

‘NOT RECALLED, BUT PRESENT’: NARRATING
THE PAST IN THE PRESENT IN DOROTHY
RICHARDSON’S *PILGRIMAGE*

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From the outset, the narration of Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* (1915-67) has puzzled readers. Filled with confusing gaps and sudden shifts from the third to the first person and from the past to the present tense, Richardson’s *roman fleuve* offers little by way of explanation as to what the connection is between narrative and narrator. Richardson has, in fact, been taken to suggest that there is no narrator at all; in an oft-quoted interview from 1931, she describes the ‘extraordinary moment’ when she all at once understood how she wanted her story to be narrated: ‘I suddenly realized that I couldn’t go on in the usual way, telling *about* Miriam, describing her. There she was as first I saw her, going upstairs. But who was *there* to *describe* her?’¹ Without anyone else present in the text but Miriam, the text has instead often been read as either filtered through its protagonist’s mind or ‘based entirely within Miriam’s interior monologue’.² According to such readings, *Pilgrimage* constitutes a representation rather than a narrative, a form of *mimesis* rather than *diegesis*.

Reading Richardson’s novel as a representation of consciousness does not easily clarify the shifts between past and present tense and between first and third person, however. Consider, for example, this passage from the end of *Honeycomb* (1917), the third volume in the novel sequence, which depicts Miriam’s state of mind right after her mother’s suicide: ‘Perhaps she had dreamed that the old woman had come in and said that. Everything was dream; the world. I shall not have any life. I can never have any life; all my days. There were cold tears running into her mouth’.³

¹ Louise Morgan, ‘How Writers Work: Dorothy Richardson,’ *Everyman*, October 22, 1931, 400.

² Deborah Longworth, ‘Subject, Object, and the Nature of Reality: Metaphysics in Dorothy Richardson’s *Deadlock*,’ *Pilgrimages* 2 (2009): 14.

³ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* 1 (London, Virago: 1979), 489. Subsequent references to *Pilgrimage* will be given directly in the text, indicating volume and page number.

Here, the narration abruptly moves from the third person to the first person and from past tense to the present. Then, just as abruptly, the narration switches back again. While it is possible to read these shifts as moving between free-indirect discourse and interior monologue, that still entails the presence of a narrator. In fact, throughout *Pilgrimage*, the shifts in the narration suggest a continuous movement back and forth between a narrating presence and the novel's protagonist—sometimes moving very subtly and sometimes more obviously.

It is the relationship and fluctuating proximity between narrator and protagonist that is the topic of this article, which seeks to examine the shifts in the narration in connection to how *Pilgrimage* conceptualizes memory and consciousness. Central to my discussion is the concept of *contemplation*, which Richardson uses both in her novel-sequence and elsewhere to denote a specific kind of concentration on the inmost self. Miriam's moments of contemplation can, I argue here, help us understand the complex narration of *Pilgrimage*. They are connected to Richardson's notion of consciousness as something inherently still and unchanging over time, albeit growing with experience: 'consciousness sits stiller than a tree [...] tho more or less continuously expanding from birth to maturity, remains stable, one with itself thruout life'.⁴ In this stable consciousness, the past is present to be re-experienced—an idea and a practice that Richardson returns to many times in *Pilgrimage*.

The idea that I am pursuing here is that it is possible to read Richardson's novel as a representation of consciousness without removing the presence of a narrator in the text, a narrator who is more than an impersonal entity—who is, in fact, an older Miriam, retrieving her past through moments of intense contemplation. In doing so, I am approaching *Pilgrimage* as a memory text, that is, a text formed and structured by the act of remembering. Paul Ricoeur's distinction between 'tales of time' and 'tales about time' is useful here: 'All fictional narratives are "tales of time" inasmuch as the structural transformations that affect the situations and characters take time. However only a few are "tales about time" inasmuch as in them it is the very experience of time that is at stake in these structural

⁴ Stanley Kunitz (ed.), *Authors To-Day and Yesterday* (New York: Wilson, 1933), 562. For a discussion of Richardson's conception of consciousness as inherently still, see Shirley Rose, 'The Unmoving Center: Consciousness in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*', *Contemporary Literature* 10, no.3 (1969).

transformations'.⁵ What is 'at stake' in *Pilgrimage*, I argue, is the revival not only of past time but of past *selves*, a revival made possible by moments of contemplation through which Miriam can access the depths of her consciousness.⁶

The shifts in the narration, then, represent this process of revival. This, I suggest, is how we should understand the narration in Richardson's novel at large: it reflects and reveals Miriam's experience of time. Before looking closer at her intense moments of introspection—and the shifts in time and person—I begin with a discussion of time and memory as they are conceptualized both in Richardson's essays and in *Pilgrimage*. I will also consider how these concepts relate to the 'contemplated reality' that Richardson wanted to explore through her writing.

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It is a commonplace to state that the early twentieth century was characterised by a new conception of temporality. In much modern fiction, time and memory are presented as individual experiences, particular to each character. Memory thus often functions as a means of characterization and is part of the novel's increased focus on consciousness. Richardson's exploration of memory fits this description but also constitutes an idiosyncratic way of representing remembrance in

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen MacLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 101.

