts ... hopes, and fancies'. Nowhere in this novel, or in the trilogy or *Maurice Guest*, does she convincingly create or suggest her belief in 'that freer, more spacious world'. Her world is inimical to Laura's kind of individuality, to individuality in any form, and it seems less than honest to leave us with an imposed optimistic touch at the end. The glimpses we have been given of life outside the school have for the most part been no less oppressive than that contained within the school's walls.

As the trilogy (*Ultima Thule* particularly) so much more comprehensively shows, Richardson's gifts work much more powerfully in negative ways. In it, it is Mahony's collapse and the hardening of Mary that excite our pity and cause our pain. In *The Getting of Wisdom*, though the whole tone is lighter, it is still the episodes of sharply felt embarrassment, of humiliation, of the decline and corruption so inseparably associated in Richardson's mind with growth, that stay with us. The 'spirit of comedy'⁸ is frequently felt, but it is not a comic novel because its author's vision remains consistent: life's possibilities are limited; try to soar above them and your wings will be clipped; and even the run down the avenue leads to Laura's being rendered 'not much larger than a figure in the background of a picture' and finally 'lost to sight'.

If all this sounds too solemn, and I'm aware that it might, I also want to make clear that it is this underlying vision which gives the book its impressive coherence. It is the discrepancy, ironically perceived, between aspiration and achievement, between appearance and reality, or, in the author's words, the shadow and the substance, that gives the book its shape, not its episodic narrative structure. This sort of discrepancy is, of course, a staple of fiction. With Richardson, one never doubts that the actuality will always be a great deal grimmer than the expectation.

The Getting of Wisdom is a 'school story' only in so far as the school environment serves to reveal to Laura how wide of the mark her expectations have been. One has only to compare her imagined impressive *entrée* into the school (pp.25–6) with the way it in fact happens. From the start Laura experiences a withering rather than the expected flowering of her sense of herself and her life's potential. The passage describing her first appearance in the school's dining-room concludes with her gauchely seating herself before grace is said: 'She felt forlornly miserable under the fire of all these unkind eyes, which took a delight in marking her slips' (p.40). The school's world is one which encourages the acceptable at the expense of the exceptional; one in which facts matter for themselves, not for their usefulness nor for the kinds of impetus they might offer the imagination. As well, she learns that spontaneity may be mistaken for vulgarity. Her flamboyant playing at the Stracheys' musical evening is partly showing off but it is also partly sheer pleasure in the exercise of her own powers. That it shocks to the core all those present is not merely a comment on the inhibiting gentility of the school's standards but an insight into Richardson's view of human life: as a trap for the unwary, as a process in which naturalness and exuberance are no protection or advantage but, in fact, downright hindrances. Experience for Richardson's protagonists is always narrowing or eroding or hardening in its effects. For Laura, natural enthusiasm becomes sly surface conformity, and awkward honesty becomes possessive distrust. For Richardson, to grow is to suffer a loss of innocence without any reassuring gain in experience.

In support of my contention that the book exhibits much more insistently than has commonly been allowed her characteristically bleak view of man's lot, I want to examine briefly three brief episodes: the expulsion of Annie Johns for theft, Laura's dealings with the Literary Society, and her friendship with Evelyn Souttar.

The Annie Johns episode strikes me as central in the getting of Laura's wisdom because it dramatizes both her desperate efforts to conform as far as possible to the behaviour of her fellows and her utter inability to do so, *and*, at the same time, her crucial recognition of this uncomfortable juxtaposition. The chapter begins by acknowledging the difficulty of the enterprise Laura has set herself and the way in which success keeps eluding her best efforts:

You might regulate your outward habit to the last button of what you were expected to wear; you might conceal the tiny flaws and shuffle over the big improprieties in your home life, which were likely to damage your value in the eyes of your companions; you might, in brief,

march in the strictest order along the narrow road laid down for you by these young law-givers, keeping perfect step and time with them: yet of what use were all your pains, if you could not marshal your thoughts and feelings—the very realest part of you—in rank and file as well? ... if these persisted in escaping control? Such was the question which, about this time, began to present itself in Laura's mind. (p.102)

The last sentence is drably unnecessary; the rest of the paragraph, perhaps unduly explicit, nevertheless rehearses very accurately Laura's relentless attempts to be like her companions *and*, intensified by the military overtones, the deadly predictabilities of their code, enacts the kind of effort she makes; the 'ifs' and broken clauses towards the end point the conditions that preclude the orderly control she longs for. That *part* of her longs for, anyway, because one of the book's real achievements is to show Laura's acceptance of her own differentness. By the end of the book she has faced the reality that she is a square peg, even if she is not yet emotionally equipped to deal with the consequences of this wisdom. The Annie Johns episode makes her isolation clear to her; makes clear to her and to us its source; and, perhaps incidentally, gives us our first important suggestion of how this author goes about her work—and the kind of artist Laura will be.

