

‘THE FAILURE OF THIS NOW SO
INDEPENDENTLY ASSERTIVE REALITY’:
MYSTICISM, IDEALISM AND THE REALITY
AESTHETIC IN DOROTHY RICHARDSON’S
SHORT FICTION

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In Dorothy Richardson’s retrospective ‘Foreword’ to *Pilgrimage*, the novel sequence which was her life’s work and integral to the development of her modernist aesthetic, she implicitly recognises that representing the nature and experience of ‘reality’ is an always-already thwarted aesthetic aim. For Richardson, being tormented by what she termed ‘the failure of this now so independently assertive reality’ was an acknowledgement of the limits of textual representation; the failure of reality, as she wrote, ‘adequately to appear in the text’.¹ Throughout Richardson’s fiction her endeavours to communicate, through intelligible language, moments of transcendent insight as well as the daily fluxes, nuances, thoughts and perceptions of the inner life reveal a continual dialectical tension between surface impressions and a deeper, spiritual ‘reality’.

Richardson’s emphasis on transitional interludes, revelatory moments and memory is considered in this article in the light of the apparent conflict between transcendental ideals of reality - conveyed through what has come to be known as the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique - and the modernist emphasis on ordinary, everyday life. These aesthetics, I argue, are related not only to modernism’s intimate preoccupation with the ordinary but also to its consistent, and apparently conflicting, concern with a reality behind appearances and below material surfaces. This tension characterises the form of the elusive, ‘independently assertive reality’ Richardson strove to depict in her writing; an aim

¹ Dorothy Richardson, “‘Foreword’ to *Pilgrimage*”, in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 429-432, p.430.

shared by her contemporary, May Sinclair, who devoted two philosophical books and a significant body of prose fiction to the question of ‘what, if anything, lies behind or at the bottom of multiplicity and change’.²

In view of these common aesthetic aims, an examination of the work of both Richardson and Sinclair offers a broader basis for understanding the modernist ‘reality’ aesthetic developing at the turn of the twentieth century, through analysis of a little-discussed genre: their short fiction. I refer to *Pilgrimage* only where there is a clear dialogue between the mystical themes raised in Richardson’s novel and those she explores in her short stories. Whilst the stories and sketches Richardson produced throughout her writing career differ markedly from her lengthy exploration of the modernist consciousness in *Pilgrimage*, they are nonetheless characterised by similarly fragmented, detached narrative styles and oblique, metaphorical forms of representation. They reveal fleeting glimpses of threshold states, transitional interludes and individual conflicts, as well as offering an insight into everyday consciousness and subjective identity.

These narrative styles are illustrative of a cultural and aesthetic shift in the conception of reality occurring in philosophy, science and the arts in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Michael Bell points out in ‘The Metaphysics of Modernism’, during this period a radical departure from representational verisimilitude in fiction was accompanied by a ‘linguistic turn’ in which, ‘rather than describing or reflecting the world, language was now seen to form it’. According to Bell, this transition forms part of an ‘epochal epistemological change for which science provides the clearest focus’.³ The dialogue between this epochal transition and the development of linguistically-experimental modernist aesthetics of reality is discernible in the short fiction of Richardson and Sinclair, and is explored in this article in the light

² May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions*, (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p.344. See also *The New Idealism*. (London: Macmillan, 1922).

³ Michael Bell, ‘The Metaphysics of Modernism’, in Michael Levenson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9-32, pp.11, 16.

of the dominant philosophical and intellectual discourses of the period in which they were writing: specifically idealist philosophy, mysticism and the newly-emerging theories of psychoanalysis.

In the context of this discussion, the term 'reality aesthetic' is used in the sense of modernist modes of representation arising from this connection which are distinct from, and in opposition to, the various narrative styles associated with literary 'Realism'.⁴ The reality aesthetic developed by Richardson and Sinclair was, moreover, antithetical to the contemporaneous rise of New Realism, a body of philosophical thought which opposed metaphysical interpretations of reality. In her book *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions*, Sinclair refutes the epistemological reasoning of thinkers such as Samuel Alexander, whose study of *The Basis of Realism* defines 'the temper of realism [as] to de-anthropomorphise: to order man and mind to their proper place among the world of finite things'. According to Alexander, the purpose of realism is not 'merely to assert the independent existence of the object ... but even more to assert that the mind is also a thing existent side by side with it, itself one of the things which make up the universe'.⁵

Conversely, both Sinclair and Richardson were concerned with understanding reality in metaphysical, ontological terms which tended to privilege questions of being over those of knowledge. Sheila Rose attributes this approach in Richardson's work to her firm belief in an essential, unified 'core' of subjectivity which 'reinforces what she persuades us to regard as the truth about the inner life'.⁶ Similarly, Sydney Janet Kaplan has noted that whilst Sinclair's approach was also ontological, it diverged from Richardson's in the sense that her writings on philosophy were on idealism as opposed to existentialism.⁷ As there are, however,

⁴ In *The Rise of the Novel*, (London: Hogarth, 1987), Ian Watt claims that realism has characterised the novel form since the conception of the genre (pp.9-34).