⁶ Some previous criticism comments on the shifts in the narration. Joanne Winning, for example, makes a case for an autobiographical reading of *Pilgrimage* based on Richardson's oscillation between 'she' and 'I', suggesting that the 'I' is Richardson's own authorial intrusion; ultimately, the journey from 'she' to 'I', Winning argues, entails a '*pilgrimage* to lesbian selfhood'. See *The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Richardson* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 31. Jean Radford argues that the 'disparity between the perspective of the narrator and the protagonist [...] gradually diminishes' until they 'eventually converge' in *March Moonlight*, a narrative strategy which Radford considers to be consistent with the 'use of the *Bildung* form'; *Dorothy Richardson* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 87. As part of a detailed inventory of Richardson's narrative techniques, María Francisca Llantada Díaz notes that towards the end of *March Moonlight*, 'Miriam's perspective and voice become, if not fused, ambiguously confused with that of the narrative instances'; *Form and Meaning in Dorothy M. Richardson's Pilgrimage* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 58.

fiction.⁷ To her, the past was not something shifting but instead stable, a presence deep within, accessible through sustained contemplation. This is how memory is depicted in *Pilgrimage* and also how she describes it in several of her essays.

In one of these essays, 'The Film Gone Male' (1932), Richardson uses the idea of contemplation to distinguish between different kinds of memory: the first kind is referred to as 'a mere backward glance'; the second, a 'prolonged contemplation of things regarded as past and done with'; and the third, 'memory proper', which is a state of consciousness that 'gathers, can gather, and pile up its wealth only round universal, unchanging, unevolving verities that move neither backwards nor forwards and have neither speech nor language'.⁸ Memory proper, Richardson asserts, entails an awareness of an unchanging inner core, which is more real than the world around us and which is accessible through contemplation.⁹ Notably,

⁷ It is worth noting, too, that while many modernist writers were influenced by Henri Bergson's ideas on memory and the experiences of time, he does not appear to have been a significant influence on Richardson, although she was most likely somewhat familiar with his work. For discussions on Bergson and Richardson, see Shirley Rose, 'The Unmoving Center', 370-77, and Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 60-65.

⁸ Dorothy Richardson, 'The Film Gone Male', in *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism*, ed. James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 205-6.

⁹ Richardson, 'The Film Gone Male', 206. It is noteworthy that William James (1890) uses the term 'memory proper' in his chapter on memory in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890). It is unclear if Richardson was familiar with James's work but possibly, it is him that she has in mind when she dismisses the dictums of psychology in the opening of 'The Film Gone Male': 'Memory, psychology is today declaring, is passive consciousness. Those who accept this dictum see the in-rolling future as living reality and the past as reality entombed' (205). In the same chapter, James also discusses the 'stream of thought', a term used by May Sinclair (1918) in her review of the three first volumes of *Pilgrimage* to describe Richardson's style and subsequently rejected by Richardson herself. See William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (Reprint, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 605 *et passim*. Suzanne Raitt suggests, however, that the term 'stream-of-consciousness' appeared in many early-twentieth-century texts and contexts that Sinclair would have been familiar with, especially so Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* (1911). See *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 281-19.

the word 'contemplation' is used here to refer both to the second kind of memory ('prolonged contemplation of things regarded as past and done with') and to memory proper, the mystical idea that memory constitutes something constant, which is accessible inside us. Both these kinds of contemplation are of interest here, and I return to them below in my discussion of contemplation in *Pilgrimage*.

It is obvious from her essays that Richardson thought of memory proper as a faculty that belongs to women rather than men, as they possess a spirituality that makes them especially responsive to contemplation and the revival of past selves.¹⁰ She suggests, for example, that a certain kind of woman holds eternity inside her, and that the 'past, present, and future are together in her, unbroken'.¹¹ Time is subject to these women's 'synthetic' ability, which is their capacity to join disparate things into one whole and to 'move, as it were in all directions at once'.¹² In other words, to these women, time is not linear and what has been is not concluded but a presence within each person, there to be re-experienced by those who possess the kind of mystical attention she refers to as contemplation.

Time and memory are presented along the same lines in *Pilgrimage*. There, too, memory is not merely an act of recollecting the past, but a sustained process described at one point as a 'strange journey down and down to the centre of being' (IV 609). In this centre, the past is present and expands when contemplated: 'the past does not stand "being still." It moves, growing with one's growth' (IV 657). At other times, the past is presented

¹⁰ Richardson, 'Film Gone Male', 206. In this, there might be an echo from Underhill's *Mysticism*, as Randall notes in a discussion on Underhill and *Pilgrimage*, there is a consistent 'thread of association' between mysticism and women in *Pilgrimage* (65). There are, moreover, connections between Underhill and Richardson's ideas about contemplation, a state of mind described in *Mysticism* as allowing 'those submerged powers which are capable of picking up messages from another plane of being have their turn', putting to sleep the 'Normal Self' and allowing the 'Transcendental Self' to awaken; *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (London: Methuen, 1911), 67-68. I am grateful to Scott McCracken for drawing my attention to parallels between Richardson's conception of contemplation and Underhill's *Mysticism*.

¹¹ Dorothy Richardson, 'Women and the Future', in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 594.

¹² Dorothy Richardson, 'The Reality of Feminism', in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, 590.

as stable—an idea that fits with Richardson’s notion of consciousness as something still and unmoving. This stillness also correlates with how *Pilgrimage* conceives of consciousness and memory in spatial terms rather than temporal. Through contemplation, Miriam’s consciousness becomes, in the words of Shirley Rose, ‘increasingly illuminated as space might be’.¹³ Indeed, Richardson often uses spatial metaphors when describing Miriam’s contemplation. In *Dawn’s Left Hand* (1931), for example, Miriam remembers a party from her childhood, which she finds ‘stood in my mind, left there, in exactly the same place on the horizon as when I had first contemplated it’ (IV 253). The memory is presented as a place inside her, there to be accessed and relived through contemplation.

