

Experimenting  
on the Borders of  
Modernism

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DOROTHY  
RICHARDSON'S  
*Pilgrimage*



Kristin Bluemel

THE UNIVERSITY  
OF GEORGIA PRESS  
ATHENS AND LONDON

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FOR MY PARENTS,  
*Paulette and Van Bluemel,*  
AND MY SISTER,  
*Lee*

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# Editorial Method



The 1979 Virago edition of *Pilgrimage* serves as the standard reference throughout this study. To emphasize *Pilgrimage's* distinctive form and equally distinctive publishing history, parenthetical documentation lists the title or partial title of each book-chapter of *Pilgrimage* followed by page numbers. References to articles in the *Dental Record* cite month, year, and page number of the relevant issue.

For those who are writing about *Pilgrimage*, Richardson's liberal use of ellipses poses special problems. Editorial conventions fail to take into account the need to distinguish between the ellipses appearing in an original text and those used by critics and reviewers to indicate breaks in quoted materials. In this book, all ellipses that are not enclosed by brackets in citations from *Pilgrimage* are part of the original text; all ellipses that are enclosed by brackets in citations from *Pilgrimage* indicate omission of material from the original document.

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# Contents



Acknowledgments

ix

Editorial Method

xi

Introduction

1

1. Reviewing the Case of Dorothy Richardson

12

2. The Missing Sex of *Pilgrimage*

36

3. Science, Class, and the Problem of the Body

76

4. The Quest for an Ending

122

Afterword

169

Appendix: Publishing History of *Pilgrimage* and Short Fiction

173

Notes

175

Selected Bibliography

193

Index

203

# Introduction



## Beginning an Unfinished Whole

When Dorothy Richardson's *Pointed Roofs* appeared in 1915, it impressed England's literary community as something genuinely new. Although it looked innocent enough, it betrayed the conventions of standard narrative by being, in Richardson's words, "a single chapter of an unfinished whole" which "properly speaking, has no 'story'" (*Windows* 191). Richardson gave the title *Pilgrimage* to this unfinished whole, this narrative without a story. The experimental nature of her larger project meant that readers of *Pointed Roofs* encountered a "book-chapter" that allowed the contents of a woman's mind to determine both the subject and form of what was to become known as the first stream-of-consciousness novel in English. Over the course of more than forty years, the consciousness of the woman in question, Miriam Henderson, would come to occupy twelve additional book-chapters and more than two thousand pages before Dorothy Richardson's death in 1957 brought an end to the unfinished pilgrimage of her heroine.

At the beginning of *Pointed Roofs*, we meet Miriam on the eve of her departure for a teaching position in a German finishing school. She is the rebel of the four Henderson sisters, the only one seeking relief from the crisis of their father's bankruptcy through work rather than marriage. She is seventeen years old, and her voice, interests, and dilemmas are those of an awkward, bookish, and snobbish adolescent. By the end of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam, still unmarried and bookish, flourishes as an independent and worldly writer in her forties, refined and strengthened by years of intellectual and romantic involvement with the figures in Edwardian London's political and literary circles. Of course it is the innumerable details that fall between these two points, the representation of changing contexts and characters, that constitute the novel's claim upon our attention. Probably the most important of these changes is Miriam's move from the suburbs of London to Mrs. Bailey's rooming house on the

outskirts of Bloomsbury. Having given up the jobs as teacher and governess that occupy her in the first volume of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam takes a post as a secretary in a Wimpole Street dental surgery, where she earns one pound a week. Her knowledge of a public world continues to expand as she explores much of her beloved London, traveling by foot, bus, and train to meet with the musicians, writers, socialists, feminists, and other “cranks” who make up the social fabric of her life and the novel’s fiction.

That we still experience her story as “something genuinely new” is in part a result of the complex relationship between the private and public worlds we traverse in the course of Miriam’s pilgrimage. The novelty of our extended, unauthorized journey through the interior spaces of a female character’s consciousness is matched only by the novelty of Miriam’s unauthorized journey through the public spaces of a male-dominated culture. Other writers have certainly told stories about the private thoughts and public adventures of young women, but few and far between are those who allow their heroines to arrive at the end of their novels with their independence, good fortune, or good name intact. The fates of Clarissa Harlowe, Catherine Earnshaw, Dorothea Brooke, and Isabel Archer are too familiar and dreary to merit rehearsal here; consideration of more contemporary heroines is not any more cheering. Woolf’s Rachel Vinrace dies of a tropical fever at the end of *The Voyage Out*, Stein’s unfortunate Melanctha contracts TB, Lawrence’s Gudrun is banished to Dresden and his Ursula dedicated to a man who will always get the last word. Clarissa Dalloway may be the most famous modernist heroine who, like Miriam, is allowed happiness and survival, but she did not greet the public until 1925, ten years after Miriam Henderson made her debut.

