

‘IMPERIALISM WANTS IMPERIAL WOMEN’: THE
WRITING OF HISTORY AND EVOLUTIONARY
THEORIES IN DOROTHY RICHARDSON’S
PILGRIMAGE

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In the words of Winifred Bryher, Dorothy Richardson’s life-long friend and patron, the novels that make up *Pilgrimage* are ‘the best history yet written of the slow progression from the Victorian period to the modern age.’¹ Again, in her autobiographical memoir, she reports how she used to suggest to her friends ‘that if they want to know what England was like between 1890 and 1914, they must read *Pilgrimage*.’² Indeed, the psychological progression of the protagonist Miriam Henderson – an urban Londoner – is portrayed within the framework of her vibrant intellectual life and her varied encounters with anarchists, painters, socialists and ‘Lycurgans’ (Fabians), musicians, writers, suffragettes and scientists who comprise the rich community of turn-of-the-century London.

The city, however, is not only the lively intellectual core of the nation; it is also the capital of the British Empire, and Miriam’s metropolitan wanderings inevitably become an in-depth exploration of the ideological forms, modes of thoughts and discourses on nationalism and imperialism that shaped the late-Victorian and Edwardian society. In accordance with Edward Said’s ‘contrapuntal reading’, the topography of *Pilgrimage* can be explored to detect places, voices and names that reveal the presence of marginal cultures, stories, and histories, as well as their ideological representation.

To this horizontal perspective, where London goes beyond its actual physical boundaries to encompass metaphorically the entire

¹ W. Bryher, ‘*Dawn’s Left Hand* by Dorothy M. Richardson’, *Close Up*, 3, 4 (December 1931), cit. in J. Donald, A. Friedberg, L. Marcus (eds) *Close Up 1927-33: Cinema and Modernism* (London: Cassey, 1998), p.209.

² W. Bryher, *The Heart to Artemis. A Writer’s Memories* (New York: Hartcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p.168.

range of the British dominions,³ may be added a vertical dimension: in the readings, lectures, and discussions on historical issues that inscribe the historical onto the map of contemporary London. From conversations with Michael Shatov, a Russian *émigré* with whom she exchanges views on Englishness and the assimilative capacity of the British Empire, to William Reich's lectures, and the readings of historians like Thomas Henry Buckle and John Richard Green, the foundations of Britain's imperialist vocation are explored and questioned by Miriam. She then turns to Victorian and Edwardian historiography to find answers to fundamental questions about her English identity raised by the linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity of the imperial metropolis. Faced with such manifold incarnations of 'the Other', Miriam cannot but wonder what English identity means, how it was formed, and whether it is being eroded and modified by imperial expansion. Richardson's London is thus the site of a cultural performance in which the bonds of exclusion and inclusion, insularity and cosmopolitanism, 'Little Englanderism' and British Imperialism, and the writing of history itself are, inevitably, part of an 'ideological cluster' made up of the many different elements described by John Mackenzie in his book, *Propaganda and Empire*:

a renewed militarism, a devotion to royalty, an identification and worship of national heroes, together with a contemporary cult of personality, and racial ideas associated with Social Darwinism. Together these constituted a new type of patriotism, which derived a special significance from Britain's unique imperial mission. That the mission was unique in scale was apparent to all. That it was also unique in its moral content was one of the principal propagandist points of the age.⁴

More specifically, the subject of this article is Richardson's interest in how the idea of evolution formed the orthodox narrative of

³ Cfr. Simmel's concept of 'functional magnitude' with reference to the modernist metropolis. G. Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in Donald N. Levine (ed.), *On Individuality and Social Forms; Selected Writings*, trans. Edward A. Shils (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), pp.324-339.

⁴ John M. Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire. The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.2.

much Victorian historiography, in search of a 'scientific' justification of Western, English and male superiority. In her own forays into the geographical, historical, cultural and ideological landscape of the imperial metropolis, Miriam Henderson is made to cope with contradictory forces relentlessly impinging on her identity both as a woman and as a citizen of the British Empire. Among these forces, the evolutionary theories permeating nineteenth-century historiographical accounts of the development of Western civilization make clear for her how gender could be and was used as a powerful instrument for the reordering and control of imperial society.⁵ With the help of evolutionism, the often contradictory images of the Englishwoman that surface in such works define the female body and the essence of femininity as mere instruments for imperialistic expansion and the preservation of the fittest. For Richardson, therefore, the empire becomes what Vron Ware describes as 'both a physical and an ideological space in which the different meanings of femininity could be explored or contested.'⁶