The single-mindedness of the novel is nowhere better seen than here. Annie Johns, to be expelled for theft, is dismissed very curtly as a 'very ugly girl of fourteen with a pasty face, and lank hair that dangled to her shoulders. Her mouth had fallen half open through fear, and she did not shut it all the time she was on view' (p.105). If there is something cruel in this picture, it is perhaps because Richardson wants to keep our eye firmly on Laura and does not want us to be distracted by ready sympathy for the hapless Annie. And it is not sympathy that distracts Laura either. Snarled at by Tilly for staring at Annie, 'she tried to do what was expected of her: to feel a *decent unconcern*' (p.106—my italics, to stress the fact that the sort of conformity that the school enjoins and endorses precludes the inner activity of real feeling). Afterwards, having desperately tried to outdo her friends in revulsion at the crime, Laura is forced to admit to herself that:

... her feelings had been different—there was no denying that. Did she now think back over the half-hour spent in Number One, and act honest Injun with herself [perhaps Laura might have thought of herself in those terms; it is all too easy to attribute them to Richardson], she had to admit that her companions' indignant and horrified aversion to the crime had not been hers, let alone their decent indifference towards the criminal. No, to be candid, she had been deeply interested in the whole affair, had even managed to extract an unseemly amount of entertainment from it. (p.109)

The source of Laura's differentness is her much more vivid apprehension of Annie's plight and this apprehension is to be explained in two ways. First, 'She understood what it would mean to lack your tram-fare on a rainy morning ... because a lolly shop had stretched out its octopus arms after you' (p.105). That is, Laura's understanding is based partly on having shared the experience or one like it; there is thus an autobiographically-rooted empathy with the thief. The next sentence—'She could imagine, too, with a shiver, how easy it would be, the loss of the first pennies having remained undiscovered, to go on to threepenny bits, and from these to six-pences'—offers the second explanation. Laura's *imagination*, fired by Mr Strachey's factual account, leads her easily to construct in her own mind the likely development of events, to sort out the culprit's motives, and it is this which makes it impossible for her to respond with the 'decent unconcern' of the others. It is not pity she feels, nor any other of the common reactions, but, rather, a sense of passionate excitement at the drama of the occasion. Richardson uses the scene to crystallize the peculiar sharpness of Laura's perceptions, to prepare us for the intensity of her later feeling for Evelyn ('Laura was shot through by an ecstatic quiver, such as she had felt only once in her life before', p.107), and, perhaps most important, to show us the relationship between what an artist knows and feels *and* how she articulates this. Laura does not yet know how to value her response to Annie's situation, but she has made a first—and wholly unwilling—step towards knowing that she is different and has arrived at some explanation of the fact:

The real reason of her pleasurable absorption was, she supposed, that she had understood Annie Johns' motive better than anyone else. ... And her companions had been quick

to recognize her difference of attitude, or they would never have dared to accuse her of sympathy with a thief, or to doubt her chorusing assertion with a sneer. (p. 109)

The cool assessment implied in 'pleasurable absorption' suggests the conscious artist's appraisal of her degree of emotional involvement *after* the event: it hardly tallies with 'Laura's heart began to palpitate' and 'the ecstatic quiver' of the page before. I labour this point because I think it shows in embryo a real insight into Richardson's methods. It is important for her to have felt an emotion truthfully or to have observed a situation accurately before she can *make* anything. Laura, pretty clearly the Artist as a Young Girl, has felt the ecstatic quiver, has 'watched lynx-eyed, every inch of Annie Johns' progress', and now, at a remove from the incident, is assessing her own part in it. She has been a passionately committed observer, and as she tries later to sort out her responses she is profoundly disturbed at what she finds in herself. Strength of feeling and honesty in facing this invariably brings no joy. James Joyce's Stephen arrives at some chilly perceptions about himself and his world too. However, Joyce, through his more comprehensive and humane view of the processes of growth, is able as Richardson is not to make us feel that experience can strengthen as well as abrade.