In her inner space, the past is accessible to Miriam, not as a mere remembering but as something as real as anything else. At times, this means accessing specific scenes from her past, as in *The Tunnel* (1919), in which she relives a childhood memory, ‘exactly the *same*’ (II 213), or in *March Moonlight* (1967), in which she finds her sister Harriett sitting alone on a porch: ‘I seemed to gaze into her being. Aware of it as if it were my own’ (IV 608). At other times her contemplation appears more general: ‘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’ (III 322). These lines easily connect to Richardson’s ideas of women who live in the ‘deep current of eternity’, mentioned above. Certainly, Miriam’s contemplation appears to lead her to the ‘centre of existence’, where all time exists to be experienced at once, the past and the future present simultaneously as if the movement of time had been nullified or suspended (III 327). This experience of the past is part of Miriam’s inner being, that ‘strange mysterious life, far away below all interference, and always the same’ (III 17).

What is referred to as contemplation—attentive and deliberate introspection—thus becomes a method for Miriam to access the depths

¹³ Shirley Rose, ‘Dorothy Richardson’s Focus on Time’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 17, no. 3 (1974): 174. After Rose, Elisabeth Bronfen has examined the ‘spatialisation of time’ in *Pilgrimage* at greater length; *Dorothy Richardson’s Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text*, trans. Victoria Appelbe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 3 *et passim*. Bryony Randall discusses time in *Pilgrimage* in relation to Bergson and Evelyn Underhill; *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, 59-91.

of her inner space.¹⁴ Memory proper in *Pilgrimage*, then, is not merely a recollection of the past, but a sustained attention inwards. Miriam's focus on her being is also what makes the past expand: her memory is not passive but an active faculty of the mind. In its most intense form, contemplation is a volitional activity in *Pilgrimage*, in contrast to the case in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27), a novel well worth comparing to *Pilgrimage* in a discussion of memory and narration. In Proust's novel sequence, the first step towards recollection happens accidentally—a passive, involuntary memory—as when Marcel, in the first volume, eats the madeleine and is suddenly forcefully brought back to his childhood summers in Combray: 'The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object [...] which we do not suspect'.¹⁵ While there are similar involuntary memories in Richardson's work, too,¹⁶ memory in *Pilgrimage* is largely presented as active. It is not released by physical objects but is reached through contemplation of an expanding self.

What *Pilgrimage* does share with *À la recherche*, however, is the connection between remembrance and the suspension of time: when memory is in play, time ceases to move forward, as discussed above. When Miriam contemplates, her inner life expands—indeed, moves in all directions—and time stands still: 'Now that the stillness had returned, life was going on, dancing, flowing, looping out in all directions, able to bear its periods of torment in the strength of its certainty of recovery, so long as time stayed still. Life *ceased* when time moved on' (III 188). Marcel, too, experiences temporal suspension when he remembers his past. For him, as for Miriam, to regain the past means a suspension of time, through which Marcel can discover himself as an 'extratemporal being', a 'character of an eternity that mysteriously circulates between the present and the past, out of which it creates a unity'.¹⁷ According to Ricoeur, the extratemporal in *À la recherche* is connected to the very genesis of Marcel's

¹⁴ Elsewhere, I have discussed Miriam's contemplation more thoroughly; see *Silent Modernism* (Lund: Lund Studies in English, 2017), chapters 2-3.

¹⁵ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, vol. 1 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1922/1966), 57-58.

¹⁶ For a discussion of such memories in *Pilgrimage*, see María Francisca Llantada Díaz, 'Proust's Traces on Dorothy Richardson: Involuntary Memory and Metaphors', *Études Britannique Contemporaines* 36 (2009).

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 144.

creative enterprise, which has its origin ‘in a contemplative moment unconnected to its inscription in an actual work, and without any consideration of the labor of writing’.¹⁸ Marcel’s writing thus appears to begin in contemplation of the past, in which time is suspended. In this he is also similar to Miriam, whose writing in *March Moonlight*—the last instalment of *Pilgrimage*—is likewise connected to the act of contemplation. Before discussing Miriam’s writing in more detail, however, I turn for a moment to Richardson’s notion of ‘contemplated reality’.

Contemplation is important to *Pilgrimage*, not only in terms of Miriam’s exploration of her inmost self but because it is connected to Richardson’s ideas about her own writing. This much is clear from her enigmatic foreword to the first omnibus edition of *Pilgrimage* (1938), in which Richardson suggests that the novel sequence had its genesis in contemplation: ‘Aware, as she wrote [...] of a stranger in the form of contemplated reality having for the first time in her experience its own say, and apparently justifying those who acclaim writing as the surest means of discovering the truth about one’s own thoughts and beliefs’.¹⁹ Through her writing, it seems that Richardson discovered something new about herself, something unfamiliar (‘a stranger’), and that this something presented itself as an ‘independently assertive reality’.²⁰ This ‘contemplated reality’ is presented in connection to Richardson’s style of writing, which she famously refers to in the foreword as a ‘feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism’.²¹ The latter is exemplified through reference to Balzac and Arnold Bennett, but Richardson also alludes to their ‘immediate successors’, who are writers that spurn romance and who believe that their writing constitutes a window unto reality.²² The difference between the masculine realism and Richardson’s ‘feminine equivalent’ is seemingly one between external and internal circumstances: against ‘Man versus conditions’ she posits the independent reality of her being, retrieved through contemplation.²³ In short, masculine realism focuses outwards, feminine realism inwards.

¹⁸ Ricoeur, 144.

¹⁹ Dorothy Richardson, ‘Foreword’, *Pilgrimage* 1 (London: Virago, 1979), 10.

²⁰ Richardson, ‘Foreword’, 10.

²¹ Richardson, ‘Foreword’, 9.

²² Richardson, ‘Foreword’, 9.

²³ Richardson, ‘Foreword’, 9.