The central 'chapters' of *Pilgrimage*, *Interim* (1919), *Deadlock* (1921), and *Revolving Lights* (1923), covering the events in the protagonist's life from April 1896 to October 1903, are most relevant and dense in terms of urban explorations. Miriam's London life is enhanced by new arrivals in the boarding house where she lives, in particular by Michael Shatov, a brilliant and handsome Russian Jew who turns to the young woman to improve his English and ends up falling in love with his teacher. With Michael, Miriam attends lectures on philosophy and history, reasons about literature, goes to opera, discusses Zionism, and her London opens up, providing her with a glimpse of the broader horizons of a cosmopolitan culture and multicultural reality.

Significantly, *Interim* opens on Christmas eve, with Miriam seated in the living room of the Brooms, the family of one of her students

⁵ See R. O'Hanlon, 'Gender and Empire', in Judith M. Brown, Wm. Roger Louis (eds), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol.IV, The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.379-397.

⁶ Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (New York: Verso, 1992), p.120.

who has now become a friend, observing two pictures on the wall: one represents Shakespeare, the other Queen Victoria with two Hindu servants by her side, surrounded by Satsuma vases and bowls (II 293-4). Secured behind bourgeois walls, London becomes a point of access to materials from all over the world, a metaphorical harbour for the multicultural stream of the empire.⁷ A variety of different ('subordinate') cultures are incorporated as fragments into the 'museum/library archive'⁸ of the modernist city, the site of a new kind of transnational 'metropolitan perception'⁹ within the boundaries of national culture.

It is not by accident, then, that one of the first places to which Miriam takes Michael is the British Museum, where the empire's appetite for collection is documented and displayed through the many pieces, artefacts, and *objets d'art* stockpiled with particular energy in the nineteenth century. The marvels of the empire, classified and exhibited to celebrate English power and identity, and educate the national audience are in marked contrast to the reality of cosmopolitan Shatov, whose foreign voice sounds loud in the temple of Englishness and seems to profane it. Once in the Reading Room of the Library, Miriam is at once fascinated by her friend's vast knowledge of Russian literature and ashamed at his behaviour. She eagerly seeks refuge in the view of the familiar 'forms of Englishmen' seated at the desks against the poison spread by the foreign enemy (III 61-2). A pattern is set: Miriam's response to the challenge of alterity always wavers between fear and consequent retreat to the comfort of an asphyxiating but reassuring insularity, and the exaltation and fascination for this new London, with Europe and the whole world stretching beyond it.

The pattern, however, is made more complex when social and geographical mobility is supplemented or replaced by readings on

⁷ Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.30.

⁸ K. Sangari, 'The Culture of the Possible', *Cultural Critique*, 7 (1987), reprinted in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffith, H. Tiffin (eds), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.144-156, p.145.

⁹ R. Williams, *The Politics of Modernism. Against the New Conformists* (Verso: London, 2007), p.39.

political and historical subjects. A pamphlet titled 'Young Ireland' lying on a table of the boarding house draws Miriam's attention and reminds her of an essay on the colonisation of Ulster she had written at school:

Never having thought of Ireland before reading it up in Green, and then some strange indignation and certainty, coming suddenly while writing; there for always. [...] There were no English thoughts in there, nothing of the downstairs house. [...] fury underneath, despairing of understanding, knowing how the English understood nothing, themselves nor any one else. (II 44)

'Green' is John Richard Green (1837-1883), author of *A Short History of the English People*, in four volumes, published in London between 1877 and 1880. Green's history, as the title suggests, deals with the English people, their character and development and it is reputed to have marked the beginning of a new epoch in the writing of history. According to A. Brundage, Green was 'a critical figure in the transition from the writing of history of elites to a broader history of social and cultural change',¹⁰ more focused on the social, industrial, and moral progress of a nation than on great personalities. Richardson does not comment directly on Green's vision of history, but her judgement is made clear in the following lines, when she speculates on the differences between the Celtic and the English temperament and on writers like George Meredith:

Novelists were angry men lost in a fog. But how did they find out how to do it? Brain. Frontal development. But it was not certain that there was not just the extra piece wanted to control the bigger muscular system. Sacrificed to muscle. Going about with more muscles and a bit more brain, if *size* means *more*, doing all kinds of different set pieces of work in the world, each in a space full of problems none of them could agree about. (II 443)

¹⁰ A. Brundage, *The People's Historian, John Richard Green and the Writing of History in Victorian England* (Greenwood Press: Westport, CT, 1994), p.2.