By that time Richardson had published seven additional book-chapters of *Pilgrimage* and reviewers were comparing her novel not only to the “feminine” novels of other women writers like Woolf, but also to experimental, stream-of-consciousness novels by male writers. Literary critics still link *Pilgrimage* to the texts of the two most famous practitioners of the form, Joyce and Proust, although as Richardson’s biographer Gloria Glikin Fromm points out, these “male” and “female” stream-of-consciousness novels were initially read by different groups of people who did not relate the authors’ projects to one another. The most dramatic connection between the work of Richardson and Joyce took place when selections of *Interim* were suppressed along with *Ulysses* by the New York Post Office’s seizure of the *Little Review* in 1920. By this

point, Richardson was following Joyce's career and writings with interest, and she positively devoured anything she could find by Proust. Richardson read and reread *Swann's Way* in 1922 when Scott Moncrieff's translation first became available to English audiences. In a letter of December 1922, Richardson described Proust's work as "a thousand things at once, all overwhelming," but did not believe he was trying to write, as some had suggested, "through consciousness." Instead, she decided Proust was writing "about consciousness, a vastly different enterprise," one which allowed him to "let himself go completely & write, as he wishes" (*Windows* 64).<sup>1</sup> The difference of Proust's enterprise from her own did not keep Richardson from volunteering herself to Knopf, the publishers of the English edition of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, as a successor to Scott Moncrieff immediately upon hearing of his death in 1930 (Fromm, *DR* 242).

Richardson herself guaranteed the continued comparison of *Pilgrimage* to the above mentioned works through her references to Woolf, Joyce, and Proust in the 1938 foreword to her novel. Her acknowledgment of the kinship of their projects is not generously made. Richardson is jealous of her status as a pioneer of a distinctive form of British writing and regrets that the "lonely track" she discovered in 1913 has since been transformed into a "populous highway." She alludes to the significant contributions of her more successful contemporaries, Woolf and Joyce, but refuses to give them additional publicity by naming them outright: "Amongst those who had simultaneously entered it [the lonely track], two figures stood out. One a woman mounted upon a magnificently caparisoned charger, the other a man walking, with eyes devoutly closed, weaving as he went a rich garment of new words wherewith to clothe the antique dark material of his engrossment" ("Foreword" 10). The ambivalence implied by Richardson's decision to hide the names of Woolf and Joyce is only somewhat moderated in her discussions of Proust and Henry James. She grants that James played the role of "pathfinder" for the "fresh pathway" of *Pointed Roofs*, but in a letter to the novelist E. B. C. (Emily Beatrix Coursolles) Jones, she notes that "all Henry James books are conceived & written in the vasty deep—he a large pale motionless octopus with huge eyes, suddenly throwing out huge tentacles" (*Windows* 53). The criticism latent in this odd metaphor becomes clearer as Richardson goes on to compare James's work to that of her friend, whom Richardson claims is not "& now never will be, in danger of motionless octopusity" (53).

Regardless of Richardson's response to James's narrative style, her novel is deeply indebted to his novels' techniques of representing consciousness. The difference or "newness" of Richardson's style of representing Miriam's thoughts in comparison to the writings of someone like James is her singular, disciplined exclusion of any other perspective from her novel. In 1912, when Richardson isolated herself in a rented house in Cornwall in order to write her first novel, her efforts foundered until she realized that her heroine was as solitary as herself—that "no one else was 'there to describe her'" (Fromm, *DR* 66). Although there are occasional signs of a narrative presence in *Pilgrimage*, that presence has disguised itself so thoroughly in Miriam's habits of speech and thought that we read the novel as an unmediated encounter with the consciousness of its heroine. This effect, the illusion of giving the reader direct access to the character, is achieved by the very first words of *Pilgrimage*: "Miriam left the gaslit hall and went slowly upstairs. The March twilight lay upon the landings, but the staircase was almost dark. The top landing was quite dark and silent. There was no one about. It would be quiet in her room. She could sit by the fire and be quiet and think things over until Eve and Harriett came back with the parcels. She would have time to think about the journey and decide what she was going to say to the Fräulein" (*Pointed* 15). We are unceremoniously dropped into the middle of a scene, deprived of the information about characters and setting that usually establishes the dimensions of a novel's fictional universe. Already it is clear that we have been abandoned by author and narrator and must make sense of this story on our own. All we know is that someone called Miriam is at the center of our narrative world, that she is conscious of light and shadow and her immediate physical surroundings, and that she is concerned about people who are somehow related to a journey. Unlike James, Richardson makes us feel our isolation by immediately greeting us with a sentence that could only be uttered by a character; "It would be quiet in her room" is not an authorial prediction, but rather Miriam's thought. If we want to figure out who this Miriam is or why it is important that her room is quiet, we simply have to keep reading.

