

DOROTHY RICHARDSON, QUEER THEORIST¹

Jennifer Cooke

In her day Dorothy Richardson was obviously *not* a pioneering queer theorist, but in what follows I suggest that she might be one in ours, through a confluence of similar conceptual moves in her work and that of recent queer thinking. As Joanne Winning and others have demonstrated through their attentive archive work on and readings of Richardson's thirteen-volume novel, *Pilgrimage* (1915-1976), same-sex desire is present within certain relationships Miriam has, particularly, with Amabel and, later on, with Jean. However, as Winning summarises, the 'option of a "straightforward" textual representation [of lesbian love], for various compelling reasons, does not present itself to Richardson as viable'.² What we get instead is a mixture of allusions and elisions, silences, hints, affirmations, negations, strange flips in point of view, and contrasts with heterosexual relationships which together indicate that Amabel and Jean are far more to Miriam than mere friends and represent for her deeper relational possibilities than those she has with men. This article is interested in the way in which Richardson constructs a female same-sex space, language and relationality as different to and better than those available within conventional heterosexuality; I then go on to discuss how similar conceptions of the benefits of sameness surface in a specific articulation of twenty-first century queer theory. For those of us who work between and within modernism and contemporary theory, there may be a glimmer of recognition for the sneaking suspicion that sometimes - not always, but sometimes - the new concepts which contemporary theory

¹ I would like to thank the participants at the Third Biennial International Dorothy Richardson Conference, which took place 16-17 September 2011 for their comments upon this paper, in particular Clare Drewery, who saw important parallels between the kind of experiences I read Miriam as having here and similar moments staged by Richardson in some of her short fiction.

² Joanne Winning, *The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Richardson* (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p.124. For all texts, page numbers will be given in parentheses, where clear, after the first citation.

employs sound strangely familiar, familiar because they appear to repeat, albeit with slightly different names, the same kinds of concepts, experiences or desires that we can perceive being grappled with by writers of an earlier time. Perhaps this is not as depressing as it sounds, however: perhaps, indeed, it tells us about the importance, in this Richardsonian case, of those concepts to gender and subjectivity, and that the seeds of modernist fiction are only starting to theoretically crystallise. Here, I argue that several concepts which Miriam uses in *Pilgrimage*, and refines her use of as the novels progress, are also important features of contemporary theoretical queer thinking. There are three areas, three sets of terms, which I am going to explore. The first of these is Miriam's shifting use of the word 'bliss' and words derived from it. The novel-sections *Revolving Lights* (1923) and *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931) carry the most reiterations of states of bliss, and these name various aspects of Miriam's rejection of heterosexual conventionality. Bliss is a word that had arguably already been linked to same-sex appreciation by Katherine Mansfield's tale of that name, first published in 1918, which additionally gave its name to a collection of Mansfield's stories in 1920; Mansfield's text hovers in the background here because of some striking similarities between the texts and ideas of the authors which I have elaborated elsewhere.³ Secondly, and in a linked way, Miriam gradually focuses upon the desirability of being over becoming. Miriam's articulation of 'being' is actually closer to what queer theorist Leo Bersani and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips attend to as 'becoming' in their 2008 book *Intimacies*. And finally, as I will be exploring, Miriam comes to advocate – after an initial rejection – a form of impersonality which, again, sounds remarkably similar in some of its aspects to the state of subjectivity advocated by Bersani and Phillips. This article, then, addresses three interlinked

³ Specifically, it was the topic of a paper entitled 'An Intimate Category of Female Being: States of Solitary Bliss in Katherine Mansfield and Dorothy Richardson', delivered at the conference 'Shaping Modernism: Katherine Mansfield and her Contemporaries' at Cambridge University, 25th March 2011. The material for the paper, and the origin of the research which informs this article, is drawn from a chapter of my forthcoming monograph on experimental writing strategies, affect and intimacy.

areas in order to trace these ideas in both Richardson's work and in that of the queer thinking I am claiming she pre-empts.

The contextual background for thinking about Richardson's work as performing aspects of queer theorising is what has been acknowledged by many commentators to be her critique of heteronormativity; not, of course, a word she would use, but nevertheless a good one for describing the way she attacks not just patriarchy but the kinds of male and female behaviours and society-wide gender expectations which sustain it. The traditionally patriarchal society Miriam grows up in and inhabits - despite some of the ground which women were gaining at the time - return her time and again to the question of the difference between male and female experience, both socially and as individuals. She points out that male achievements in the public sphere are dependent upon the service of women in private, those who cook, clean, keep house and raise their children for them. Miriam is firmly convinced that men and women think differently, and she links this to education and to the negative representations of women in literature;⁴ science (II 220); nature (II 220, 222); and, finally, religion, which, she claims, 'has nothing but insults for women' (II 222). Men are associated with 'taking up a fixed attitude . . . having a sort of prepared way of taking everything' (II 251); they use 'their knowledge like a code or a weapon' (II 354); what they say is 'clever' but only 'superficially true' (II 113) and women like her old school friend Alma imitate this speech to gain male admiration. Men are aligned with the rhetorical power of a language artfully deployed and their knowledge is repeatedly deemed by Miriam to be instrumental and categorising. She is also, pretty unqueerly, something of an essentialist, despite her continual critique of society and the socialisation of the genders; this is one of the reasons she dislikes the term 'feminist' (III 216).