Miriam's reference to the theory of evolution is specifically concerned with the distinction between the large size of the human brain compared to the brain of the higher primates. Evolutionist scientists believed in biologically-rooted differences between men and women, which started with the arrest in female development at an earlier stage of evolution: since men were exposed to far greater selective pressures than women, they evolved further. The belief was reflected in illustrations of female skeletons, whose tiny skulls were meant to emphasize women's intellectual weakness. The size of female skulls was 'scientifically' measured and provided the (alleged) basis for a direct connection between brain size and intelligence.¹¹ These assumptions nourished several generations of scientific sexism and had an enormous influence on almost all fields of knowledge, including history, as the text of *Pilgrimage* testifies. At first, the reference to Green seems to point at the possibility of a different way of writing history, since his approach is not consistent with the Positivist train of contemporary historiography and its belief in regular patterns detectable in history analogous to those revealed by natural sciences.¹² His insistence on the free will of individuals and the aspirations and resources of the people, independent of biological evolution and teleological progress, is to Miriam a more acceptable key to the study of the history of civilization, because it is not based on prior assumptions about women's biological and intellectual inferiority.

However, in the following discussion with Michael, he endorses Green as a genuine celebration of English laws and the tradition of freedom, of which his 'most English' Miriam is a brilliant example. Miriam's reaction is a furious refusal of Michael's assumptions about what Englishness is. Although, for both, going back to the origins of the English nation and 'character' means going back to the Protestant Reformation. Michael, however, relies on the pre-Darwinian evolutionism of Henry Thomas Buckle:

¹¹ See C. Tavis, *The Mismeasure of Women: Why Women are Not the Better Sex, the Inferior Sex, or the Opposite Sex* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

¹² *Ibid.*, p.3.

Your Buckle has completely demonstrated this in a most masterly exhaustive consideration of the civilisations of Europe. Ah, it is *marvellous*, this book, one of your finest decorations; and without the smallest touch of fanaticism; he is *indeed* one of your greatest mind so the best English type, full of sensibility and fine gentleness [...]

[...] His mind is perhaps greater than even your Darwin, certainly with a far wider philosophical range, and of *far* greater originality. What is wonderful is his actual anticipation, in idea, without researches, of a large part of what Darwin discovered more accidentally, as a result of his immense naturalistic researches. (III 110-11)

The reference here is to Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* (1857), the work that made the historian a celebrity. The ambitious plan consisted in a first, introductory part, in which the theoretical framework and the general principles governing the course of human progress were outlined, and a second part devoted to the peculiar features of the progression of single nations. Once again, as the concurrent reference to Darwin signifies, the methods of historical and scientific research go hand in hand. Buckle's aim is to establish the writing of history on a scientific premise that would prove that human actions are governed by laws as fixed and regular as those which rule the physical world.¹³ In Buckle's physically-determined universe, individual efforts have little place, and the evolutionary pattern of human affairs count them as mere disturbing forces to be absorbed in the mainstream of the age to which they belong. Michaels' enthusiasm is obviously not shared by Miriam and, as was the case with Green, she expresses her dislike indirectly, by means of a cutting judgement on the scientists who mostly inspired it. For her:

'Someone will discover some day that Darwin's conclusions were wrong, that he left out some little near obvious thing with big results, and his theory, which has worried thousands of people nearly to death, will turn out to be one of those everlasting mannish explanations of everything which explain

¹³ Henry T. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, Vol. I, 2nd edition (New York: Appleton & Co., 1864), p.6.

nothing. I know what you are going to say; a subsequent reversal of a doctrine does not invalidate scientific method. I know. But these everlasting theories, and men are so 'eminent' and important about them, are appalling; in medicine it is simply *appalling*; and people are just as ill as ever; and when they know Darwin was mistaken, there will be an end to Herbert Spencer.' (III 111).