The originality of this beginning may be measured by its difference from the opening paragraph of *The Ambassadors*. Admittedly, the beginning of James's novel is not much more accommodating than that of *Pilgrimage* as it too neglects to mention who the characters are or indicate the motives for their thoughts or actions. It does, however, provide the comfort of a narrative presence, an authoritative "I" who emerges

mid-paragraph to explain something about the protagonist's preoccupations. This "I" is seldom seen thereafter, but its willingness to reveal itself at the start is one of the factors that separates James's and Richardson's experiments with narrative.

Richardson's variations on James's narrative techniques are modest in comparison to her experiments with standard rules for punctuation.<sup>2</sup> In the eyes of her editors, her most infamous practice is her frequent use of ellipses or suspension points to break up sentences or separate them from one another. These ellipses indicate gaps in Miriam's conscious thought, and depending on the circumstances, they may signal the passing of time, the straying of attention, or the pressure of unconscious thought. As Jean Radford explains in her book *Dorothy Richardson*:

while the narrator is allowed to present only the *consciousness* of the protagonist, the text represents the *unconscious* forces working within and *through* that consciousness. The words on the page (the representation of consciousness) are supplemented by a range of typographical devices: ellipses, italics, segmented passages, gaps and spaces in the text. These devices represent the repressions and gaps in consciousness, or that which is left unsaid or is unsayable. . . . And in the text there are actually *printed silences* to register the activities of the unconscious which neither speech nor writing can reach. (69–70)<sup>3</sup>

This explanation of the relation between punctuation and consciousness, form and thought-content, is an example of a symptomatic reading of the text that employs the kinds of strategies Richardson herself uses in her reading of the topography of Edwardian London. To note the methodological connection between Radford's psychoanalytic criticism and Richardson's social analysis is to point toward an instructive paradox of form; the same materials that signal the limited perspective of *Pilgrimage* have the potential to convey multiple social and political meanings. Radford's discussion of ellipses in *Pilgrimage* implies that the forms that signal the private world of Miriam's unconscious gesture toward the political unconscious of the narrative's public world.

Punctuation is not the only form that has the potential to function as a bridge between changing private and public meanings in *Pilgrimage*. One of the novel's most obvious formal shifts is the replacement of third-person narrated monologue with first-person quoted monologue. In *Pointed Roofs* Miriam is most often referred to in the third person; in

*March Moonlight*, the last book-chapter of *Pilgrimage*, we move back and forth between third-person narration in Miriam's voice and first-person utterances of her thoughts.<sup>4</sup> A chapter that is dedicated to Miriam's first-person meditation upon a letter from her friend Jean ("And her only reference to the party was a demand to know what I had been discussing" [558]), occasionally shifts to a third-person narration about Miriam ("Turning back to read the end, Miriam welcomed as accompaniment to the undesired excursion, the odour of wood-smoke" [577]). This is another example of how *Pilgrimage* breaks the rules of narrative, demanding a corresponding break in readers' novel-reading habits.

To emphasize the role of rules of narrative and habits of reading is to insist once again upon the implicitly collective, social nature of *Pilgrimage's* experimental forms. This emphasis on literary form as social form provides the framework for an understanding of *Pilgrimage's* experiments as "authored" by readers instead of the writer. This counter-logical claim challenges the assumption of traditional criticism of *Pilgrimage*, which burdens Richardson with the sole responsibility for breaking the potential meaning of the text through formal experiment. Typically, critics assume that any uncomfortable departure from literary norms should be interpreted as a sign of Richardson's singular failure of taste and judgment rather than a sign of an unusual and genuinely social project. Leslie Fiedler's foreword to Caesar Blake's early study of *Pilgrimage* provides an example of the potentially self-defeating consequences of this critical approach. In his five-and-a-half-page discussion of *Pilgrimage*, Fiedler uses the words "dull," "dulness," "boredom," or "ennui" seventeen times, effectively contradicting his announced aim of promoting Richardson's and Blake's projects. The weight of the accumulated references to boredom falls upon Richardson and makes readers feel helpless in the face of the text's supposedly intractable, failed experiments. Yet these experiments only exist as such through readers' complicity with or resistance to established habits of reading. This implies that readers might change those habits and thus change the meaning (the "dulness" or the "boredom") of the text that exposes them. This more democratic understanding of the "origins" of textual meaning implicitly throws into question the notion of stable norms of literary excellence. Changing social and historical conditions guarantee that there will be inevitable variations in rules and habits governing reading; attention to the history of these rules supports the argument that readers, more than authors, create "great" writing.