Rejecting marriage and critiquing the 'sheltered ones'

The modernist period, somewhat self-constitutively ordained by Virginia Woolf as beginning in 1910, was an important one for writers who would be hailed as feminists by later feminist

⁴ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, 4 Vols (London: Virago, 1979), II, pp.219, 222.

commentators, even if they themselves objected to the label and the contemporary political specificity they understood it to signify.⁵ Gender roles were slowly shifting; more women were working in white collar positions; the suffragette movement was mounting challenges and achieving legal gains; and the First World War brought a greater number of women into the workforce generally.⁶ With its incredible amassing of contemporary details amongst its thousands of pages, *Pilgrimage* documents some of the changes in and challenges to contemporary gender relations that are occurring in this period. Essays ‘advocat[ing] a male position of power in postwar society’, as Bonnie Kime Scott summarises D. H. Lawrence’s ‘Matriarchy’ (1928) and ‘Cocksure Women and Hensure Men’ (1929) or stories such as his ‘Tickets, Please’ (1919) testify to the male anxieties provoked by such changes, and, indeed, by women like Miriam Henderson.⁷ Miriam has strong views on relations between the sexes and these develop and sharpen as she arrives in London a single, independent working woman, living in a boarding house. The beginning of her new central urban life is recounted in *The Tunnel* (1919), the fourth novel-volume of the series. Despite the poverty of her circumstances, due to low pay and the absence of parental or marital financial support, Miriam is quick to appreciate the benefits of not becoming one of ‘the sheltered’, as her and friends Jan and Mag judge married women to be (II 92). Discussing their love of

⁵ Virginia Woolf claimed that human character – and therefore literature – changed in 1910, a rhetorical move made to mark a paradigm shift in her 1924 essay ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’. See Virginia Woolf, *A Woman’s Essays*, Rachel Bowlby (ed.) (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp.69-87. It is in *Deadlock* (1921) that Miriam first learns the word ‘feminist’, from Michael Shatov, and then declares she disagrees with the position of ‘those women’s rights people’ (III 218), although later she will support Amabel’s marching for suffrage.

⁶ A useful sketch of the changes during the modernist period is given in Maren Tova Linett’s ‘Modernist Women’s Literature: An Introduction’, which opens *The Cambridge Guide to Modernist Women Writers*, Maren Tova Linett (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.1-16, although reading a collection of Woolf’s essays on women and on literature also gives a good sense of the changes afoot during this period for women. See Woolf, *A Woman’s Essays*, op. cit.

⁷ ‘D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930)’ in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.) (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp.224-237. The two short essays are also reproduced.

nonworking days – Sundays, since Londoners worked a six day week – the three women list the behaviours and pleasures which, if married, they would not be able to indulge in: spending the morning ‘in your knickers, with your hair down’ and enjoying ‘the first cigarette over the *Referee*’ (II 90) are described as ‘just pure absolute bliss...complete well-being and happiness’ (II 91). The women then playfully build the alternative, picturing the constraints of married life:

‘While the sheltered people are flushed with breakfast-table talk –’
‘Or awkward silences.’
‘The deep damned silence of disillusionment.’
‘And thinking about getting ready for church.’
‘The men smoke.’
‘Stealthily and sleepily in arm-chairs, like cats – ever seen a cat smoke? – like cats – with the wife or somebody they are tired of talking to, on the doormat – as it were...’ (II 91)

Married life on a Sunday is full of obligations beyond the self (the necessity of small talk), hemmed in by routines and traditions (the breakfast table, Sunday clothes), gendered differently (it is the men who smoke) and subservient to institutions such as the church. Towards the end of the third novel-section of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam lays this out directly as linked to the necessary rejection of marriage:

So there was nothing for women in marriage and children. Because they [women] had no thoughts. Their husbands grew to hate them because they had no thoughts. But if a woman had thoughts a man would not be ‘silly’ about her for five years [as Miriam sees in the relationship of her employers, The Corries]. (I 439)

Unlike her friends Alma and Eleanor Dear, and two of her sisters, Harriet and Sarah, Miriam will not marry, continuing to reject a series of male proposals. Instead, she will become first a lover and then a writer.

Bliss, incommunicability, and female desire

The word 'bliss' that Mag, Jan and Miriam use to describe how they feel about the activities of their unmarried selves upon a Sunday morning is invoked like this by Miriam to name a kind of happiness derived from time spent with other, favoured, and potentially fancied, women; it also names a more internal state of largely incommunicable, private pleasure, marked by her independence from men.⁸ It is a word, therefore, which names the pleasures to be gained from non-heteronormative arrangements and activities; a queer word, we could venture. Miriam also uses it to describe time outside of or away from the usual trappings of her life and work; it appears in conjunction with holidays (in Oberland; at the Wilson's holiday house), days off, and feelings of timelessness. It is nearly always associated with the autonomy of being an unmarried woman insofar as it tends to communicate her pleasure at having been able to choose, entirely for herself, the companions she is with, the living circumstances she is in, or the holidays she is on, unlike the 'sheltered people'. *Revolving Lights* is the section of *Pilgrimage* with the greatest number of uses of 'bliss' and its derivatives, 'blissful', 'blissfully' and 'blissfulness'; it is the section, too, wherein Miriam refuses Michael Shatov's offer of marriage, giving his Jewishness as her main reason, and then recuperates on holiday by the sea at the house of her old school friend Alma and Alma's literary husband, Hypo Wilson, the attentions of whom Miriam clearly enjoys.⁹ Many of the uses of

⁸ My work on the number of references to bliss is mainly done by hand, since there is as yet no full searchable digital text of *Pilgrimage* except for the first volume, *Pointed Roofs*, which is on Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/>.