Miriam cannot accept historical narratives made up exclusively of 'eminent men', in which women are confined, at best, to auxiliary roles. Her rage is also directed at Herbert Spencer, whose theory of evolution was inspired by the same universalist aspirations characterizing Buckle's research: philosophy, biology, psychology, sociology, religion and ethics were all combined to subordinate individual choices to external conditions. As remarked by George Thomson, Miriam's fury is quite understandable, since in the same years in which women were actively fighting for equality, both Darwin and Spencer were elaborating on women's inferior development: scientific theories on evolution were invoked more and more 'to support ideologies of male superiority. [...] the woman, whose function was to serve the male and to guarantee the continuance of the race, was situated at a lower level of evolution comparable to that of primitive peoples.'¹⁴

It is not surprising that Buckle was also committed to the study of the relationship between women and the progress of civilization, namely for a lecture he delivered at the Royal Institution on 19 March 1858 (later printed in *Fraser's Magazine*), titled 'The Influence of Women on the Progress of Knowledge'. In it, after candidly remarking that 'none of the greatest works which instruct and delight mankind have been composed by women',¹⁵ he detects a female presence in the development of knowledge, ascribing it to women's 'innate' preference and bias for the deductive method. On this basis, he contends that women's role is essential in that they have supported and encouraged men in deductive habits of

¹⁴ G. Thomson, *Dorothy Richardson Annotated: Notes on Pilgrimage* (Greenboro NC: ELT Press, 1999), p.101.

¹⁵ Henry T. Buckle, 'The Influence of Women on the Progress of Knowledge', reprinted in *The Miscellaneous and Posthumous Works of Henry Thomas Buckle*, Vol.II (London: Longmans, 1872), p.57.

thought, and this is how ‘they have rendered an immense, though unconscious [sic!], service to the progress of knowledge’.¹⁶ The rhetorical climax of the text is reached when Buckle joins the chorus celebrating women as mothers of the valiant sons of the empire:

The striking fact [is] that most men of genius have had remarkable mothers, and that they have gained from their mothers far more than from their fathers; this singular and unquestionable fact can, I think, be best explained by the principles which I have laid down.¹⁷

Thanks to the mediation of history and science, *Pilgrimage* abounds in direct or indirect references to such ideological constructions of women’s role. Fragile and inferior, but also Mothers of the Empire and Britannia’s Daughters, called ‘to symbolize the idea of moral strength that bound the great imperial family together’,¹⁸ Victorian women inhabit scientific, philosophical and historical discourses and peep through Richardson’s pages to mirror her heroine’s difficult path to consciousness.

At the dentist’s studio in which she works as a secretary, Miriam is given free access to a scientific encyclopaedia by one of the doctors. What she reads under the entry ‘Woman’ is a summary of the worst circulating theories on female inferiority and her indignation sounds harsher than ever:

... the whole world full of *creatures*; half-human. And I am one of the half-human ones, or shall be, if I don’t stop now.

Boys and girls were much the same ... women stopped being people and went off into hideous processes. What for? What was it all for? Development. The wonders of science. The wonders of science for women are nothing but gynaecology – all those frightful operations in the *British Medical Journal* and those jokes – the hundred golden rules... Scared functions ... highest possibilities ... sacred for what? The hand that rocks

¹⁶ Ibid., p.62.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.72.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.3.

the cradle rules the world? The Future of the race? What world? What race? Men.... Nothing but men; forever. [...]

[...] It will all go on as long as women are stupid enough to go on bringing men into the world ... even if civilized women stop the colonials and primitive races would go on. It is a nightmare.

They invent a legend to put the blame for the existence of humanity on woman and, if she wants to stop it, they talk about the wonders of civilization and the sacred responsibilities of motherhood. They can't have it both ways. They also say women are not logical.

They despise women and they want to go on living – to reproduce – themselves. None of their achievements, no 'civilization', no art, no science can redeem that. There is no pardon possible for man. The only answer for them is suicide; all women ought to agree to commit suicide. [...]