The changing social and historical conditions of second-wave feminist movement provide an obvious example of the way political change impacts understandings of aesthetic norms. Recognition of the importance of *Pilgrimage's* feminist contents, of the way its heroine is conscious of and rebels against the sex and gender codes that structure her late Victorian and Edwardian culture, has led to a renewed analysis and appreciation of the novel's forms.<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that feminist critics have or should have a monopoly on interpretations of *Pilgrimage* or its status as an overlooked "masterpiece" of British literature. In fact, feminist scholarship does not always do justice to the multiple and often contradictory forms and targets of Miriam's feminist rebellion; too often it is ready to find a single brand of feminism advocated by *Pilgrimage's* heroine and too willing to claim that particular feminist ideology for all of *Pilgrimage*. This kind of thinking overlooks the fact that Miriam migrates between political positions, and it thus ignores the complexities of *Pilgrimage's* resistance to patriarchy. For example, when Miriam sets out with her father on her journey to Hanover at the beginning of *Pointed Roofs*, she cringes at the thought of his potentially knowing answer to a question she has about the Indian Civil Service. Simultaneously, she clings to the notion of his intellectual and cultural superiority:

If only he would answer a question simply, and not with a superior air as if he had invented the thing he was telling about. She felt she had a right to all the knowledge there was, without fuss[. . .] I am unsociable, I suppose—she mused. She could not think of any one who did not offend her. I don't like men and I loathe women. I am a misanthrope. So's pater[. . .] We are different—it's us, him and me. He's failed us because he's different and if he weren't we should be like other people[. . .] . . . horrible. . . . (*Pointed* 31)

It would be hard to derive a feminist position from these confused thoughts about gender, knowledge, and social relations. While Miriam eventually develops a more sophisticated understanding of the relation of her gender to her social position, she never places herself in one feminist camp or another. The possibility of movement between gender identities that characterizes the above passage—Miriam's possible identification with the masculinity represented by her father, the femininity represented by the loathsome women, or her potential disidentification from both—is the most consistent quality of her feminism.<sup>6</sup>

*Pilgrimage's* hyper-realistic style, its obsessive representation of the



details that make up Miriam's experience of the physical and social text of Edwardian England, functions as a concrete backdrop for the novel's shifting feminist stance. This realism allows Richardson to do for London what Joyce does for Dublin; both writers seem to transform a map of the urban homes of their youth into prose. Like Joyce's writings, however, Richardson's novel destabilizes the realism of its urban world through antirealist formal devices, the most familiar of which are the techniques associated with stream-of-consciousness prose. As a novel situated within consciousness, *Pilgrimage* can only be classified as "realist" with qualification. Within the terms of the fictional contract it imposes, the "reality" of *Pilgrimage*'s make-believe world is confined to the subjective consciousness of its heroine. Its material is the stuff of imagination, memory, and sensation, and its forms are mandated by the activities of unconscious, as well as conscious, thought. Paradoxically, for *Pilgrimage*'s readers to regard it as an objective representation of life in Edwardian London—or a German finishing school, Swiss mountain lodge, or Quaker farm—they must first pretend to accept as objectively "true" its representations of Miriam Henderson's subjectivity. It is a sign of *Pilgrimage*'s complexity that readers have been willing to get inside this paradox in order to recognize a real world of the past.

The novelist Winifred Bryher noted in her memoirs, "I have always told my friends abroad that if they want to know what England was like between 1890 and 1914, they must read *Pilgrimage*" (168). In *Pilgrimage* itself, Miriam's close friend Hypo Wilson says to her:

"You know, you've been extraordinarily lucky. You've had an extraordinarily rich life in that Wimpole Street of yours. You have in your hands material for a novel, a dental novel, a human novel and, as a background, a complete period, a period of unprecedented expansion in all sorts of directions. You've seen the growth of dentistry from a form of crude torture to a highly elaborate and scientific and almost painless process. And in your outer world you've seen an almost ceaseless transformation, from the beginning of the safety bicycle to the arrival of the motor car and the aeroplane. With the coming of flying, that period is ending and another begins. You ought to document your period." (*Clear* 397)

These words are directed to Miriam and describe Hypo's vision of her life and her capacities for "documenting her period." Yet these words can