⁹ For a strong reading of Richardson, and Miriam, in relation to Jewishness, see Maren Tova Linett, *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially the two chapters which address *Pilgrimage*. Linett provides a convincing account of the Jew as a foil for various anxieties and stereotypical projections in the writing of the period, including Richardson's. In the chapter 'Transformations of Supersessionism in Woolf and Richardson', she argues that Judaism is a step which Miriam considers and then rejects, moving beyond it into Christianity, with this second creed especially evident in the final two volumes of *Pilgrimage*. Linett's reading stresses what it sees as Miriam's 'path to Christian fulfilment', which I think is an over-reading of the importance of Christianity to Miriam (p.71). Quakerism and the Young Women's Bible Association House (examples Linett draws on as evidence of her

bliss relate to these two events. After a visit to a gentile woman who had married a Jew, Miriam thinks how she would be 'sacrificing the bliss of her own uninfluenced life' (III 236) were she to marry Michael. Finally, when she actually refuses him, she describes the lack of connection she feels they already suffer. He is unable to even recognise her bliss, far less to share it; she in turn, deliberately shields it from him and keeps it apart:

He had never for a moment shared her sense of endlessness...But the things she threw out to screen her incommunicable blissfulness, or to shelter her vacuous intervals from the unendurable sound of his perpetual circling around his set of ideas, no longer reached him. She could silence and awaken him only in those rare moments when she was lifted out of her growing fatigues to where she could grasp and state in all its parts any view of life that was different from his own. Since she could not hold him to these shifting visions, nor drop them and accept his world, they had no longer anything to exchange. (III 304)

In *Revolving Lights* bliss names what Miriam cannot share with Michael, what marrying him will deprive her of, and what she is able to experience again after she has finally refused him and, assured of her freedom, gone on holiday.

growing Christianity) give Miriam two things: knowledge that there is a creed which appreciates the silence and solitude she has increasingly recognised as important, especially to her art; and autonomy. Her relationship with Jean, which Linett notes has Christian overtones, also has lesbian ones which complicate a straightforward Christian reading. I read Miriam's journey as one primarily towards a position from which she can write. I think Linett's reading also underplays the importance that Amabel has for Miriam in retaining Michael in her life. In her later chapter, 'The Race Must Go On: Racial Continuity in Barnes and Richardson', Linett considers Amabel's role more fully, and she is right to stress the complexity of Miriam's relationship to Michael's Jewishness, and to highlight the contradictory stereotypes with which Richardson represents this relationship. I agree with Linett that Miriam's rejection of Michael on the grounds of his Judaism is disingenuous, but not, as Linett states, because of her 'refusal to consider Reform Judaism (in which the prayer [wherein men thank God for not making them women] has no place)...' (p.122). Instead, I see it as part of Miriam's need to distance herself from people and circumstances – such as marriage – which would prevent her being able to be as autonomous as she desires to be.

Bliss is also a significant word, deployed with regularity and at key moments, in the first of the final four novel-sections, *Dawn's Left Hand*, wherein Miriam has a love affair with the attentive Hypo (based on H.G. Wells). At the same time - as she tells Hypo - she is 'perpetually' 'preoccupied' (IV 240) by the thought of 'the beloved', Amabel, a new female friend with whom she has an intense, deep and arguably eroticised relationship (IV 242). As Joanne Winning notes, *Dawn's Left Hand* was begun in 1927, a year before the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), but it took Richardson 5 years to write over a period when, as Winning summarises, 'Hall's obscenity trial overwhelmed public discourses about lesbian sexuality' (118-9), the debates around which produced for the female writer of female-female love a 'prevailing censorious atmosphere' (119). Richardson is reticent to give details of the physical side of Miriam and Amabel's romance, although we know that the memory of their first meeting obsesses Miriam until they meet again (IV 176, 184); we hear how they are tenderly tactile with each other (IV 190); share a bed sometimes (IV 243); and that they declare love for one another (IV 196, 246).¹⁰ Everything about the relationship, including perhaps the silence surrounding its absented physicality, indicates that these two women have fallen in love, from the moment they sit down on a sofa engrossed in talk, unaware that the day turns to darkness, to the time when they desire to leave a party, 'longing' to escape the whirl of sociability to be privately alone together in bed (IV 243). Whilst with her heterosexual lover Hypo, Miriam thinks of Amabel, even seeing herself as she imagines Amabel sees her in response to Hypo's compliment upon her naked figure (IV 231). She maintains to herself that her relationship with Amabel is far superior: 'Nothing could be better. No sharing, not even the shared being of a man and a woman, which she sometimes envied, sometimes deplored, could be deeper or more wonderful than this being together...' (IV 242). Amabel, she muses to herself in the company of Hypo, has confirmed for her what she had thought might be her inexperience of men or what she - perhaps

¹⁰ Amabel declares her love by writing it on Miriam's bedroom mirror, whilst Miriam declares she loves Amabel to Hypo. Thus there is no point in the text where the women declare their love to one another.

euphemistically - names 'a personal peculiarity': 'her certainty that between men and women there could be no direct communication' (IV 223).¹¹ *Dawn's Left Hand* thus sets up a recognisable comparison between a heterosexual and a lesbian love affair, with the former leading to disappointing sex, miscommunication, arguments and resentment, and the latter to a deep and intense sense of shared lives. Despite the account of the sexual liaison with Hypo, *Dawn's Left Hand* is, in fact, full of descriptions of close female relationships and desires, further consolidating the impression that the connection capable between women far exceeds that between a woman and a man.