Richardson's feminine realism is consequently not only a style of writing, focused on inner rather than outer reality, but also a *mode* of writing: a state of mind at the moment of composition, one based in contemplation of the writer's own reality and her past selves. That this is the case is corroborated by Richardson's comments about literature, in which she often claimed that an author should only write about what she knew best: herself. In an interview with Vincent Brome, Richardson emphasizes the importance of contemplation to her own writing; she 'talked at length of the mystery of time in which the dead were no longer dead and of that very special exhilaration which came from experience remembered, controlled and recaptured more vividly than was possible with the distracted present'.²⁴ Such experiences, Brome writes, had come to Richardson as she was writing *Pilgrimage*.²⁵

While contemplation served as a basis for Richardson's writing, her foreword intimates that memory proper is difficult to realize in words. This is suggested by the fact that the 'independently assertive reality' that Richardson perceived as she was composing *Pointed Roofs* was something independent of what she wrote, as it failed to 'adequately [...] appear within the text'; what she experienced through contemplation evidently proved difficult to translate into language.²⁶ The 'hundred faces' that summon each other to 'disqualify' what she has written are possible to understand as representing Richardson's past selves.²⁷ As Stephen Heath has pointed out, the name Miriam can be read as reflecting the many identities of the novel's protagonist: 'a myriad of part egos, "I am's"'.²⁸ *Pilgrimage* certainly conveys an idea of a multitude of selves, something which I return to below.

The connection between contemplation and writing that Richardson proposes in her foreword brings to mind Wordsworth's definition of

²⁴ Vincent Brome, 'A Last Meeting with Dorothy Richardson,' *London Magazine*, 1 June (1959): 31.

²⁵ Brome, 31.

²⁶ Richardson, 'Foreword', 10.

²⁷ Richardson, 'Foreword', 10.

²⁸ Stephen Heath, 'Writing for Silence: Dorothy Richardson and the Novel', in *Teaching the Text*, eds. Suzanne Kappeler and Norman Bryson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 128.

poetry as the result of ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’.²⁹ While poetry begins with feeling, Wordsworth writes, ‘the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins’.³⁰ In Wordsworth’s own memory text, the *Prelude*, his memories of his childhood are presented as if—in the words of Lorna Martens—they ‘lay readily available to his consciousness’.³¹ In his own words, in the poem, they were ‘called to life’ through ‘after-meditation’.³²

It is not difficult to find echoes of Wordsworth in Richardson’s foreword: his ‘emotion recollected’ is her ‘contemplated reality’, and the resulting emotion he describes, which ‘actually exist[s] in the mind’, is her ‘independently assertive reality’. As it happens, these are aspects of the preface that Richardson emphasizes herself in the opening of her review of *Finnegans Wake*, written the year after the foreword to *Pilgrimage*. She recognizes in Wordsworth a different exploration of reality, one focused on ‘concentration upon the various aspects of the sublime and beautiful’, which after the Romantic period shifted to ‘what may be called the immediate investigation of reality’.³³ What Wordsworth describes, Richardson writes, is

what happens when the poet, recalling an occurrence that has stirred him to his depths, concentrates thereon the full force of his imaginative consciousness; how there presently returns, together with the circumstances of the experience, something of the emotion that accompanied it, and how, in virtue of this magnetic stream sustained and deepened by continuous concentration, there comes into being a product this poet names, with scientific accuracy, an ‘effusion’.³⁴

²⁹ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works including The Prelude*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 611.

³⁰ Wordsworth, 611.

³¹ Lorna Martens, *The Promise of Memory: Childhood Recollection and Its Objects in Literary Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 6.

³² Wordsworth, 421.

³³ Dorothy Richardson, ‘Adventure for Readers’, in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, 600.

³⁴ Richardson, ‘Adventure for Readers’, 599-600.

To Richardson—and, for that matter, to Wordsworth—poetry is thus not only a product of a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ but rather a result of deepened focus on an emotion, which ‘returns’—is reexperienced—and which then results in the ‘effusion’, the writing of the poem.³⁵ The similarities between Richardson’s ‘contemplated reality’ and Miriam’s exploration of her ‘zone of her being’ are noteworthy because of what these possibly reveal about *Pilgrimage* as a memory text. In the following section, I explore memory in *Pilgrimage* further—first in connection to Miriam’s writing late in the sequence and, finally, in connection to the shifts in narration.

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In the last instalment of *Pilgrimage*, *March Moonlight*, Miriam’s writing becomes connected to her experiences of temporal suspension. As Rebecca Bowler notes, memory is presented here as ‘the ideal method for self-realization’; Adam Guy comments that writing is presented as ‘giving access to authentic experience’, constituting ‘an actual presence’.³⁶ What Miriam writes consequently appears focused on what her memory reveals: ‘While I write, everything vanishes but what I contemplate. The whole of what is called “the past” is with me, seen anew, vividly’ (IV 657).³⁷ This

³⁵ Wordsworth, 598. Richardson’s discussion of Wordsworth’s preface appears to have been informed by her reading of Herbert Read’s *Wordsworth: The Clark Lectures 1929-1930* (1930), which she reviewed for *The Adelphi* in December 1930. In her review, she discusses Wordsworth’s ‘sorely mishandled definition of poetry’ and quotes at length from Read on the topic. See ‘The Return of William Wordsworth’, *Adelphi*, December 1930: xviii.

³⁶ Rebecca Bowler, *Literary Impressionism: Vision and Memory in Dorothy Richardson, Ford Madox Ford, H. D. and May Sinclair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 193; Adam Guy, ‘Modernism, Existentialism, Postcriticism: Gabriel Marcel Reads *Pilgrimage*’, *Pilgrimages* 9 (2017): 18.