[...] 'Nature's great Salic Law will never be repealed.' 'Women can never reach the highest places in civilization.' Thomas Henry Huxley. With side-whiskers. A bouncing complacent walk. Thomas Henry Huxley. (*Thomas Babington Macaulay*). The same sort of walk. Eminent men. Revelling in their cleverness. (II 220-22)

Apart from 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world?', a line from William Ross Wallace's poem 'What Rules the World?', many sentences are directly borrowed from the encyclopaedia. They basically concern contemporary scientific advice on women and pregnancy and on women's position in the evolutionary ladder, partly drawn from the *British Medical Journal*: women would be undeveloped men, 'inferior; mentally, morally, intellectually, and physically...her development arrested in the interest of her special functions' (Ibid). Side-whiskered 'Eminent Victorians' other than Buckle, Spencer and Darwin, are summoned to appear before Miriam's court and it comes as no surprise that they are historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, and scientist Thomas Henry Huxley. Miriam's sharp irony is directed towards their bombastic

demeanour and, more seriously, towards their both being advocates of a materialistic notion of progress. For the Whig historian, author of *History of England from the Accession of James II* (1848), the progress of a country – and of England in particular – should be read in terms of physical, moral, and intellectual improvement. As for the biologist,

He not only used his considerable professional powers to exclude women from organized science, but, in conjunction with the leading Darwinians, he also subtly reinforced late-Victorian assumptions of white male supremacy and contributed to the scientific anti-feminism that characterized evolutionary biology and anthropology in this period. [...] Huxley excluded women from science in the name of science and redefined that science to ratify that exclusion.¹⁹

In the dominant, conservative view of a woman's relationship to Empire, the Englishwoman was a multi-faceted figure, at once a heroic mother responsible for the preservation of the white race, and an underdeveloped subject in need of man's protection.²⁰ Miriam's reaction exposes the paradoxes and contradictions of such a position: women are marginalized in the name of their supposed inferiority, but nonetheless celebrated and sanctified for the sake of reproduction. It is no wonder that she fulminates against the evolutionary theory and women's submission in the name of the prosecution of a 'superior' race. Being a woman, and also a Liberal individualist, she refuses to sacrifice individual freedom and will to racial or national interests. On the contrary, Michael, who believes in the necessity of human beings to live and behave in accordance with the superior exigencies of collectivity, blames her for being an Englishwoman full of prejudices, a 'pure-Tory', though in many ways 'most exceptionally, for an Englishwoman, emancipated' (III 149-150).

¹⁹ E. Richards, 'Huxley and Woman's Place in Science: the 'Woman Question' and the Control of Victorian Anthropology', in James R. Moore (ed.), *Essay in History, Humanity and Evolution. Essays for John C. Greene* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.253-281, p.279.

²⁰ Ware, p.120.

Admittedly, Miriam's considerations on race and colonial women – blamed for giving birth to endless generations of men and thus guaranteeing the spread of their despicable theories – casts a shadow on the text and prevents it from being read in a univocal, anti-imperialist and progressive key. Rather, a fundamental tension between gender and race, and at times a primacy of race over gender, is at work here. As Vron Ware wrote in 1992, the connection between class, race, and gender within the imperialist context is still insufficiently explored, and little research has been carried out on feminist politics and whether it offers 'consciously or unconsciously, an alternative view of popular imperialism [...] how they connected their own idea of womanhood to those whom they perceived to be of different cultures and race, as well as how they dealt with difference itself'.²¹ In Western thinking, gender and race frequently overlapped in ideological constructions, with women representing a domestic version of the 'other', as much inferior and therefore in need of male/imperial authority. Here, on the contrary, Miriam's self-perception is first and foremost that of a Western woman, whose stage in the evolutionary process is more advanced compared to her colonial 'sisters', and enables her to embrace conscious sexual politics. Incapable of clearly disentangling gender from national and racial concerns, she gives voice to and contributes to reinforce the image of 'Oriental' or 'Eastern' women as passive, quiescent victims and instruments of male power.²²

This is why, in their investigation of the complex and multi-faceted relationship between gender, race and English identity in *Pilgrimage*, scholars like Carol Watts and, more recently, Jane Garrity have highlighted Miriam's tendency to take shelter in an imperializing and even xenophobic Englishness whenever she is faced with a too challenging 'otherness',²³ such as that embodied by Michael Shatov. Her London is made up of lines she never dares cross, namely racial lines, and this metropolitan topography is at once a measure

²¹ Ibid, p.121.

²² Ibid, p.163.

²³ C. Watts, *Dorothy Richardson* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1995), pp.52-3.

of Miriam's idealism and English conservatism, her commitment to the feminist cause and her nationalist limits.²⁴ For Garrity,

Miriam's subjectivity is both a national and an international construct, and the product of myriad oscillations between sexual and social categories, what the novel ultimately values is not incessant mobility, but stillness; not internationalism, but Englishness.²⁵

Undoubtedly, Miriam is immersed in the contradictions and obstacles marking the progression of a young, white, working woman in *fin-de-siècle* imperial metropolis. However, we should not assume that her search for both personal and national identity is governed by a form of racial and nationalist conservatism, as this is to underestimate the complexity of the text, whose philosophical and aesthetic foundations rest on the will to look at things 'with a hundred eyes, multitudinously, seeing each thing from every point of view' (III 324).