When Miriam first encounters Amabel, at an all-female club in London, our protagonist is still living with Selina Holland, with whom she shares a bedroom divided by a curtain. At a Lycurgan socialist meeting Miriam discusses this arrangement with her friend Rachel. The conversation between Rachel and Miriam is startling, partly for its uninterrupted speed and partly because, unlike on many other occasions, more is said than thought by Miriam; significantly, it revolves freely and openly around women and their feelings for one another. Mention is made of 'The Octopus', a nickname for another woman at the meeting who, Miriam claims, 'is in love with me' (IV 181). Rachel requests from Miriam news of 'your Selina', who, it appears, has threatened to move out ('Do you think that was a feeler?', asks Rachel (IV 183), perhaps suggestively). Miriam recounts how Selina unexpectedly visited her workplace to revoke her decision to move and how, despite being 'thrilled' that Selina couldn't bring herself to finally leave their cohabitation (IV 184), Miriam lied and said she had already arranged to return to her previous boarding house in Tansley Street. This Sunday of the socialist meeting, of the conversation with Rachel, is therefore the last Sunday living with Selina and for Miriam this creates 'a featureless, blissful moment' (IV 185), which promptly ushers in the memory of her recent first sighting of Amabel. Affirmed by the attentions of Selina, intrigued by the memory of

¹¹ Interestingly, Project Gutenberg's searchable *Pointed Roofs* threw up 4 uses of 'bliss', three in connection with Mina, with whom the young Miriam is fascinated, and one in a scene of mutual pre-dance baths with her sister Harriet, replete with sponge fights and 'dubbing'.

attractive Amabel, invigorated by Rachel, Miriam feels blissful. Blissful too, in *Dawn's Left Hand*, are several memories of time spent with Jan and Mag, Miriam's modern female friends who live together in intimate informality, seemingly always in camisoles and knickers, smoking, cooking for themselves or bicycling daringly round their Bloomsbury Square (IV 206; 209).

However, there is another modality to the feeling of bliss for Miriam, one which is solitary, non-normatively free, and very much linked to having 'a room of her own', even if, as when sharing with Selina, it is not always and entirely hers. Like in Mansfield's tale, where material objects such as fruit, bowls and pear trees can become touched by Bertha's bliss and reflect it back to her as though symbolically, a happy Miriam can look at the room she is about to leave, where there is 'early morning light pouring from the high window along the green pathway and reflected, in their different ways by the bureau, the mirror, the crockery: the quiet deep bliss of it. Bliss that would remain unchanged and gradually spread its quality even over the shallow months...' (IV 193).¹² This is the morning after the night when Miriam had just had her first, long conversation with Amabel, described as touching 'the very root of her being' (IV 192). Bliss is mobile, contingent and contiguous, often prompted by or prompting the memory of women who inspire Miriam's affection and to whom she is attracted but, as with the bedroom and its bliss-bathed objects, it is linked to solitude and silence, to the fact that despite near-poverty she has created a life and living conditions over which she has full control. Awaking on her first Sunday back in Tansley Street, alone and without Selina, Miriam talks of feeling 'steeped in bliss' (IV 355). We all know this feeling: the sense of perfect self-happiness when we only have ourselves to please and ourselves for company, when we are 'communing' with ourselves without any of the pressures, requests and requirements that come with other people, and importantly for Miriam, that would come with waking up next to a husband.

¹² For my reading of Mansfield's 'Bliss', see Jennifer Cooke, 'Katherine Mansfield's Ventriloquism and the Faux-Ecstasy of All Manner of Flora', *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 19, 1 (Jan-March, 2008): 79-94.

Later, in a complicated set of events, Miriam will engineer for Amabel to marry Michael, her old Jewish-Russian flame and ex-fiancé. Yet, on the eve of this union, when Miriam stays with Amabel, the two women retain the ability to touch again their core of connection. The text does not clarify who speaks first:

‘Why can’t we stay as we are forever?’

‘I know.’

‘Let’s get away. Get up and go, you and me and all we have.’

‘I know.’

Completeness of being. Side by side, silent, with the whole universe between us, within us, in a way no man and woman, be they never so well mated, can ever have. (IV 545)

Echoing the scene in Mansfield’s ‘Bliss’ where Pearl and Bertha stand looking at the pear tree, there is a collapsing of time and space in this moment which longs for forever but feels as though it encompasses the whole universe. It is a fantasy of escape from the normative storyline of Amabel’s approaching marriage and all it will entail (initial misery, suburbia, a child, her abandonment of politics); it is an affirmation of the intense bond the women have shared but cannot, for various reasons, sustain.¹³ Of course, neither of them acts upon the urge ‘to get away’. Amabel marries Michael, eventually having his child. Miriam marries nobody, eventually beginning a book. Like the Mansfieldian relationship between Pearl and Bertha, there is no erotic, exclusive future for this female couple; men will come to interrupt the potential inhering in the feelings of communicative closeness that Mansfield and Richardson depict their female protagonists expressing.

What is at stake in this representation of a desired but ultimately untenable female relationship? As we’ve seen, Richardson sets it up as distinct from and transcendent of heterosexual relational capabilities. Miriam’s critique of the communicative incompatibility between men and women runs throughout *Pilgrimage* and is part of

¹³ The reasons for the dissolution of their love affair are complicated but perhaps the most obvious reason for Miriam’s withdrawal is to aid her project of becoming a novelist, which she sees as a solitary occupation.

her development as a writer; it helps dictate her choice not to marry the variety of suitors who cross her path. It does not even take a special, loved individual such as Amabel for women to connect with each other in ways that it is impossible for them to connect with men, Miriam believes:

But there is a moment in meeting a woman, any woman, the first moment, before speech, when everything becomes new; the utter astonishment of life is there, speech seems superfluous, even with women who have not consciously realised that life is astonishing...It is not possible to share this sense of life with a man...? (III 280-1)

As Winning has noted, silence is a significant (and probably, for Richardson, a political) component of the female-female relationships in *Pilgrimage* and it marks them out from the usually noisy, wordy world of men (125-6). The connection described above arrives before and beyond speech and is not translatable across the gender divide. Whether Miriam is wrong in positing such an experience is less interesting than the fact that Richardson depicts a female protagonist with this view. Implicit within such an affirmation of female relationality – and explicit, too, in many other statements Miriam makes – is a critique of existing gender positioning and roles which destabilises the heterosexual, married couple as the *ne plus ultra* unit. This is as much a political move as it is a literary one: under fire in particular is the aspiration to a bourgeois marriage which commits women to house and child and submission; in other words, a far more circumscribed, if more financially secure, life than that of the early twentieth-century single woman that Miriam represents. Women who enter such marriages do not even appear to have the power to stop their husbands having affairs, affairs with single women like Miriam or Miss Fulton in ‘Bliss’.