The quality of Laura's imagination is seen repeatedly to leave her exposed in the narrowly circumscribed world of the school. For a brief hour it makes her the centre of an admiring audience as she describes her visit to the curate's house, egged on by the girls eager for details of depravities in the vestry. Laura sees lying as a means of ensuring success (a typically Richardson comment on the nature of Laura's 'wisdom'), and, equally important, she is astonished at her own inventive facility: 'And now, by her own experience, Laura was led to the following discovery: that, if you can imagine a thing with sufficient force, you can induce your imagining to become reality' (p.138). And after the visit she finds

... the plunge once taken, it was astounding how easy it became to make up things about the Shepherds; the difficulty was to know where to stop. Fictitious details crowded thick and fast upon her. ... But all the same she was not idle: she polished away at her flimflams, bringing them nearer and nearer probability, never, thanks to her sound memory, contradicting herself or making a slip, and always able to begin again from the beginning. (p.151)

The whole episode is only mildly amusing and is drawn out beyond its intrinsic entertainment value. What stay in the mind are Laura's reflections on what you can persuade people to accept as truth, and the feeling that Richardson is here offering a sort of apologia for fiction. (As Leonie Kramer has noted in her extended account of Richardson's 'enslavement to facts',⁹ she was not always able to 'induce [her] imagining to become reality'.) The value placed on a 'sound memory', on 'never ... contradicting herself or making a slip' is unmistakable and has resonances that go well beyond this episode. At the heart of Laura's successful mendacity is her discovery of the relation between imaginative and factual reality. For Richardson to achieve imaginative reality required a basis in fact, as it does for Laura. The Annie Johns affair has taught Laura something about the quality of her perceptions; her fanciful account of the curate's lustful forays against her virtue teaches her something further about the nature and power of the imagination. It is her experience with the Literary Society that brings this aspect of the novel under the closest scrutiny.

In her attempts at rehabilitating herself in the eyes of the girls, Laura has tried slavishly to imitate Mary Pidwall, the school's paragon of aseptic rectitude; and 'a growing pedantry in trifles warped both her imagination and her sympathies: under the aegis of M.P., she rapidly learned to be the latter's rival in an adherence to bald fact, and in her contumely for those who departed from it' (p.189). Like Richardson's other protagonists, Laura habitually runs to excess, even in her concern for literal truth, which she sees as the remedy for the wild fabrications of the past. This passion for 'bald fact' and her clandestine reading of *A Doll's House*, which was 'all about the oddest, yet the most commonplace people' (p.191), are the two chief factors which influence her performance with the Literary Society. In spite of her strenuous emulation of M.P., 'her young, romantic soul rose in arms against this [i.e., Ibsen], its first bluff contact with realism, against such a dispiriting sobriety of outlook', and for her maiden contribution to the society she writes, in reaction, a wildly romantic tale of Venetian assassins. In next trying to follow the lead of her friend Cupid who can 'expand infinitely little into infinitely much' (p.193), Laura decides she has 'no wealth of words at her disposal to deck it [her 'little incident'] out' (p.195). It is not merely 'a wealth of words' that Laura lacks; like her creator, she needs a solid basis of fact to initiate the confident release of her imaginative

powers; again like Richardson, Laura needs to learn exactly how *much* fact is necessary to produce the effect of verisimilitude. Her second performance is a disastrous twenty-page account of 'A Day at School' in which she 'consistently set down detail on detail' and which bores her audience to madness. The third, and successful, narrative describes an imaginary excursion to the hills near her home, and 'neither this particular excursion, nor the exciting incident which she described with all the aplomb of an eye-witness, had ever taken place. That is to say: not a word of her narration was true, but every word of it might have been true' (p.196).

This passage offers an accurate account of how Richardson at her best uses fact. There is a sense, of course, in which all novelists are drawing on 'fact', but in this book she is much more overtly autobiographical in her reliance on fact than most authors; and I adhere to this in the face of Dorothy Green's exhaustive charting of Richardson's deviations from the minutiae of her life at the Presbyterian Ladies' College. Like Martin Boyd, she uses and skilfully re-arranges aspects of her own life in the making of fiction. Her own account in *Myself When Young* of her friendship with the real-life counterpart of Evelyn Souttar points to the kind of indebtedness to fact that I have in mind.