⁵ Samuel Alexander, *The Basis of Realism*, (London: H. Milford, 1914), pp.1, 5.

⁶ Sheila Rose, 'The Unmoving Centre: Consciousness in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*', *Contemporary Literature*, 10, 3 (Summer 1969): 366-382, pp.381-2.

⁷ Sydney Janet Kaplan, "'Featureless Freedom" or Ironic Submission: Dorothy Richardson and May Sinclair', *College English* (1971): 914-17, p.915.

numerous discrete and complex strands of idealism, I refer to this body of philosophical thought specifically in the sense of Sinclair's spiritual monism, a term she uses to denote the unified reality she believed existed behind multiplicity and change and which she defined variously as unity, the Absolute, the ultimate reality and 'God'.

The dichotomy in literary modernism between the conception of reality as centred on either everyday events or the metaphysical realm of heightened spiritual awareness has been highlighted in a number of recent critical studies. Liesl Olson's book *Modernism and the Ordinary* and Bryony Randall's study of *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* both explore modernism's concern with ordinariness and everyday temporality, whilst Elisabeth Bronfen examines Richardson's spatial aesthetic as well as her emphasis on the memory trope in *Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory*.⁸ In this discussion, I seek to privilege neither modernist representations of the everyday and the banal nor theories of the 'moment' which tend towards the spiritual or transcendent. Rather, I focus on the dialectical relations between unity and fragmentation, spatiality and temporality and being and becoming in order to illustrate how these apparently opposing positions underpin both Richardson's and Sinclair's depictions of a unifying core, or continuous essence, of subjective being.

The work of Richardson and Sinclair was frequently compared by contemporary reviewers who attributed the influence of Richardson's *Pilgrimage* to Sinclair's 1919 modernist Bildungsroman, *Mary Olivier: A Life*. Subsequent connections made between the two writers have generally focused upon Sinclair's application of the phrase 'stream of consciousness' - its first use in a literary context - to the first three instalments of *Pilgrimage*. In her article "Featureless Freedom" or Ironic Submission', Kaplan analyses *Pilgrimage* with *Mary Olivier*, detailing the literary relationships

⁸ See Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Elisabeth Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text*, trans Victoria Appelbe (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).

between their authors and exploring their shared interest in mysticism and their focus on the inner development of their protagonists.⁹ Diane Filby Gillespie has also drawn attention to the literary connections between Richardson and Sinclair, analysing not only Sinclair's use of the 'stream of consciousness' metaphor in relation to Richardson's work but also her detailed response to the complexities of definition associated with the term.¹⁰

Sinclair's review of *Pilgrimage* is noteworthy, however, not only for the coining of the term 'stream of consciousness' but also for her less-frequently noted observation that 'criticism up till now has been content to think in *clichés*, missing the new trend of the philosophies of the twentieth century'.¹¹ Sinclair engagement with this new trend was elucidated through both her fictional and her philosophical writings, in which she took issue with New Realism's stance, as she phrased it, 'against the persistent tyranny of the Absolute and the One'.¹² As Sinclair makes clear in both her philosophical books, however, she continued to adhere to the principles of monism which were at the core of her beliefs surrounding mysticism and the spiritual nature of reality. Both Richardson and Sinclair conveyed a preoccupation with metaphysical conceptions of truth in their short fiction and sought to depict an authentic, textual equivalent of the subjective consciousness of their protagonists, primarily through use of the psychological narrative style and the stylistic device of the revelatory moment.¹³

Modernist motifs such as these recur in the work of both writers in a series of interrelated themes to which the critic Julie Kane refers as 'the root "mystical experience" - loss of self; merger with a greater unity; the apprehension of numinousness, timelessness, transcendence, and intensified meaning'.¹⁴ An examination of

⁹ Op. cit, p.915.

¹⁰ Diane Filby Gillespie, 'May Sinclair and the Stream of Consciousness: Metaphors and Metaphysics', *English Literature in Transition*, 21 (1978): 134-142.

¹¹ Op. cit, p.442.

¹² *The New Idealism*, op, cit, p.15.

¹³ Ibid, p.241.