In contradistinction to the conventional contemporary assumption/ideal that a heterosexual marriage with the right man would deliver female fulfilment, Richardson presents mutual female communication as deeper and more immediate – insofar as it evades the mediation that is language – as well as more capable

of completing female being. In these representations, though, women come out on the uncomfortably stereotypical side of the knowledge/intuition binary, retaining their place within the 'natural' and even 'mystical' category, in opposition to the 'rational' or 'logical'. Thus an essentialising of what it means to be female takes place that does not escape traditional binary thinking but merely celebrates the 'feminine' arts of empathy and communication. Nevertheless, there is still an operative critique of patriarchy, of the limits of a masculinised discourse, and of the restrictive nature of marriage available here. As Stephen Heath points out in his discussion of *Pilgrimage*, 'Resistance [to the conventional novel and its representations of women] is the risk of essence, the opposition turns on an alternative representation that is always potentially another definition, another given place'.¹⁴ In other words, if women are not *that* (what patriarchy, male discourse, and marriage dictate they are), then they are *this*. Heath's observation highlights one problem faced by the female writers trying to articulate new forms of female experience and perception in this period: drawing female-female experience from invisibility into a comparison with female-male experience inevitably ends up inserting itself into a binary logic which precedes it.

Sameness and Impersonality

At this point, I would like to suggest a further reading of bliss in Richardson's *Pilgrimage* by exploring its intersections with Miriam's ideas surrounding, firstly, the personal, personality, and impersonality, the last of which Miriam's attitude towards alters and evolves as the novels progress, and later, in the last section of this article, the relationships between bliss and temporality, in order to highlight their surprising similarity to some recent work within queer theory. Throughout *Pilgrimage*, Miriam advances the opinion that we all have a surface personality, which can shift and change, but that underneath and underlying this there is a quintessential sameness to people. In *Deadlock* (1921) she tells Michael that

¹⁴ Stephen Heath, 'Writing for Silence: Dorothy Richardson and the Novel' in *Teaching the Text*, Susanne Kappeler and Norman Bryson (ed.) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p.140.

‘everybody is the same really, inside, under all circumstances’ (III 146), and later, in *The Trap* (1925), she reflects that ‘She was herself, she knew, but never quite permanently: never believing that what people thought themselves to be and thought other people to be, went quite through . . . Always certain that underneath was something else, the same in everybody’ (III 429). This deeper, core self is not a response to personality, to the ‘surface levels’ upon which people behave; it is more structural than our self-projections, a deep-level being which we all share (IV 192). A similar plea for the recognition of a fundamental sameness has recently been put forward by psychoanalytic inheritors Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips in their 2008 book, *Intimacies*. They suggest a relational model of what they call ‘impersonal narcissism’, whereby the focus is upon seeing the same-in-the-other, beyond the vagaries of individual personalities, and beyond the orientation to others as different and therefore threatening.¹⁵ Instead, ‘what is different about others (their psychological individuality) could be thought of as merely the envelope of the more profound (if less fully realized, or completed) part of themselves which is our sameness’ (86).¹⁶ Bersani and Phillips’s model of impersonal intimacy is derived from several sources: on the one hand, the love between an older man and a younger boy advanced by Socrates in *The Phaedrus*; and, on the other, a shared desire to reconfigure the psychical composition of the psychoanalytic child, who is born into lack and into the perception of others as threatening, the latter a legacy derived from the infant’s observation that the mother’s attention is capable of being interrupted or even dominated by someone else. Both theorists examine the beneficial significance of the structure of the psychoanalytic treatment encounter, wherein a stranger tells another stranger extremely personal details within the safety of an impersonal relationship and – ideally and in theory – without relational repercussions. Additionally, Phillips discusses the

¹⁵ Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p.86.

¹⁶ For a summary of their account and a brief critique see the online conference paper, Jennifer Cooke, ‘Impersonal Intimacy or Impossible Theory? Appraising a Recent Psychoanalytic Rethinking of Intimacy and Love’ presented at *Persons, Intimacy and Love: Probing the Boundaries*, Third Global Conference, Salzburg, Austria, 6-8 November 2009, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Cooke.pdf>, date accessed: 7 August 2010.

relationship of a mother towards her newborn as an illustration that appreciation of, and intimacy with, another person can occur without the previous accumulation of personal 'knowledge' of that individual's personality. The factors stressed from these examples together constitute a valuing of sameness over difference; a de-emphasis on the importance of personality or individual identity; and a re-evaluation of relationships which do not give pre-eminence to longevity and accumulated 'knowledge' as markers of intimacy and its depth.

Bersani and Phillips have the advantage over Miriam of being theorists whereas she is a fictional character, one who has not spent her adult life reading twentieth- and twenty-first century psychoanalytic and queer theory. Miriam's positions can be inchoate and at times contradictory: her belief in a fundamental sameness, for instance, sits at odds with her assertion that men and women have different consciousnesses; her railing against heteronormativity, and belief that negative representations of women across different disciplines and discourses leads to their denigration, implies that gender behaviour is a construction, a series of positions and performances tutored into place by education and culture, which is uncomfortably in tension with her essentialist arguments for the inherent nature and superiority of female knowledge.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the concordances between her belief in an underlying human sameness and the arguments advanced by Bersani and Phillips are remarkable. These later theorists are not quite as universalising as Miriam: they allow, in an analogue to how Socrates's older lover sees in the boy he loves the shadow of the particular god he follows, that 'naturally each subject's type of being is not reflected in everyone else' (86). Nevertheless, they hold the same appreciation for a deeper sameness, rather than the surface differences which make us into separate individualities, and they argue for the abandonment of our attachment to a constructed and performed selfhood in order to de-fetishise that route for establishing our distinctness from others. In the concluding sentences to the book, 'bliss' is the word

¹⁷ 'I wouldn't have a man's – *consciousness*', stresses Miriam, 'for anything' (II 149). It is in this section where she also elaborates on how she thinks men and women have different types of knowledge too.