Richardson draws obvious strengths and weaknesses from her autobiographically-centred methods. She could never be guilty of Laura's first failure; but she could very easily be guilty, and in *The Young Cosima* and stretches of *Australia Felix* is guilty, of the tedium Laura achieves in Opus No. 2. Lacking Cupid's inventiveness in making small things matter Richardson has no sure way of bringing her minor characters to life. (Just a moment's reflection on what Dickens does with, for instance, Trabb's boy in *Great Expectations* will pinpoint this inadequacy.) This matters less in *The Getting of Wisdom* where everything is secondary to Laura's development than it does in *Australia Felix* where we are distracted by too many lives which are not imagined with enough vitality to engage us and which tend to obscure rather than illuminate the drama of Mahony's life.

However, just as Laura finds how to engross her audience by the imaginative transmutation of the literal truth so, at her finest, Richardson approached greatness in her re-arrangement of the facts of her parents' and on her own life in the latter half of *Richard Mahony*. '... every word of it might have been true': we could say that of *Ultima Thule* but by that stage of the novel we no longer care about this sort of factual accuracy. What matters is that Richardson has enlisted our imaginative sympathy with Mary, Mahony, and Cuffy. Similarly, in *The Getting of Wisdom*, what matters in the end is not how truthful a picture of the author's schooldays it presents but the degree of our commitment to Laura's growth. It is based on one kind of truth but it is a work of art only because it has achieved another and more important kind.

There is real buoyancy in this brief account (Chapter 21) of Laura's grasping the idea of artistic truth and the way she hugs this knowledge to herself. This is the book's most hopeful aspect, but it does not end there. If it did, one might have agreed about its being essentially a 'merry little book', but the book's last chapters are dominated by the debilitating effect on Laura's life of her sudden, possessive adoration of the older girl, Evelyn Souttar. This section of the book is based on a real-life friendship that was intense and long-lasting, and Richardson, drawing on an emotion she has known intimately, faces the pain of jealous passion with impressive honesty. It is again characteristic, though, that the relationship that most powerfully draws out her fire in this novel is one which in the end brings no joy. It reinforces my sense of her preoccupation with the disintegration that inevitably accompanies all human growth. Laura's feeling for Evelyn drains emotionally, and threatens her health and her capacity for daily living as well. Richardson exposes it all with her usual clear-eyed honesty, despite her claim in *Myself When Young* that she 'deliberately weakened ... [her] headstrong fancy for the girl called there "Evelyn"'. To have touched this in other than lightly would have been out of keeping with the tone of the book. The real thing was neither light nor amusing.¹⁰ Nor is the rendering of it in *The Getting of Wisdom*, and one of its most disturbing facets is its lack of mutuality.

What Laura offers Evelyn is a slavish and ultimately tyrannical devotion; all she receives in return is an indolent affection based as much on laziness as any more positive feeling. It is Evelyn who takes the first step by inviting the not-very-popular Laura to share her room, for Laura

... had but a small talent for friendship; she did not grasp the constant give-and-take intimacy implies; the liking of others had to be brought to her, unsought, she, on the other

hand, free to stand back and consider whether or not the feeling was worth returning. And friends are not made in this fashion.

But Evelyn had stoutly, and without waiting for permission, crossed the barrier
(p.200)

This passage is interesting first as a measure of the sort of openness the school has discouraged in Laura. When she arrived there 'the desire to please, to be liked by all the world, was the strongest her young soul knew' (p.35), but the school has taught her caution, and the growth of her own individuality, despite the school's best efforts to restrict this, has led her to make some sharp discriminations. She has been ready to toady to Mary Pidwall but at the same time to despise her narrow self-righteousness, and she has elsewhere sensed vulgarity of mind even where she has courted favour. What the school has done for her in personal terms is to educate the spontaneity out of her so that she can now 'stand back and consider whether or no the feeling was worth returning'.