¹⁴ Julie Kane, 'Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 41, 4 (Winter 1995): 328-349, p.332.

these issues gives an insight not only into these writers' development of an aesthetic of reality - the basis of much of the radical linguistic experimentation generally associated with literary modernism - but also into the dialogue between modernist literature and its contemporary philosophical context. Suzanne Raitt has noted this connection in the work of May Sinclair, whose engagement with mysticism and idealist philosophy is more immediately discernible from her writings than that of Richardson. Raitt's biography of Sinclair documents her growing commitment to German idealism which coincided with a crisis - both social and personal - of Anglican faith.¹⁵

Recent studies on Richardson's work are, however, re-evaluating her concern with both mysticism and idealism in her fiction. Sheila Rose for instance has claimed that 'the mystical orientation' of Richardson's view 'allows the individual to have direct and intimate knowledge of the force lying at the very core of life'.¹⁶ Similarly, Bryony Randall has noted that whilst Richardson's engagement with mysticism is 'generally unarticulated and certainly unformulated', this is nonetheless to be expected from a writer 'so fluid in her affinities', and that her work 'certainly expresses a sympathy with, and experience of, mystical aspects of life'.¹⁷ It is significant, therefore, that Richardson's and Sinclair's shared interest in mysticism coincided with a period in which conventional religion declined; leaving, as Kane suggests, a spiritual void 'in the wake of Darwinism with non-Christian, non-deistic, humanistic, yet "religious" teachings'.¹⁸ According to Raitt, mysticism thus conceivably offered a substitute in representing 'a way out of the orthodoxies of the past, without denying the need for a spiritual life altogether'.¹⁹

¹⁵ Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p.43.

¹⁶ Op. cit, p.371.

¹⁷ Randall, op. cit. pp.64-65.

¹⁸ Julie Kane, 'Varieties of Mystical Experience in the Writings of Virginia Woolf', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 41, 4, Winter (1995): 328-349, p.329.

¹⁹ Op. cit, p.236.

Deborah Longworth's article, 'Subject, Object and the Nature of Reality' develops these points in detail. Starting from the premise that 'metaphysical questions about the nature of being and of reality pervade *Pilgrimage*', Longworth explores the reciprocal relationship between mysticism and the modernist representation of reality and suggests that an understanding of the novel's intellectual context reveals this as a central tenet of Richardson's aesthetic project. Longworth details the influence of idealism on *Deadlock*, the sixth instalment of *Pilgrimage*; tracing the trajectory of the protagonist Miriam Henderson's developing awareness of philosophical explanations of reality. Whilst the influence of the philosophical realists G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell - writers Sinclair engaged with closely in her two books on idealism - is not directly referenced in *Pilgrimage*, according to Longworth their critique was central to the early twentieth-century philosophical shift of which Richardson would likely have been aware'.²⁰

The modernists' consistent concern with formulating techniques through which the subjective experience of elusive, metaphysical explanations of reality might be articulated has been most pervasive in the fragmented, linguistically experimental aesthetics of psychological prose and a form of spiritual ecstasy commonly associated with the Joycean epiphany. These two literary devices are closely interrelated and were conceivably informed by theories of sublimation evinced by Freud, mainly in "Civilised" Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness' (1908), 'On Narcissism' (1914), and *The Ego and the Id* (1923). By the time *A Defence of Idealism* appeared in 1917, Sinclair was writing along similar lines that 'all sublimation is a turning and passing of desire from a less worthy or fitting object to fix it on one more worthy or fitting'.²¹ In her two lectures entitled 'Symbolism and Sublimation' she further adopts Carl Jung's use of the term 'libido' to mean 'creative energy' in general, sexuality being 'one among many aspects and functions of the libido'. For Sinclair, 'all religion, all art, all

²⁰ Deborah Longworth, 'Subject, Object and the Nature of Reality: Metaphysics in Dorothy Richardson's *Deadlock*'. *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 2 (2009): 7-38, pp.7-12.

²¹ Op. cit, p.7.

literature, all science are sublimations in various stages of perfection'.²²

There is a clear connection here between Sinclair's notion of sublimation and the modernist 'epiphanic moment' of heightened awareness or revelation. For Sinclair, as for Richardson, piano playing is a recurring symbol of ecstatic artistic expression. In her 1914 novel *The Three Sisters*, when the character of Alice plays the piano rebelliously and loudly, 'the excitement gathered; it swung in more and more vehement vibrations; it went warm and flooding through her brain like wine. All the life of her bloodless body swam there, poised and thinned, but urgent, aspiring to some great climax of the soul'.²³ The language is overtly sexual, and similar examples of sublimation as a mystical experience are scattered through Sinclair's novels and short stories. Another instance occurs in 'If the Dead Knew', one of the tales in the *Uncanny Stories* sequence, in which a young man is desperate to marry but because of his impoverished state is unable to do so during his mother's lifetime. He therefore wishes his mother dead. He and his fiancée both then sublimate their passionate libidos into music, as indicated in Effie's response to Wilfred's church-organ recital:

The young girl who stood beside him drew in a deep, rushing breath; her heart swelled; her whole body listened, with hurried senses desiring the climax, the crash of sound. [...] she loved his playing hands, his rocking body, his superb, excited gesture [...] The climax had come. The voluntary fell from its height and died in a long cadence, thinned out, a trickling, trembling diminuendo. It was all over.
The young girl released her breath in a long, trembling sigh.²⁴

The narrative perspective of this passage, again couched in sensual language, is that of Effie, an intermediary whose mystic insight eventually brings about a rapprochement between Wilfred and the

²² May Sinclair, 'Clinical Lectures on Symbolism and Sublimation I', *Medical Press*, 16 August 1919, pp.119-20.