Bersani reaches for to describe how it would feel to escape our attachment to our constructed selves:

It is indeed strange that we find it so difficult to welcome, as Phillips writes, the blissful nature of the loss of the power of selfhood – a power it was, in any case, always an illusion to think we possessed...[this] may be the most profound ‘mistake’ inherent in being human: that of preferring our opposition to the world we live in over our correspondence, our ‘friendly accord,’ with it. (125)

As we have seen above, Miriam distrusts the outward self, distrusts what we think we are and what we think others are; she looks instead for sameness, connection, being. Along with Bersani and Phillips, she too will come to see impersonality – a form of relationality which is not based on or rooted in an appreciation of personality – as an important mode of being.

Impersonality as it initially appears in *Pilgrimage* refers to a certain type of desired distance: one of its first uses is to name the teaching style Miriam develops in the north London girls’ school, a contrast to the ‘personal’ style of Julia, one of the other teachers (I 332). Much later on, it begins to be negatively associated with Hypo Wilson and, as Miriam characterises it, ‘his determination to keep sex in its place, while admitting that he did not know what this place ought to be, to keep it impersonal, because he feared personalities’ (IV 324). At this point, Hypo believes that Miriam may be pregnant with his child, something he has wanted for her and which he believes will help galvanise her into moving out of the city into a ‘green solitude’ where she can begin to write a novel (IV 238). Such a child, however, is not seen by Hypo to be an impingement in any way upon his life and marriage; as Miriam observes him chatting to Amabel over dinner, she surmises somewhat tartly that he is wishing ‘to test the quality of this young woman who was probably destined to share the “green solitude,” to socialize it, keep it impersonal and unexacting during his occasional visits and, possibly, one day herself supply incidental romantic interest’ (IV 323). At this stage, the personal, and personalities, as those markers which individualise people, are set

up against the impersonal, which is deemed an escape route for Hypo, and other men like him, from the messy consequences of a personalised love affair; after some post-coital cold-shouldering he is, Miriam angrily feels, trying to teach her about the ‘elimination of the personal’ (IV 263). Being impersonal in Hypo’s way creates or insists upon distance.

There is another kind of impersonality, however, which Miriam comes to value, one rather different to Hypo’s version but which, because of his interest in impersonal relationality, she thinks he might readily comprehend. In chapter two of *Dawn’s Left Hand* Miriam has returned from Oberland, which had been the holiday destination she visited in the eponymous previous section. She is recalling her time away, painting a ‘background’ of it (a key word in her development as a writer) for the entertaining of friends she is visiting on the way home, when she experiences feelings of ‘joy’ and ‘eternity’; these feelings will accompany her back to London (IV 139). She thinks Hypo would appreciate what she calls this ‘golden eternity’, a ‘beauty that had entered into her for ever’ (IV 140): commenting that ‘he would understand that discovery about oneself is impersonal, as well as personal, like a discovery in chemistry’ (IV 140). These new feelings remain with her as she opens the letters which have accumulated during her absence, including a love letter from Hypo which fails to deliver ‘the usual electric shock’ (IV 141) because ‘It was only, she thought, as she sat down to open his letter, with the unlocated being of these people that she desired communication and not at all with the sight and sound of their busy momentary selves’ (IV 141). Our ‘busy, momentary selves’ are akin to the ‘surface levels’ which Miriam believes we operate on much of the time; what she is seeking – and feels she has found, at this moment – is a deeper sense of self, one which will, after this return from Oberland, meet, and be met by, Amabel. The discovery is personal in that it affects her, singularly, but impersonal since it connects her with the deeper sense of self which she believes anyone can access, if they wish; it is a discovery which, like in chemistry, would be true for everyone and only personal insofar as you discovered it. Later, the impersonality of a deeper sense of self is alluded to as she watches the rain from the *Dimple Hill* farm: ‘To-day, it was a blessed exemption from seeing

and doing. Descent, laden with treasure one would could afford to forget, down into impersonality where past and future, vanished from their places, lay powerless to nudge and jostle, far away within the depths of a perfect present' (IV 453). Syntactically dense as this is, with its mounting clauses and its blurring of precipitation's descent with that into the 'depths of a perfect present', nevertheless, what Miriam is articulating is not dissimilar, in terms of how it defines 'impersonality', from that which Bersani and Phillips are detailing in *Intimacies*. Specifically, this lies in the way the present is prioritised over the past or the future: one of the features of impersonal intimacy stressed by Bersani and Phillips is its difference from the usual assumption that intimacy is predicated upon what we know about ourselves or another. They see this as part of a negative legacy of psychoanalysis, which has, they claim:

...mised us into believing, in its quest for normative life stories, that knowledge of oneself is conducive to intimacy, that intimacy is by definition personal intimacy, and that narcissism is the enemy, the saboteur, of this personal intimacy considered to be the source and medium of personal development. (vii-viii)

Personality, the trappings of our everyday selves as we construct them to be a marker of our individuality and project them in ways which makes us distinct from others, is not what Bersani, Phillips, or Miriam think conveys or builds real intimacy. We shall turn to the significant relationship with Amabel in the novel to see how Miriam experiences a deep sense of being which connects with another being, rendering the outside trappings of persona all but irrelevant.