³⁷ Several commentators on Richardson’s novel have suggested that the writing Miriam begins in the last novel—seemingly related to her past life and memories—is in fact the beginning of her own *Pilgrimage*, that is, a novel about her own life. These critics seek in *Pilgrimage* a circular movement similar to that of Proust’s *À la Recherche*, in whose last volume Marcel begins to write a novel himself, *about himself*. See Gloria G. Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (Athens, GA: 1994), 370. As Kristin Bluemel cautions, however, ‘the contents of [such a] circle are fragmentary’; the brief descriptions of Miriam’s writing only

kind of intense contemplation means ‘oblivion’ of the ongoing present for Miriam: her focus inwards is so intense that it requires her ‘to forsake life’ (IV 609). Writing consequently suspends time and what is ‘reveal[ed]’ inside appears more real than anything else (IV 607): ‘whenever something comes that sets the tips of my fingers tingling to record it, I forget the price; eagerly face the strange journey down and down to the centre of being. And the scene of labour, when again I am back in it, alone, has become a sacred place’ (IV 609). That ‘scene of labour’ is at once the desk at which she writes and the space inside her—the space in which images are revealed that ‘if you hold’ them ‘steadily, for long enough, you could write about’ forever (IV 613).

In many ways, writing becomes the destination of the spiritual ‘pilgrimage’ Miriam pursues over the course of the novel-sequence, giving her the freedom to explore her consciousness as she wishes. While *Pilgrimage* seemingly lacks formal closure, Miriam’s writing in *March Moonlight* suggests that she has arrived somewhere and that she is not returning home ‘empty-handed’, having ‘achieved nothing’, being ‘just nothing again’, as at the end of *Pointed Roofs*, the first volume in the series (I 183). When this phrase appears again in *March Moonlight*—Miriam notes that to her sister Sally, she has ‘once again returned empty-handed’ (IV 578)—it is to emphasize that this description no longer fits Miriam.

This difference in Miriam is also noticeable in the tone and style of *March Moonlight*, which contrasts with what has come previously: the last volume is shorter, more fragmentary and Miriam is more prone to comment on events, as though musing on them in hindsight. In part, this may be because the final instalment was never fully completed and when it did appear, it was ten years after its author’s death.³⁸ The distinctive new style

vaguely imply that she is writing—or, possibly, considering writing—a novel, and the suggestions that she is writing about herself are equally vague. See *Experimenting on the Borders of Modernism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 130.

³⁸ At the same time, Richardson did publish the three first chapters in *Life and Letters* in 1946—with the proviso ‘work-in-progress’—thus signalling that this part of the instalment belonged to the ‘half a book’ she mentions having completed in a letter in 1945; *Windows on Modernism*, ed. Gloria G. Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 525. George H. Thomson notes that the first two chapters ‘still demonstrate a firm and complex narrative control’ whereas

is especially conspicuous in the first chapter, in which Miriam reminisces about the time she spent with her new friend Jean while on vacation in Vaud a couple of months earlier, bringing the act of contemplation much closer to the surface of the text than is the case in previous volumes. What stands out in this first chapter is the clear movement back and forth between the contemplating Miriam, reminiscing and narrating her past, and the Miriam on vacation in Vaud—i.e. a movement between the act of remembering and that which is remembered. Unusually for *Pilgrimage*, the chapter is told almost exclusively in the first person; the name ‘Miriam’ appears only once on the very first page and then again towards the end (IV 555, 577).

This ‘I’, moreover, appears to belong to the older Miriam, convalescing in her sister’s garden; there she is, on the first page, and with no one there to describe her but herself. If the use of the first person signals a shift to interior monologue—that is, a representation of Miriam’s consciousness—then the interior represented is that of the contemplating Miriam, the one who, in the present tense, ‘finds her eyes upon Sally’s chestnut tree’ (IV 555). The chapter appears to chart her recollections as they happen. That this is the case is also signalled by the many small temporal expressions that appear to emphasize a distance between the two Miriams, the one narrating and the one remembered: ‘*Always, when I think of [Jean], I shall see her as she looked when the sound of their boots was heard*’; ‘*And I remember contemplating [...] the autumn beauty of Dimple Hill*’; ‘*I recall her only as questioning and listening*’; ‘*And to this day I do not know whether she desired only to test her power*’; ‘*But now I see that it was more than Jean’s in-born courtesy*’; ‘*I know now what will have been for him that moment in the depths of the untethered day*’ (IV 557, 561, 564, 567, 571, 573, emphases added). Clearly, the ‘I’ of this chapter belongs not to the Miriam in Vaud but to her older counterpart, remembering her previous self and the earlier time.

What is narrated here, then, is the older Miriam’s memories of the past, however recent, together with her intermittent comments on how she ‘now’ understands events differently compared to when they happened. While *March Moonlight* stands out in terms of the distinctly personal narrative voice in the first chapters—prone to musing and commentary

‘Richardson’s grasp is slackening’ towards the end of the instalment; *A Reader’s Guide to Dorothy Richardson’s Pilgrimage* (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1996), 51.

rather than representation—it is not the only volume of *Pilgrimage* to offer such observations on the part of an older Miriam looking back. In *The Tunnel*, for example, a seemingly older Miriam recalls how a Mrs Potter took her to listen to Dame Nellie Melba: ‘I heard Melba. I don’t remember hearing her’ (II 19). In *The Trap*, the older Miriam stops to remember ‘that night when I sat writing until morning’ (III 501). And in *Dawn’s Left Hand*, an older Miriam considers Amabel from Hypo’s perspective: ‘sacrilege, even in thought, to apply to Amabel this belittling expression that *at this moment I see* as part of his deliberate refusal to take any kind of womanhood seriously’ (IV 240, emphasis added). By emphasizing the temporal distance between the events narrated and the point of the narration, these examples clearly differentiate between two Miriams in the text: one is the character we encounter in the text and the other is an older Miriam, contemplating her past and, at times, reliving it.