²³ May Sinclair, *The Three Sisters*, (London: Virago, 1982), p.32.

²⁴ May Sinclair, 'If the Dead Knew', in *Uncanny Stories*, (London: Hutchinson, 1923), p.163.

berating presence of his mother's 'ghost'; conceivably a manifestation of his guilty conscience. In this respect, as Jean Radford argues, sublimation may be viewed as a 'rationalisation of - yet again - self-denial'.²⁵ For Sinclair, however, the aesthetic of sublimation was closely related to the ideals of unity and 'Ultimate Reality' which she saw as the objects of the metaphysical quest for truth. As she suggests in *A Defence of Idealism*, 'the quest of Ultimate Reality is as much a necessity of thought as it is a passion of the soul. And the idea of the Absolute is not primitive. It is a very late and highly "sublimated" idea'.²⁶ Moreover, this area of Freudian theory, belonging as it does to the realm of metaphysics, contributed to the cultural and aesthetic shifts occurring at the outset of the twentieth century. According to Michael Bell, Freud's investigation of the realm of the human psyche 'showed how, through the process of "sublimation", consciousness may itself act as a sophisticated barrier to recognising the true nature of instinctual desire'. Moreover, this is 'not just a personal problem to be diagnosed, it is the necessary basis of civilisation'.²⁷

The prevalence of the themes of sublimation and the epiphany in modernist literature are thus indicative of the level of contemporary interest in this method of representing reality. The revelatory moment, or 'moment of being', as Virginia Woolf termed it, also became a particularly commonly-used structural device in modernist short fiction to the extent that, as Clare Hanson notes, the 'general interest in the "significant moment"' resulted in short fiction coming to prominence in the early twentieth century.²⁸

The moment of being is also a recurring motif in Richardson's novels and short fiction. Whilst Richardson did not adhere to Sinclair's commitment to idealism - 'most "idealism"' she wrote to her friend Henry Savage in 1951, 'is enlightened self-interest' - she

²⁵ Jean Radford, 'Introduction', May Sinclair, *Mary Olivier: A Life*, (London, Virago, 1980), unpaginated.

²⁶ Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, op. cit, pp.241, 246.

²⁷ Bell, op. cit, p. 9.

²⁸ Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions 1880-1980* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985), p.55.

adopts a similar focus to that of Sinclair on interludes of heightened self-awareness achieved through piano playing.²⁹ The connection between the epiphanic moment and music in Richardson's work has also been observed by Sheila Rose, who notes that in *Clear Horizon* the appearance of a musical phrase 'results in a form of spiritual ecstasy', an event which Rose claims is 'closely analogous to Joyce's aesthetic of epiphany'.³⁰ In her letter to Savage, moreover, Richardson goes on to equate music with mysticism, writing that 'the word "ideal" keeps its meaning in suitable contexts & within rigid limitations. Language is a very partial medium of expression. Poetry indirectly more direct. Music still more so. [...] In the hierarchy of being, the mystics [...] stand on a "higher", or "deeper" or further rung'.³¹

Richardson's notion of a metaphysical realm of consciousness which is beyond linguistic articulation accords with Ludwig Wittgenstein's assertion in 6.522 of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that 'there are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical'.³² Bertrand Russell, writing from a realist stance, suggests in his introduction to the *Tractatus* that 'the totalities concerning which Mr Wittgenstein holds that it is impossible to speak logically are nevertheless thought by him to exist, and are the subject-matter of his mysticism'.³³ In Richardson's letter to Savage, as well as in her fictional endeavours to represent her 'independently assertive reality' in *Pilgrimage*, this scenario is repeated through references to music. It recurs in *Pointed Roofs*, the first instalment of *Pilgrimage*, in a scene in which piano-playing brings spiritual ecstasy for Miriam Henderson:

She would play, to herself. She would play something she knew perfectly, a Grieg lyric or a movement from a

²⁹ Dorothy Richardson, in Gloria Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson*, (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p.661.

³⁰ Sheila Rose, 'Unmoving Centre', op. cit, p.373.

³¹ Fromm (ed.), op. cit.

³² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Bertrand Russell (ed.), trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001), p.89

³³ Bertrand Russell, 'Introduction', *ibid*, p.xxiv.