Being, Becoming and Queer Temporalities

On the surface, Amabel is the kind of woman Miriam usually does not like, with 'plastic poses', an annoying laugh, and a self-awareness of the attractive impact she makes: it is not her personality that appeals to Miriam but her deeper being and the connection they share. Amabel, she claims, has touched the 'very root of her being' (IV 192). On at least two occasions, Miriam

contrasts 'being', which she advocates, with 'becoming', which is aligned with the everyday, momentary self we perform to people. Becoming is also gendered, associated with what Miriam thinks are 'masculine' values and activities, if also inevitable aspects of living: achievements, work life, public discourse and persona. Hypo Wilson is Miriam's example of a person who is 'becoming': it is not just that he is primarily interested in 'ceaseless becoming' (IV 220) but that he can only see that in others too, so that Miriam feels 'unknown to him' since in others he 'only saw what they were becoming or might become, and of the essential individual knew, and wanted to know, nothing at all' (IV 220). Miriam contrasts the two states specifically:

Being versus becoming. Becoming versus being. Look after the being and the becoming will look after itself. Look after the becoming and the being will look after itself? Not so certain. Therefore it is certain that becoming depends on being. (IV 362)

As Bryony Randall notes, Richardson's privileging of being over becoming is diametrically opposed to a contemporary and popular Bergsonian advocacy of becoming as 'more properly describe[ing] human consciousness' because it communicates flux and movement.¹⁸ Alongside other commentators, Randall also notes Miriam's tendency to gender these two states: on the one side there is being, the female and the mystical, on the other, becoming, the male and the scientific (65, 72-3). Miriam's final conclusion above, however, would collapse if these gendered lines were adhered to rigidly, since to imply that masculine 'becoming' 'depends on' female 'being' would be to beg the question of why in that case women are not able to fulfil the becoming elements as effectively as their male counterparts, and, indeed, how men ever get to the stage of 'becoming' which they inhabit if they do not first 'look after' their being. However, despite the 'versus' she uses here, Miriam is not contrasting these two states, but arguing for their mutual recognition and value. She would like to see Hypo's 'world

¹⁸ Bryony Randall, 'Dailiness in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*', *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.64.

of ceaseless “becoming” *exchanged for one wherein should be included also the fact of “being,”* the overwhelming, smiling hint, proof against all possible tests, provided by the mere existence of anything, anywhere’ (IV 362; my italics). There is ‘being’ in everything, possible in every moment regardless of the activity undertaken. Being is a stable experience, potentially available; becoming is what it is possible, and perhaps sometimes necessary, to lay over the top; it is more transient and protean but also, perhaps inevitably, more formed in response to the precepts and expectations of society. There are obvious shades of the Freudian schema of the unconscious and the conscious here, although being for Miriam is a conscious and crucially an active relationship to the world. Thus, although the terms seem inverted from their earlier modernist articulation, the conceptual states to which they refer are actually very similar.

Bersani and Phillips also elaborate upon being and becoming as states related to intimacy, whether self-intimacy or that with another. Neither is using quite the same vocabulary as each other, nor as Miriam, so the distinctions need unpicking, but what they are referring to has points of constellation with Miriam’s ideas, as we have seen before. Phillips states that the mother-infant relationship, instead of being built upon persona and individuality, is one that is attentive to the ‘process of becoming’ (114). Glossing this later, Bersani will suggest that, “The subject’s wish to *know* the other, rather than being valued as our highest relational aspiration, should be seen, as Phillips writes of the relation between mother and child, as “a defence against what is unknowingly evolving, as potential,” between them’ (124). These statements, attentive as they are to a temporality of unfolding relationality, or what Bersani will call ‘evolving affinities of being’, are largely unrelated to Miriam’s sense of ‘becoming’; in fact they seem the opposite (124). For Miriam, ‘becoming’ means adopting the cloak which society expects, constantly moving on to the next thing, a busy state, inattentive to the world and caught up in performing the self, for Bersani and Phillips, becoming means rejecting all the pre-scripted norms for how we are supposed to feel and behave towards people, ignoring the precepts about knowledge of the other constituting the deepest intimacy, and allowing ourselves to be

responsive to the relational potential which is inherent in every meeting with another person. In their temporal attention to the moment, as opposed to the stretch of the past and the expectant horizon of the future which circumscribes the usual sense of relational intimacy, the kind of becoming that Bersani and Phillips sketch is far closer, indeed, to Miriam's 'being'. Like Miriam, this is interested in the moment itself and involves recognising that we share 'a certain type of being' with others, a sameness which transcends the usual categories through which we mark off difference or perform our busy shifting selves. Queer theory, whose shape owes much to the early influential contributions of Bersani, has recently become interested in challenging normative conceptions of temporality, arguing that our sense of time is often predicated upon an implicitly heterosexual orientation to futurity.¹⁹ While the intricacies of these debates are far beyond any potential alignment with Miriam's sense of being, like Bersani and Phillips, they share with her a desire to affirm the present over and against the past or the future. Sometimes in queer discourses, this is identified as a form of attention to 'becoming'; such, for example, is the sense Calvin Thomas is invoking when he writes of 'queer as a site of permanent becoming', and yet this sounds more akin to a sense of evolving being than it is the kind of Hypo Wilson busyness by which Miriam is so repelled.²⁰

¹⁹For a good summary of the turn to time, see Ben Davies and Jana Funke's 'Introduction: Sexual Temporalities', which begins their edited collection, *Sex, Gender and Time in Fiction and Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.1-16. For more detailed discussions by some of the most influential theorists on this topic, see: Carolyn Dinshaw and Lee Edelman et al, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Round Table Discussion', *GLQ* 13, 2/3 (2007): 177-95; Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004); and Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Calvin Thomas, 'Foreword: Crossing the Streets, Queering the Sheets, or "Do you Want to Save the Changes to Queer Heterosexuality?"', in Richard Fantina, (ed.), *Straight Writ Queer* (Jefferson and London: McFarlane and Company, Inc. Publishers: 2006), p.4.