What we see in the examples above is the distinction between what narratologists after Günther Müller refer to as ‘story time’ (*Erzählte Zeit*) and ‘discourse time’ (*Erzählzeit*): that is, a distinction between the time of the events narrated and the time of narration. While these terms have mostly been used to distinguish between narrative time and reading time, they can also be used to clarify a division between the time frame of the story and that of the narrator. Discussing these separate temporal levels, Sara Håkansson distinguishes between two different ‘nows’ in fiction: one which belongs to the story told, the ‘story-time now’, and one which belongs to the narrator, the ‘narration now’, the latter constituting ‘an ontological level which is detached from the story’ and which ‘allows reader and narrator to “meet” in an exclusive sphere’.³⁹

Read with this distinction in mind, *Pilgrimage* can be said to move between two different levels of ‘now’, and while it may seem as though most of the

³⁹ Sara Håkansson, *Narratorial Commentary in the Novels of George Eliot* (Lund: Lund Studies in English, 2009), 19-20. Håkansson’s use of these terms is based on Mendilow’s distinction between the ‘now’ of the story (the ‘Relative Now’) and the now of authorial commentary (the ‘Absolute Now’) in *Time and the Novel* (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), 99-103; Håkansson, however, emphasizes the role of the narrator to a much higher degree. Mendilow’s discussion focuses on the author rather than the narrator, and to him, switches between the different time frames constitute ‘an intrusion’ and means that the ‘creaking of the machinery is heard’ (102).

narrative is set in the ‘story-time now’, I suggest that the narrative constantly moves back and forth between the ‘story-time now’ and the ‘narration now’.⁴⁰ The little comments inserted into the text draw our attention to the discrepancy between the different temporal levels present in the discourse: one focused on the Amabel that the younger Miriam knew and had a relationship with, for example, and one focused on the *memory* of Amabel as she appears to the older narrator at the time of the telling (‘at *this moment* I see’).

If we read *Pilgrimage* as a representation of consciousness, then, it is one that belongs to the older, narrating Miriam, present in the ‘narration now’. What we as readers take part of is her contemplation of her past—a past which is ‘reveal[ed]’, ‘seen anew, vividly’ (IV 607, 657). Part of the function of the narration of *Pilgrimage* is thus to serve as a textual realization and representation of Miriam’s conception of consciousness and reality: we are not only presented with her ‘contemplated reality’ but with the very faculty of contemplation itself and with the two kinds of memories presented in ‘The Film Goes Male’: prolonged contemplation and memory proper. As John Paul Riquelme has suggested about Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a novel that he argues is also narrated by its protagonist: ‘The language of the one book casts two shadows, projects two images related by superimposition as in a palimpsest’.⁴¹ In a palimpsestic reading of *Pilgrimage*, we consequently have two Miriams to take into consideration, the younger one always being the memory of the older one. This in itself is not an unusual scenario in narrative fiction; the difference between *Pilgrimage* and a novel like, say, *Jane Eyre* (1847), however, is that the two temporal levels are not consistently kept separate. At times they merge, as Miriam enters her memory proper, re-experiencing her past in a way that Jane never does.

⁴⁰ *Pilgrimage* has previously been read as representing two different time eras in the sense that Richardson’s context at the moment of writing can be detected in the text. Carol Watts notes, for example, that the novel has to ‘be thought’ in a ‘double sense’: a ‘continual performance of recording and recognition’ which belongs both to ‘its present as those of the pre-war, *fin-de-siècle* world it evokes’; *Dorothy Richardson* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1995), 6. Winning similarly discusses two time frames, one belonging to Miriam and the other to Richardson: ‘the “present” in which it is written, and the “past” which is the subject of that writing’; *Pilgrimage of Dorothy Richardson*, 75.

⁴¹ John Paul Riquelme, *Teller and Tale in Joyce’s Fiction: Oscillating Perspectives* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 64.

The palimpsestic nature of *Pilgrimage* is most clearly discernible in the shifts in the narration: here we are directly present in the older Miriam's contemplation. In those instances where the tense suddenly changes to the present and the perspective to the first person, the two 'nows' appear to be conflated: the narrating Miriam is experiencing a moment of suspension in which the experience of the past grows so close to her that she is in it anew, reliving the moment. What happens in the parts of the text that are narrated in the first person and/or the present tense is that the two temporal levels of the novel—the two 'nows'—become fused. The boundaries between the two Miriams are consequently blurred, as though they are both present simultaneously: they are at once past and present Miriam. Such instances represent a synthesized consciousness, in line with what Richardson describes in her essays as women's ability to unify: 'past, present, and future are together in her, unbroken'.⁴² If time is indeed suspended when Miriam is in contact with her being, so that all the past and the present is with her at once, then the moment of experiencing the 'eternal feminine' is represented in the narrative by the shifts in time and person.

The fact that the uses of first-person narration and present tense are not always simultaneous—narration in the first person is by far the more common—also suggests that there is a difference in how intensely these moments are experienced. The scenes where both occur together thus appear to constitute an especially strong occurrence of memory proper. An example of such a scene is the opening of chapter VI in *The Trap* (1925)—the eighth 'novel-chapter' of *Pilgrimage*—in which Miriam wakes up to sunlight and a strong experience of extratemporality:

When I open my eyes there is a certain amount of light—much less than I felt before I opened them—and things that make, before I see them clearly, an interesting pattern of dark shapes; holding worlds and worlds, all the many lives ahead. And I lie wandering within them, a different person every moment. Until some small thing seen very clearly brings back the present life and I find a head too heavy to lift from the pillow and wariness in all my frame. [...] Yet what ease of mind I have now. What riches and criminal ease, exemptions and riches. (III 478)

⁴² Richardson, 'Women and the Future', 595.