Beethoven Sonata ... on this gorgeous piano ... and let herself go, and listen. That was music ... not playing things, but listening to Beethoven. ... It must be Beethoven ... Grieg was different ... acquired ... like those strange green figs Pater had brought from Tarring ... Beethoven had always been real.
It was all growing clearer and clearer. ... ³⁴

The passage is conveyed in the broken, elliptical syntax which frequently characterises the modernist epiphany. The term 'epiphany', first identified by James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in *Stephen Hero*, an early draft of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, arises initially from an apparently trivial event: the overhearing of a broken, fragmented conversation which prompts Dedalus to identify the 'sudden spiritual manifestation' as a key component of his artistic vision'.³⁵ As the depiction of this form of revelatory moment consistently eludes linguistic representation, however, there is critical contention about what precisely it entails. In *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Liesl Olson notes a tendency within critical accounts of modernism to privilege moments of transcendent understanding located within the modernist moment. Instead, she highlights modernism's emphasis on ordinary experience.³⁶ However, whilst her representation of minutiae of everyday experience and subjective consciousness is generally acknowledged to be Richardson's major contribution to literary modernism, there are also continual references to moments of intense or significant experience in her writing. These are noted by Sheila Rose and also Elisabeth Bronfen, who notes that in *Pilgrimage*, 'the ecstatic joy associated with metaphysical wonder and astonishment is seen to bring liberation from bondage to the material world'.³⁷

The 'moments of being' occurring in Richardson's writing conceivably support both the apparently conflicting positions of

³⁴ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, Vol.1, (London: Virago, 2002), p.56.

³⁵ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero: Part of the First Draft of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, (London: Cape, 1944), p.216.

³⁶ Olsen, p.3.

³⁷ Olsen, p.182.

transcendental, spiritual 'unity' as opposed to everyday existence. In the short fiction, epiphanic revelations frequently arise from banal, everyday situations, but within these moments Richardson's almost exclusively women protagonists encounter interludes of heightened self-awareness in brief moments of respite from domestic and familial responsibilities. Confrontations with the limits of subjective consciousness also frequently characterise Richardson's epiphanies and are suggestive of the incapacity of language adequately to express human experience.

These scenarios recur in the stories of 'Sunday' and 'Ordeal' when the respective protagonists appear to confront their own mortality, and are a particularly noteworthy feature of Richardson's 1919 short story, 'Sunday'.³⁸ Whilst the events portrayed within this story are everyday and commonplace, 'Sunday' is essentially a story of silence and the limits of communication. It explores connections between the boundaries of subjective consciousness and the possibilities for its linguistic representation which are withheld from the reader but revealed to the main protagonist who, during an obligatory, much-dreaded Sunday visit to her elderly, deaf grandmother, apparently experiences a confrontation with her own mortality and that of 'Grannie'.

Conversation between the grandmother and the protagonist is disjointed throughout the story with little understanding on either side. For instance, the speaker believes Grannie is aware of the beauty of the day as she has herself experienced it: 'She saw it all' (28). What is seen is never specified; the dimension of Grannie's insight and the protagonist's interpretation of it remains beyond the scope of linguistic articulation. Punctuation is sparse and the protagonist's largely unsuccessful attempts at verbal conversation with Grannie lack quotation marks, adding to the impression of imprecision and fluidity.

As the conversation falters, references are made to haunting and death. The narrator recognises herself as a 'ghost meaning nothing' and shortly afterwards she reaches the moment of hoping

³⁸ In Dorothy Richardson, *Journey to Paradise: Short Stories and Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Virago, 1989).

that Grannie will die: 'that the end would come here so that she might never bring the trumpet and the chapel magazines to make a centre of gloom in amongst everything' (27-8). At this point, an undisclosed revelation occurs and the speaker lapses into reverie. 'I had found out how to do it', she asserts, and although the 'it' she discovers is unclear, the story implies a connection between the limits of mortality and the limits of language. The syntax in the story here breaks down into short, fragmented sentences punctuated by elliptical omissions in the text: 'the twilight going backward, evening and gaslight never to come ... When the gaslight came on the furniture in the room would become quiet and harmless again ... It was dark and cold' (29).

This passage is again revealing of the recurrent characteristic of the modernist epiphany, particularly in modernist women's short fiction, of syntactic breakdown into broken, fragmented sentences. This conveys an implicit awareness of the limits of representing conscious experience and of the linguistic impossibility of fully articulating moments of transcendent insight or heightened self-awareness. It is not, therefore, co-incidental that Joyce's Stephen Dedalus first identifies the epiphany after overhearing a broken, fragmented conversation:

The Young Lady-(drawling discreetly) ... O, yes ... I was ...
at the ... cha ... pel. ...
The Young Gentleman-(inaudibly) ... I ... (again inaudibly)
... I ...
The Young Lady-(softly) ... O ... but you're ... ver ... ry ...
wick ... ed. ...³⁹