In one of her several discovery trips into the intellectual life of the city, Miriam attends a lecture by William Reich, a Hungarian patriot and historian whose theories on the history of England and Europe were popular in early twentieth century London. She later reports its contents quite diffusedly to Hypo Wilson, the fictional alter ego of H. G. Wells, but her enthusiasm for Reich's thesis is evident. She defines him as 'an absolute blaze of light', illuminating 'Ourselves. The English, Continuing Buckle' (III 375). Miriam then sums up Reich's vision of the history of Europe and the role played by England against the threat from Germany:

The only hope, England. Which he calls a nation of ignorant specialists, ignorant of history; believing only in race, which doesn't exist – a blindfold humanitarian giant, utterly unaware that other people are growing up in Europe, and have the use of their eyes. [...]

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ J. Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England. British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.86.

[...] England has attracted thousands of brilliant foreigners, who have made her, including the Scotch, who until they became foreigners in England were nothing. And the foreigner of foreigners is the permanently alien Jew. And the genius of all geniuses Loyola, because he made of all his followers permanent aliens. Countries without foreigners are doomed. (III 376)

English and foreigners, us and them, are the poles of Reich's binary reading of English history. Britain has been made great by its assimilation of other people and this levelling dimension is the only one in which alterity seems to be conceived: an instrument for militarist and colonial expansion. This imperialist/patriarchal logic would be as effective if 'Scotch', or 'foreigners', were replaced by 'women'. Once again, Miriam's identity as the proud citizen of the Empire seems to prevail over her identity as a woman heavily constrained by the imperialist will of expansion and domination. Although aware that Reich's theories are in many respects the continuation of Buckle's belief in the possibility of applying scientific methods to history, at the moment she is too flattered by his celebration of the glorious mission of the English nation to reflect on her own problematic position as a female citizen. What she does find valuable in Reich is also his disbelief in any notion of race and the awareness of the existence of other, non-assimilated, people, in their turn endowed with different eyes to see alternative futures for Europe. Actually, in his *Graeco-Roman Institutions* (1890) Reich claimed 'to disprove the applicableness of Darwinian concepts to the solution of sociological problems', in favour of psychological readings.²⁶ However, Reich's positivist approach to history leads him to lay stress on environmental, geopolitical, and economic conditions that do not admit free choice.²⁷

Like Buckle, moreover, Reich touched on the subject of women and Empire, and in terms that no woman could possibly tolerate. Quite predictably, in his *Imperialism. Its Prices; its Vocations* (1905),

²⁶W. Reich, *Graeco-Roman Institution, from anti-evolutionist point of view; Roman law, social slavery, classic conditions. Four lectures delivered before the University of Oxford* (Oxford: Parker & Co., 1890), 'Preface'.

²⁷W. Reich, *Foundations of Modern Europe, Twelve Lectures delivered in the University of London* (London: Gorge Bell & Sons, 1904), p.223.

women are only required to support men in their civilizing mission. They are thus supposed to give up their feminine attributes of beauty and grace in order to prevent their charm from interfering with men's work. 'Imperialism', he solemnly claims, 'wants imperial women'.²⁸ And imperial women are women ready even to undergo terrible physical sufferings for the sake of an empire that sits on their complete subjugation, physical, psychological, and intellectual: 'We hear that in China women suffer an artificial distortion of their feet. This is far from being a mere odd custom. Some disfiguring of the truly feminine must be resorted to in imperial States.'²⁹ There is more than this, yet. Women's paradoxical position as both victims and guardians of the ideology of imperialism prescribes that they must relinquish their femininity, but not altogether, since that would mean the end of motherhood, and the extinction of the British race:

To the strongest arguments of excessive Imperialists, Englishwomen ought only to retort: 'We do not want to become like the matrons of Imperial Rome. If we lose our feminine force altogether, whence shall our sons take their manly vigour? Can you imagine the Gracchi without Cornelia? Let us remain Englishwomen by all means; but women as much as English.'³⁰

No matter where Miriam turns her gaze, history, biology, literature, sociology, all seem conflated in representing a woman as a body and a mind to be fought over due to its symbolic and productive potential; no matter the field, the same evolutionary *air de famille* colours late-Victorian and Edwardian vocabulary with all the shades of imperial ideology.