There is a passage in *Pilgrimage* which brings together many of the terms I have been discussing here. Miriam's affair with Hypo is underway; Alma, his wife, writes to tell Miriam that she and Hypo will be visiting London and wish Miriam to join them in attending a performance of Wagner. Miriam imagines that this event, despite their entangled personal lives, will involve an 'impersonal sitting down together, before a large stage made vast by outpouring music, of the three equally reduced to silence and committed to experience whose quality could not be stated in advance' (IV 143). Thirty pages later and Miriam is actually at the concert, thinking, yet again, about the difference between her and Hypo. The anti-teleological nature of the following thought process, which distinguishes between two attitudes to the future, maps well onto the difference between becoming and being:

...to have a distinct end in view endangers both end and means. To know beforehand where you are going is to be going nowhere. Because it means you are nowhere to begin with. If you know where you are you can go anywhere, and it will not be the same place, and good. (IV 172).

Thus, becoming is orientated towards the future, whilst being is about dwelling in the present in such a way that the present itself is transformed. The insistent, noisy emotion of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* leads Miriam to contrast it negatively with Bach, whose music speaks to her of 'stillness, dailiness, the quiet, blissful insight whose price is composure. The deep quiet sense of *being* –' (IV 172). Given Miriam's interest in the present, in bliss, and in solitude, Bach is the artist she is more naturally drawn towards and yet, later, she feels that the evening's opera has managed to strike 'to the depths of her being' (IV 173). Being, in both these musical configurations, is contemplative; a giving of oneself up to the moment, attentive to its possibilities to touch you, and to spread its 'glow' over onto other experiences (IV 173). Bliss is linked to a certain timelessness, where moments of the present are shot through with happiness and a sense of eternity. Randall's interpretation leads her to comment that 'temporal differences are ultimately ways of articulating Richardson's conception of a fundamentally eternal humanity...' (72). Yet 'humanity' here is not

to be thought in a religious or a material sense; it is a metaphysical conviction that there is a possible experience of existence which goes beyond and leaves behind the persona-self that we perform to others, to touch a deeper core, a core that each person has the capacity to reach if they can create the right kind of attention to the present.

As we have seen, one of the major contributions of recent queer theory is that it has returned us to thinking about the relationship between time and subjectivity. The female lifespan in the world Miriam inhabits – grow up, get married, have children, grow old, die – is a heteronormative model which she rejects, at first through financial necessity and later through conscious choice and the exercise of hard-won autonomy. Like Bersani and Phillips, Miriam is interested in a fundamental human sameness; for the theorists, this is the basis for a new form of relationality, one which to some extent at least, and for a short time, Miriam appears to practise with Amabel. What Miriam, Bersani and Phillips desire is an access to a deeper self, one which can appreciate its similarity to others rather than seek to differentiate itself from them. This articulation of desire for a deep, impersonal connection is for the most part, in these accounts, nonheterosexual: for Bersani, it stems from his work on gay subcultures, which Phillips follows in *Intimacies*, and for Richardson, it is proto-lesbian.²¹ In both articulations, too, it represents a yearning for something more than what the present organisation of gender and subjectivity delivers. The fact that ‘impersonal intimacy’, a kind of mirroring of reciprocity based upon sameness not difference, still remains to be thoroughly theorised in the twenty-first century affirms how radical a modality of being it was for a modernist like Richardson to be depicting, nearly 100 years before.

The final image of the novel, argued by some critics to be a melancholic grasping towards the kind of reproductive futurism – to use Lee Edelman’s phrase – which Miriam has no part in, being single, unmarried, and at that point without a lover too, is in my

²¹ As I have noted, Phillips in one small section explores whether it might also be accessible in the mother-child bond.

reading an affirmation of Miriam's queerness.²² As she stands there, the 'essence' of her relationship with Amabel remains 'untouched', we read (IV 685). 'Still we remain,' Miriam thinks, 'what we were to each other when we first met' and there is an 'inexpressible quality' to their relationship which is transmitted through Paul, Amabel's infant. Alone, Miriam finds and holds him and feels what she calls 'the complete stilling of every one of my competing urgencies. Freedom' and 'perfect serenity' (IV 685). This is not because he is a child and she longs for a child; she has, as she points out, held many children of friends and sisters and not had this experience. The text is clear: it is because he is Amabel's child that she feels like this and her final question is whether the child of another loved woman, Jean, who has acceded to heteronormativity will make her feel the same. Instead of the pessimistic – if rhetorically important – lambasting of the figure of the child which we see in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, we see here a different sense of queer continuity. One way of viewing this would be that Miriam has 'fitted' her feelings for Amabel into the heterosexual schema, but that would be to downplay how Miriam had 'given Michael into her [Amabel's] hands' (IV 658). There is in this final scene some of Phillips's sense of maternal intimacy as not rooted in personality; some of Miriam's queer sense of eternity, her feelings of bliss, and her conviction of a kind of fundamental sameness. There is an affirmation of the way Amabel, and now her offspring as a part of Amabel, can touch Miriam's being. Richardson did not have the large vocabulary we do today for discussing sexuality and subjectivity but the one she invented for Miriam Henderson, inconsistent as it may sometimes be over the many thousands of pages of *Pilgrimage*, has an uncanny continuity with contemporary theoretical concerns in ways which make us realise, perhaps, something of that fundamental sameness which Miriam is so convinced we all share underneath.

²² Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp.2-3.