Evelyn's proffered friendship at first flatters Laura but it quickly becomes clear that much of Evelyn's good-nature, genuine though it is, is a careless thing. For her, 'it was less trouble to be merry and amiable than to put oneself out to be selfish, which also meant standing a fire of disagreeable words and looks; and then, too, it was really hard for one who had never had a whim crossed to be out of humour' (p.201). With painful accuracy, Richardson delineates the disparity between the degrees of engagement on the part of each girl. This is a good example of the way she uses but transforms the 'facts' of autobiography to achieve a different fictional bias. She tells us in *Myself When Young*:

In those days school-authorities had not begun to look with jaundiced eyes on girlish intimacies. We might indulge them as we chose; and even when it must have been clear to the blindest where I was heading, the two of us continued to share a room. Some may see in my infatuation merely an overflow of feelings that had been denied a more normal outlet. But there was more to it than that. The attraction this girl had for me was so strong that few others have surpassed it. Nor did it exist on my side only. The affinity was mutual; and that is harder to understand. For she was eighteen and grown-up, and I but a skinny little half-grown. (p.71)

This needs little comment. It is clear how extensively Richardson is drawing on a particular emotional recollection in the Laura-Evelyn episode but 'mutual' is not the word for the novel's relationship. Evelyn likes and is amused by Laura, but Laura's response is acutely painful for her and Richardson's honesty in 'reporting' the stages of the relationship in the novel makes us feel this pain with an intensity that foreshadows the harrowing last volume of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*:

Laura, not altogether blind to externals, saw that her companions made fun of her But at the present pass, the strength of her feelings quite out-ran her capacity for self-control; she was unable to disguise what she felt, and though it made her the laughing-stock of the school.
(p.208)

Richardson is an author who sees loss of one's dignity as the almost inevitable corollary of feeling too strongly, and for her, the rarest spirits are those most prone to such feeling, and consequently to such loss. And nowhere in this or any other Richardson novel do we find dramatized a belief in the possibility of a mutually fulfilling, satisfying relationship.

For all that the novel ends with that liberating run down the avenue, the authentically Richardsonian note is struck in the following sentence in which Laura faces up to the coming separation from Evelyn:

A further effect of the approaching separation was to bring home to her a sense of the fleetingness of things; she began to grasp that, everywhere and always, even while you revelled in them, things were perpetually rushing to a close; and the fact of them being things you loved, or enjoyed, was powerless to diminish the speed at which they escaped you.
(pp.214-5)

If it were *merely* the ‘fleetingness of things’ that Richardson left us with, we should be less disturbed. It is not just that the end is in sight in every human life, in every human relationship: what disturbs us more is the sense always present, in both *The Getting of Wisdom* and *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* that growth and decay exist side by side; more, are inextricably mingled. It is not just a matter of time; Richardson is preoccupied with the notion of life as a series of disintegrations. Wisdom got is pain felt and candour lost. There is no consoling notion that pain and grief enrich our perceptions on the beautiful and the joyous; they are simply necessary, unavoidable, and *non-fructifying* aspects of the process known as life. Joyce can see the limitations of Stephen Dedalus's achievements but at the same time he clearly values their significance in Stephen's growth. Richardson is too preoccupied with what she sees as the inevitable corruption and disintegration that accompany growth for her to give us an adequate sense of the excitement that can also be part of the process.

For Richardson, the making of fiction is the rendering of this inescapable grimness. Her reliance on a basis of fact accounts, not just for the solidity of her best work, but also for the disquieting if austere honest recognition of the place of suffering in all human life. *The Getting of Wisdom* is a rigorous and intelligent appraisal of the truth as its author sees it, and I value it for that and for its discriminating sympathies.

1. Nettie Palmer, *Henry Handel Richardson* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson), p.29.
2. ‘Notes on My books’, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 1940.
3. Dorothy Green, *Ulysses Bound*, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1973), p.242.
4. *The Getting of Wisdom* (London: Heinemann, 1961), p.35. Subsequent references to this edition are given in brackets after quotations.
5. Nettie Palmer, pp.31–2.
6. Richardson explicitly endorsed this view in ‘Notes on My Books’.
7. Richardson, ‘Notes on My Books’.
8. Nettie Palmer, p.41.
9. Leonie Kramer, ‘Henry Handel Richardson’, in *The Literature of Australia*, ed. Geoffrey Dutton. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p.328.
10. *Myself When Young* (London: Heinemann, 1948), p.70.

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