However, according to Hypo, there are those in England, invisible in Reich's rhetoric, who do not believe in the inevitability of war and in a reading of the recent history of Europe exclusively as the battlefield of the opposing forces of England and Germany. Miriam is relieved and takes the chance offered by Hypo to openly

²⁸ W. Reich, *Imperialism. Its Prices; its Vocations* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1905), p.47.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.50.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p.128.

declare her dislike for Reich and express her belief that war may be just another result of male ferocity (III 376-7). Although the World War would prove her wrong, her belief in the possibility of reading history differently and her gradual awareness of that history, pivotal in the construction of national identity, being the site of conflicting trends and interests, is a fundamental step in her intellectual growth. In other words, there are no historical truths in the same sense as scientific laws, which can be tested and demonstrated. She then mentions to Hypo the name and work of 'Mrs Stetson', who delved into the origins and development of mankind to account for them differently in *Women and Economics*:

'It was the happiest day of my life when I read *Women and Economics*.' [...]

[...] the blaze of light she brings is by showing that women were social from the first and that all history has been the gradual socialization of the male. It is partly complete. But the male world is still savage.'

'The squaw, Miriam was –'

'Absolutely social and therefore civilized, compared to the hunting male. She went out for herself. Mother and son was society. *He* had no chance. Every one, even his own son, was an enemy and a rival.' (III 378)

'Mrs Stetson' is Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the American feminist writer, who at the time used her husband's surname. Her book, published in 1898, was reviewed by Richardson in an article for *The Ploughshare*, with the significant title, 'The Reality of Feminism.'³¹ In her review, Richardson brilliantly summarizes Gilman's views on science and the scientific development of industry, holding the latter responsible for splitting everyday life into two separate spheres: the world and the home. This, in turn, resulted in a vision of women as mere sexual products, thus nullifying the ages in which the home was the centre of productive services and, therefore, of society: 'Woman was a differentiated social human being earlier than man. The 'savage' woman who

³¹ Dorothy Richardson, 'The Reality of Feminism', *The Ploughshare*, 2, (September 1917), reprinted in B. Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1990), pp.401-7.

first succeeded in retaining her grown son at her side, invented social life'.³² Gilman then argues that women should now go into the world and make of it a home, that is, socialize it, since household chores and cooking would be equally shared between men and women, in a perfect cooperation of male and female energy. To Miriam, searching for 'historical truth' means lifting the veil of ideology masked as science and acknowledging that women's subordination to men and patriarchal-imperial constructions is not due to any biological and innate differences between the sexes; rather, it is due to the social, cultural, and political evolution of human communities. In this new light, even 'savage women', here symbolized by the squaw, are finally raised to the status of sisters in the universal condition of femininity.

Reich had outlined a physiognomical interpretation of English history that could detect the mark of its imperial vocation in the very physical traits of its people. Miriam now counts Reich's 'imperial faces'³³ among the many distortions of turn-of-the-century science, to whose altar women have been sacrificed:

And all the time, all the western world, life growing more monstrous. The human head growing bigger and bigger. A single scientific fact, threatening humanity. [...] Insane. Science rushing on, more and more clear and mechanical...? 'Life become more and more a series of surgical operations.' How men can contemplate the increasing awfulness of life and yet wish it go on? The awfulness they have created by swaddling women up; regarding them as instruments of pleasure. (III 379)

The monstrous creatures of such a science are summoned to vindicate the bodies of the million women 'swaddled up' over the centuries. The language of evolution and that of science are now consciously used by Miriam. After a series of historical, scientific and philosophical readings that celebrated the glories of a progress directed by natural selection and inherent tendencies, she now considers the idea of a mere mechanical evolution as potentially

³² Ibid, p.402.