The omissions in the text make it impossible for the reader to attach an intelligible meaning to it, yet these apparently uninspiring brief fragments of conversation lead Dedalus to create, and try to name, an aesthetic intended to convey a deeper, unifying sense of reality. Like Richardson's response to the 'stream of consciousness' metaphor, however, the term 'epiphany' was subsequently rejected. The word is omitted from the later version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, although both this and the 'stream of

³⁹ Joyce, op. cit, p.216.

consciousness' have persisted in critical discourse. Likewise, the impossibility of articulating her 'truth' is recognised by the 'Sunday' narrator in a passage when she nearly bends forward to use the speaking tube in another vain attempt to communicate with Grannie:

It was no use. It would carry my thought into action ... All social talk was hatred. I sat twisting my fingers together longing to get back into the incessant wonders and joys away from the room that had seen my truth. The room throbbed with it. It made the room seem lighter[...] (29)

This passage is again noteworthy for its conflation of psychological narrative and epiphanic revelation. A similar technique is used in *Pilgrimage*, in which María Francisca Llantada Díaz connects the form of the Joycean epiphany with 'light and brightness' which transforms Miriam's perception of the world and fills her with an 'overwhelming feeling of freedom'.⁴⁰ Similarly, the 'truth' the 'Sunday' narrator claims to see throbs, making 'the room seem lighter', although this observation is undercut by the fact that the room 'was dark and cold' and the experience of the wonders and joys existing outside the room remain beyond the current scope of the protagonist's consciousness.

What 'Sunday' reveals is limits. As Elisabeth Bronfen points out, Richardson recognises that 'language is not sufficiently able to capture reality' and considers that 'it might be possible to express the overlooked or un-speakable aspects by employing a mode of oblique representation'.⁴¹ Yet such an exploration of the 'outside' of verbal or textual representation and its hints of an incommunicable realm of consciousness can only lead straight back into the confines of language. Richardson's psychological narrative can thus only create the illusion of the direct presentation of a character's consciousness. In this sense the 'Sunday' narrator, whose reverie is broken by spoken language

⁴⁰ María Francisca Llantada Díaz, 'Pointed Roofs: Initiating Pilgrimage as Quest Narrative', *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 3 (2010), 53-74, p.68.

⁴¹ Op. cit, p.149.

when Grannie whispers 'light the gas, dearie', conveys an ambivalent attitude toward language as a communicative medium. The other of language is its antithesis, even if the presence of this unarticulated state is what ultimately gives meaning to the modernist aesthetic of identity.

As the narrative style of 'Sunday' reveals, linguistic challenges of representation conceivably informed the development of Richardson's reality aesthetic. The experiences of the 'Sunday' protagonist, in her unrealised attempts to articulate the truth about her conscious experiences linguistically, suggest Richardson's belief in two discrete yet dialectically interrelated dimensions of being. Elisabeth Bronfen has described these as 'a surface reality which is always mobile and can be rendered through facts and verbal eloquence, and a reality which exists beneath the surface and is located in an inner region'.⁴² The experiences of the 'Sunday' protagonist also support Bronfen's contention that 'the second layer of reality may be recognised only in silence and embodies a form of invisible and unnameable, yet continuous and coherent centre: a permanent, continual essence'.⁴³ Multiplicity and unity here converge in a sense similar to the philosopher Henri Bergson's notion of consciousness as 'a multiplicity of moments bound to each other by a unity which goes through them like a thread'. As Bergson goes on to rationalise, however, neither multiplicity nor unity are capable of independent endurance. Unity, he argues, appears 'as some immobile substratum of that which is moving, as some intemporal essence of time'. He refers to this essence as 'an eternity of death, since it is nothing else than the movement emptied of the mobility which made its life'.⁴⁴

As Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson have pointed out, moreover, Bergson's 'bottomless, bankless river' is analogous of William James' metaphor of the 'stream of consciousness'. Both entail a conversion of the self 'from an entity into a movement or activity' and for Bergson, this concept signifies the metaphysical

⁴² Bronfen, op. cit, pp.148-9.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Henri Bergson, 'Duration and Intuition', in J.J.C. Smart (ed.), *Problems of Space and Time*, (London: Macmillan, 1964), p.143.

theory of duration in which ‘the self is essentially temporal, always opening out into the future but incorporating its entire past’.⁴⁵

In Richardson’s writing there is also an inextricable link between consciousness and reality; a belief shared by Sinclair whose essay on *Pilgrimage* praises Richardson’s literary style for getting close to reality.⁴⁶ Sinclair elaborates further on the connection between reality and subjective consciousness in her explication of spiritual monism in *A Defence of Idealism*, in which she states that ‘as long as the monist was tied to his bare epistemology, he could find no means of defining “Thought,” so as to include in it things that are not “thoughts”’.⁴⁷ Like Richardson, Sinclair here reveals a suspicion of epistemology in her suggestion that a form of ‘reality’ exists beyond the strictures of consciousness, and that this elusive realm of existence evades linguistic articulation. Also like Richardson, Sinclair’s modernist aesthetic echoes Bergson’s contention that consciousness is characterised by the conflict between a continuity and a stasis of self, a position informed by her idealism which, as she goes on to explain in *A Defence*, ‘must have a principle which shall be both static and dynamic’.⁴⁸