Not only do the light and the shapes call to mind a moment of contemplation as it usually appears in *Pilgrimage*, but there is also a strong sense of a unified temporality in the descriptions of the many worlds available to Miriam during the experience and in her account of moving between them, ‘a different person every moment’.⁴³ It is not only her past selves but also her future that Miriam is ‘wandering within’, in line with the idea that ‘coming events cast *light*’ (II 13), an idea that is present already in *The Tunnel*. In Rose’s reading, ‘the future moves into the past where gatherings of all that has occurred are in fact all that was available to occur’.⁴⁴ Accordingly, in the scene from *The Trap* quoted above, Miriam is experiencing her unchanging centre, where all possible versions of herself can be seen and relived, ‘a different person every moment’.

In this chapter, the shift back from this experience of temporal suspension to the usual mode of narration in *Pilgrimage*—past tense and free-indirect-discourse—is gradual. The tense first switches back to the past—‘Life flowed in a new way. Many of the old shadows were gone’—and then Miriam is once again referred to as ‘she’: ‘Wearily she tumbled her happy self out of bed’ (III 478). The effect is that of diminishing proximity. During the moment of intense contemplation, the narrator gets so close to past selves as to be present in them and in the experiencing Miriam at once. They meet, so to speak, in the unchanging centre, where they remain unified through the synthesizing consciousness for a moment, which is represented by the shifts in the narration. Once this moment passes, the narrator withdraws again, narrating from a further distance.

The shifts in the narration thus appear to suggest something about the nature of the memory in focus. While a switch to the first person indicates that we are in a moment of prolonged contemplation, passages where the narration shifts both to the first person *and* to the present tense appear to indicate that Miriam has accessed memory proper: she is experiencing the past in the present. As an end to the present discussion, I will look more

⁴³ This phrase also draws to mind a line from Richardson’s foreword, where she describes how ‘a hundred faces, any one of which, the moment it was entrapped within the close mesh of direct statement, summoned its fellows to disqualify it’ (‘Foreword’, 10). Is it the earlier Miriams—or possibly the earlier Dorothys—who are disqualifying Richardson’s text?

⁴⁴ Rose, 168.

closely at two ‘memories’: the first, Miriam’s memory of her mother in *The Tunnel*, and the second, the representation of her relationship with Amabel in *Dawn’s Left Hand*. The contrast between these two memories serves to highlight how the narration can reveal both proximity and distance between the different temporal levels present in the text.

The traumatic experience of her mother’s suicide haunts Miriam through much of *Pilgrimage* but is rarely explicitly referenced, suggesting that it is a memory that Miriam has difficulty confronting. There is a significant gap between the dramatic ending of *Honeycomb*—which leaves Miriam alone in Brighton after her mother’s death—and the beginning of *The Tunnel*, which situates Miriam in London, now working as a dental secretary and living at what appears to be her second boarding house.⁴⁵ Though rarely mentioned, the mother’s suicide is a central event in *Pilgrimage*, casting, in the words of Jean Radford, ‘a long shadow’.⁴⁶ While the short chapter VII—quoted below in its entirety—does not explicitly mention the mother’s death, it is clearly Miriam’s grief that surfaces in these lines:

Why must I always think of her in this place? ... It is always worst just along here.... Why do I always forget there’s this piece ... always be hurrying along seeing nothing and then, suddenly, Teetgen’s Teas and this row of shops? I can’t bear it. I don’t know what it is. It’s always the same. I always feel the same. It is sending me mad. One day it will be worse. If it gets any worse I shall be mad. Just here. Certainly. Something is wearing out of me. I am meant to go mad. If not, I should not always be coming along this piece without knowing it, whichever street I take. Other people would know the streets apart. I don’t know where this bit is or how I get to it. I come every day because I am meant to go mad here. Something that knows brings me here and is making me go mad because I am myself and nothing changes me. (II 136)

The shortness of the chapter alone makes it stand out in *The Tunnel*; it constitutes less than half a page, and the blankness above and beneath it both emphasizes how significant these feelings are to Miriam at this point in the narrative—they stand out from the rest of the text—and how compartmentalized her grief is, represented apart from her everyday life

⁴⁵ Thomson places the mother’s suicide in July or August 1895 in the narrative’s chronology; *The Tunnel* picks up in April, 1896; *A Reader’s Guide*, 64.

⁴⁶ Radford, 88.

in London. For the Miriam of the ‘story now’, this is not a memory she can control but rather an involuntary one, associated with this specific place, a place which she, perhaps unconsciously, seeks.

The use of the present tense in this passage also suggests that this is a memory that is re-experienced by the older, narrating Miriam: a case of memory proper. The repeated use of the word ‘always’ in the three first sentences suggests that the memory represented here is intense enough to still be painful many years later. The comment that ‘nothing changes me’ especially indicates that this specific place in her memory—one not only associated with grief but also with guilt—will remain ‘always the same’ and always agonising. The idea of being geographically lost, unable to ‘know the streets apart’, also serves as a metaphor for how suddenly Miriam’s grief descends on her, seemingly without warning and without her being able to prepare herself for the pain. The use of the present tense here signifies the force of the remembered pain but it also represents the timelessness of the emotions experienced.