³³ Reich, *Imperialism*, p.30.

degenerative. The idea is symbolized by ‘the half-human creatures with swelled heads that break into the civilized, ordered Western world and turn it into a nightmare of insanity.’³⁴ By exposing the risks of a mechanical and blind faith in science, when science is so evidently imbued with ideology, Miriam rejects the idea that evolution and biological transmission are the only dimensions that account for individual life, as that would entail being reduced to a form of existing ‘merely as a link, without individuality’ (III 247):

‘Very well than; I know what I think. If the sacred race plays tricks on conscious human beings, using them for its own sacred purposes and giving them an unreal sense of mattering, I don’t care a button for the race and I’d rather kill myself than serve its purposes. Besides, the instincts of self-preservation and reproduction are *not* the only human motives. They are not human at all. (III 152)

Thinking about her family, namely its paternal side, she links her thoughts back to the history of England, tempted to read in their features ‘their thoughtless, generous English ancestry’, of Puritan ascendancy: ‘They were the Puritans she had read of; but not Cromwellian, certainly not Roundheads’ (III 248-9). Going back to the origins, once again, means going back to the ‘origins of Englishness’, located in the Reformation. Her view of seventeenth-century religious and political turmoil is that of Carlyle and the Romantic historiographical tradition, with its zeal for distinguishing between the Puritans and Roundheads, the rebels and murderers of the monarch and thus promoting a process of revaluation of the revolutionary events. As had been the case with Ireland, this is also an indirect reference to Green, who dealt with this issue from the same perspective in his *History of the English People*.³⁵ Miriam then goes on to consider the maternal side of her family and concludes her historical-sociological survey with the affirmation of her desire not to be affected or even

³⁴ Thomson op. cit. notes that here Richardson might also be indirectly referring to ‘Of a Book Unwritten’ (1898), by H. G. Wells. Wells quotes a fictitious scientific essay by a professor of biology in which the man of the future is imagined with a slight body but huge heads and hands (p.197).

³⁵ Ibid, p.173.

defined by either influence. Her choice is to include both sides, and give voice to both:

the two natures, equally matched, mingle and fight? It is their struggle that keeps me adrift, so variously interested and strongly attracted, now here, now there? Which will win? ...Feeling so identified with both, she could not imagine either of them set aside. Then her life *would* be the battlefield of her two natures. (III 250)

Miriam's aspiration is to range 'more and more consciously on all sides simultaneously' (III 246), though the process is not painless and exempt from vacillations, as we have seen. Her resistance to confining definitions and boundaries is a form of opposition that is political, ideological, as well as aesthetic and philosophical. The capacity of seeing things from multiple perspectives is a guarantee of tolerance and acceptance, and of the refusal to catalogue nations and people on the basis of innate qualities:

Decked. Distinguished. Marked among the nations, for unconscious qualities. What is England? What do the qualities mean?

'I'm not interested in laws. If I knew what they were I should like to break them.' (III 113)

And it is especially her relationship with Michael that gradually impinges on her capacity to see things from different angles, as she clearly states in a passage from *Deadlock*, in which she wonders:

whether with this strange knowledge at her side she might be passing forward to some fresh sense of things that would change the English world of her. English prejudices. [...] Their removal would come: through a painful association. For a while she would remain as she was. But even seeing England from his point of view, was being changed; a little. The past, up to the last few moments, was a life she had lived without knowing that it was a life lived in special circumstances and from certain points of view. Now, perhaps moving away from it, these circumstances and points of view

suddenly became a possession, full of fascinating interest. (III 151).

Miriam gradually elaborates on her own discourse, at once profoundly individualistic and ventriloquistic. Mapping Richardson's imperial metropolis certainly involves, as Carol Watts states, 'a registering of the contradictions and prejudices at the heart of the imperial nation-state which shape the desires and identifications of its subject',³⁶ and also testifies to Miriam's endless efforts to question and deconstruct the very idea of Englishness. By looking at the national past through the eyes of the historians, Miriam understands the impossibility of constructing a univocal and unifying vision of a nation's history and identity. Such a questioning of the process of writing history, carried out mainly through the lens of science, also allows Richardson to investigate the ways in which women's identity and role in both history and science were ideologically constructed. A fundamental passage in this process is the discovery of a woman's own voice in contemporary scientific debate.

Apart from the example of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as discussed, other textual instances that show the richness of material offered by *Pilgrimage* to the cultural historian still await a detailed study. The inherent paradoxes that emerge in the depiction of the many images of women in the late-Victorian era and of the English imperial nation pave the way for Miriam's autonomous search for her own place in the Empire, both as a woman and as a political subject. Her quest does not lead to reassuring answers, but rather to a comprehension of the multiplicity and irreducible ambiguity of human life.

³⁶ Watt, p.57.