The second example chosen for discussion concerns Miriam’s romantic relationships with Hypo Wilson and Amabel in *Dawn’s Left Hand* and the difference between them. Miriam’s sexual relationship with Hypo is described in detached terms: Miriam concludes that his ‘body was not beautiful’ and that his ‘relaxed form was nothing to her’ (IV 231, 257). The scene serves as an answer to Miriam’s hopeful thoughts at dinner with Hypo before the first time that they have sex: ‘sure now, if she could hold out, of attaining at last in his presence for the first time, save now and again by accident, to possession of that self within herself who was more than her momentary self’ (IV 222). What Miriam hopes is that becoming intimate with Hypo will mean being able to access her inner self fully when she is with him. But even though something is ‘beating within her of what seemed at once life and light’, no true connection is established between the two, nor does Miriam properly seem to access any self beyond the ‘momentary’ one (IV 226). Moreover, whatever possession of herself she does achieve is not attributed to Hypo but rather to the thought of Amabel: ‘Amabel was with her, young Amabel’ (IV 223).

This dissonance between Miriam and Hypo is mirrored in the narration, which remains in third person and past tense, signalling not only a lack of enthusiasm in the moment but primarily that the memory of the episode does not elicit any strong emotions. In fact, the only time that the narration

does switch to the first person we appear to move into the ‘narration now’, with the narrating Miriam commenting on what Hypo would make of Amabel. She notes that she ‘at this moment’ considers a comment from Hypo a ‘deliberate refusal to take any kind of womanhood seriously’, which refers to him belittling Amabel by calling her ‘pretty’ (IV 240). This is a general comment about Hypo’s view of women rather than a specific memory belonging to this particular scene; what we hear is the narrating Miriam commenting on an aspect of his personality. Elsewhere in the volume, the first person also appears in relation to Hypo when Miriam is arguing with him in her mind: ‘I’m a free-lover. Of course I’m a free-lover. But not his’ (IV 254). These shifts suggest that to Miriam, Hypo is an intellectual sparring-partner, someone to argue with, but not a romantic partner.

Comparing how Miriam’s response to Hypo contrasts with her response to Amabel also brings forth an interesting contrast: if Hypo remains distant, the mere thought of Amabel is intimate, and often so at moments when Miriam is with Hypo. As Joanne Winning notes, even though it is the affair with Hypo that receives the most explicit treatment in this volume, ‘the text is ambiguous about *who* the real lover might be’.⁴⁷ In relation to Amabel, for instance, the narrator notes how for Miriam ‘everything about her had become a continuous blossoming’ (IV 217), and how she was ‘more deeply immersed [in life with Amabel] than in any shared living that had fallen to her lot’ (IV 242). At the relationship’s most intense moment, the narration switches to the first person, as Miriam retells her childhood ‘bee memory’ to Amabel:

[I] woke so utterly refreshed that I said without thinking: ‘This is the birthday of the world,’ and, while she flew to fling herself down at my knees, I was back in the moment of seeing for the first time those flowerbeds and banks of flowers blazing in the morning sunlight, that smelt of the flowers and was one with them and me and the big bees crossing the path, low, on a level with my face. (IV 243)

In response, Amabel falls into tears, a sign of ‘sympathy’ that illustrates the two women’s closeness at this moment. Notably, though, the narration remains in the past tense here, marking a distance between experience and narration: this, too, is a case of prolonged contemplation rather than

⁴⁷ Winning, 120.

memory proper, signalling that the recollection is not intense enough to constitute a moment of reliving the past.

When Miriam once again reverts to the first person when contemplating Amabel, later in this volume, it remains uncertain whether or not we are in the 'story-time now' or the 'narration now', even though the tense this time is partly the present: '[Amabel will] remain with me for ever, a test, presiding over my life with others. She stands permanently in my view of life, embodying the changes she has made, the doors she has opened, the vitality she has added to my imagination of every kind of person on earth' (IV 251). Is Miriam talking about Amabel from the point of view of her younger self or is she talking about how Amabel has affected her life in a more general sense? The use of the present perfect suggests that it is the latter: the narrator Miriam is commenting on how the relationship with Amabel still affects her even at this later point in time. The shifts in the narration here imply a certain temporal distance to what is narrated—a distance that fits in well with how the friendship with Amabel fades in later volumes. What the narration in *Dawn's Left Hand* thus suggests is that ultimately, Amabel fails to achieve a *shared reality* with Miriam in the same way that Jean does in *March Moonlight*: 'Jean. Jean. Jean. My clue to the nature of reality' (IV 612). The memory of Amabel does not evoke the same strong feelings for Miriam, nor does it bring Miriam into her past, allowing her to narrate it as though it were the present.

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Reading *Pilgrimage* as a memory text—a novel concerned with the past as experienced from a later point in time—entails making sense of the narrative on two levels simultaneously: we are taking part in the older Miriam's contemplation of her younger self and these two perspectives are combined in the narration. Mostly interspersed, they are sometimes fused. The narrative perspective signals how the older Miriam relates to the memories that she accesses through contemplation, a sustained attention inwards that in its most intense forms suspends time for her. Mostly, the life of her younger self is retrieved through acts of *prolonged contemplation*; these memories are usually narrated in the third person and in the past tense, but sometimes the narration switches into first person, too. At times, instances of the first person in the past tense also move us into 'narration now': the 'I' thus constitutes narratorial commentary from the older Miriam, looking at her life from a more distant standpoint. When the narration shifts into the first person and the present tense, however, it

appears that the two ‘nows’ conflate and that time is suspended for Miriam as she accesses her memory proper: she is re-experiencing the past in the present, as though accessing a secret chamber inside her where everything still is as it was.

To return to the question that Richardson herself asked about the narration in *Pointed Roofs*: ‘But who was *there* to *describe* her?’⁴⁸ The answer, as I argue in this article, is that Miriam herself was there, reliving her past through contemplation, an act which in *Pilgrimage* is translated into a narrative. In my reading, Richardson’s ‘contemplated reality’ is thus a representation of a contemplating consciousness—both *mimesis* and *diegesis*—that charts Miriam’s fluctuating proximity to her past: her ‘pathway to reality’.

⁴⁸ Morgan, 400.