For Sinclair reality and consciousness were thus closely connected. She adopts the metaphor of the ‘stream of consciousness’, referred to contemporaneously as ‘psychological prose’, from William James’ *Principles of Psychology* to designate the narrative shift from vivid external description to introspection in modernist depictions of subjective consciousness. According to James, consciousness:

does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a

⁴⁵ Richard Ellman and Charles Feidelson, *The Modern Tradition: Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.687.

⁴⁶ May Sinclair, ‘The Novels of Dorothy Richardson’, in Bonnie Kime Scott, (ed.), op. cit, p.444.

⁴⁷ Op. cit, p.297.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described.⁴⁹

Critical reviews of the work of writers who attempted to articulate an elusive reality through this form of narrative pervaded the contemporary periodicals, and it was in this context that Sinclair first used James' definition to refer to the problem of representing 'reality'. In her review of *Pilgrimage*, published in the *Egoist* in 1918, Sinclair asserted that 'in identifying herself with this life, which is Miriam's stream of consciousness, Miss Richardson produces her effect of being the first, of getting closer to reality than any of our novelists who are trying so desperately to get close'.⁵⁰ Despite Sinclair's praise of her work, however, Richardson herself objected strenuously to the stream of consciousness label, calling it a 'death-dealing metaphor' and 'that lamentably meaningless metaphor "The Shroud of Consciousness"'.⁵¹

Elsewhere, Richardson explains in further detail the reasons for her rejection of Sinclair's metaphor. In her 'Foreword' to *Pilgrimage*, she dismisses it on the basis that it 'lyrically led the way' in a series of 'formulae devised to meet the exigencies of literary criticism'.⁵² In an essay for *Life and Letters* entitled 'Novels', Richardson refers scathingly to the borrowing by Sinclair, 'from the epistemologists, of this more than lamentably ill-chosen metaphor, long since by them discarded but still, in literary criticism, pursuing its foolish way'.⁵³ On separate occasions, as documented by Shiv Kumar, she suggested a tree or a fountain as more appropriate metaphors for consciousness because 'its central core, its luminous point, (call it what you will, its names are legion) tho more or less expanding from birth to maturity, remains stable, one with itself thruout life'.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Quoted in Ellman and Feidelson, op. cit, p.717.

⁵⁰ 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson', p.444.

⁵¹ Gloria Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp.597, 600.

⁵² Op. cit, 11.

⁵³ Dorothy Richardson, 'Novels', in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), op. cit, pp.432-435, p.433.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Shiv Kumar, 'Dorothy Richardson and the Dilemma of "Being versus Becoming"', *Modern Language Notes*, 74 (June 1969): 494-501, p.499.

These expositions suggest that a key term of Richardson's objections to the stream of consciousness metaphor was its epistemological basis. Diane Filby Gillespie accords with this view in her observation that, at worst, 'stream of consciousness' suggests 'a flow of sensory impressions through a consciousness that was merely a passive receiver'.⁵⁵ The short story writer and critic Katherine Mansfield takes issue with Richardson's literary method on a similar basis. In a review for the *Athenaeum* entitled 'Three Women Novelists', Mansfield complains of the lack of plot and 'break-neck speed' at which apparently unrelated events occur in *The Tunnel*:

There is Miss Richardson, holding out her mind, as it were, and there is Life hurling objects into it as fast as she can throw. And at the appointed time Miss Richardson dives into its recesses and reproduces a certain number of these treasures - a pair of button boots, a night in spring, some cycling knickers, some large, round biscuits - as many as she can pack into a book, in fact. But the pace kills.⁵⁶

Mansfield's reading of the novel attests in this description to the 'stream of consciousness' as a metaphor for the mind as a passive receiver of impressions; an image which Richardson was at pains to reject. Virginia Woolf voiced similar objections to the psychological narrative style, writing derisively in a diary entry of 1920 that 'I suppose the danger is the damned egotistical self, which ruins Joyce and Richardson to my mind'.⁵⁷ Alternatively, Woolf sought to develop a prose style that would convey 'a sense of burden removed; pretence and make-believe and unreality gone ... [and with it] the horrible activity of the mind's eye'.⁵⁸ As these critical responses illustrate, the definition 'stream of

⁵⁵ Op. cit, p.140.

⁵⁶ Katherine Mansfield, 'Three Women Novelists', in John Middleton Murry (ed.), *Novels and Novelists* (London: Constable, 1930), p.4.

⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol.2, 1920-1924*, Anne Olivier Bell (ed.), (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), p.14.

⁵⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Leonard Woolf (ed.), (London: Triad, 1978), p.138.

consciousness' is thus not unproblematic as Richardson pointed out forcefully and Sinclair herself later came to accept.

Ultimately, Sinclair also abandoned the term, reflecting in *A Defence of Idealism* that 'the fact of the unity of consciousness can certainly not be accounted for or explained on the simple theory of consciousness as a stream or streams, or as any sequence or even conglomeration of merely "associated" states'.⁵⁹ The reality which for both Richardson and Sinclair resides within subjective consciousness does, however, reveal inter-related aesthetic tensions between 'surface-and-depth' reality, and also between everyday temporality and the transcendental, spatial aesthetic of revelation conveyed in 'Sunday'. In representing such states, Richardson developed a technique for her art which is traceable throughout her short fiction in particular. As her biographer Gloria Fromm has noted, she 'liked to imagine secret reservations, concealed inner lives, or undisclosed judgements, especially in her occasional short stories'.⁶⁰

An emphasis upon these elusive realms connects Richardson's 1945 story 'Excursion' with the earlier story of 'Sunday', possibly through the consciousness of the same protagonist. It involves a woman named only as 'Gran' who is holidaying with a number of other protagonists whose relationships to her are unclear. It is, however, evident that the 'Grannie' this later grandmother remembers in a contemplative passage is the same character as the woman in 'Sunday' who was reluctantly visited by a young woman, possibly the 'Gran' of 'Excursion'. In her contemplation of a childhood holiday, the 1945 grandmother reflects on 'the negative joys' which her sojourn by the seaside has brought her:

no visit to Grannie, no desperate search, after the first greetings, for something to say to her that must be shouted, several times, down her long speaking tube, only to hear, when at last she had caught one's words, her querulous, disconcerting, 'Is that *all?*' (99)

⁵⁹ Op. cit, p.80.

⁶⁰ Gloria Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p.338.

This connection with the characters of 'Sunday' draws attention to the indistinct genre boundaries afforded by short fiction and used by Richardson in a form typical of her fluidity of representation.

The connection between past and present is achieved in 'Excursion' through a technique frequently used by Richardson in order to represent consciousness: the memory trope. Like 'Sunday', 'Excursion' is set just before the fall of twilight. It focuses on a family group spending an evening together on holiday, just before the time arrives for their blackout curtains to be closed. The dialogue between the characters which forms the basis of much of the earlier part of the text is permeated by the reflections of an unseen observer who perceives the conversation through her own half-detached consciousness. It becomes apparent as the story progresses that these reflections belong to Gran, and a large section of the text within the later stages of the story focuses on her sole reverie. Gran's contemplations are brought to the forefront of the story when the bark of a dog - a sound heard only by her - marks the divide between past and present and transports her consciousness away from her observations of the present day and back into her memories of a childhood holiday sixty years in the past.

At the outset of the story, Gran's observation of the sky is the focus of her unspoken communication with the character of Jane. The prose is fluid and unpunctuated, as illustrated in the first lines of the story: 'On yet another evening, their voices, gathered together. One voice, in variations' (96). Quotations unattributed to the various characters are presented in speech marks, into which intermittent passages of unpunctuated prose are interjected:

Yes. Leaving a splendid sky: huge clouds piled along the horizon lit by sunset; then by afterglow slowly fading. Jane loves it just as I do. Jane knows all about the doings of the winds. (96).

The fragments of the conversation Gran hears before retreating into her own memories are banal and everyday, focusing on the

progression of daily time and a radio programme: 'the time is ... twelve and a quarter minutes past seven ... the next part of the programme follows ... in ... just under three minutes' (98). This passage is presented in the elliptical style which in Richardson's work so frequently signifies the shift into psychological prose or precedes an interlude of heightened awareness. At this point in the story the dialogue breaks down and the full narrative focus turns to Gran's perspective, together with a shift from third- to first-person narration:

Black and tan collie. Hurling himself, all alone, along the empty esplanade. Leaping. Barking as he leaps. Wild with joy. His barks go up into the sky, making me look up and realise how high it is. Up and up and up. For the first time. I didn't know. Now I know. I've seen it, and I know, and shall never, never forget. Up and up and up and up. But looking again is not quite the same as the first look. It is that I shall remember, always. A secret. People will come, later on, after breakfast. But they won't see the sky as it is when it's alone, when there's nobody about and nothing going on (98).

This passage is significant for its evocation of the epiphanic revelation which, ironically, does not reveal. As in 'Sunday', whatever is revealed to Gran during this moment of reflection remains indistinct. Like the elusive 'it' which the 'Sunday' speaker claims she has discovered having dismissed hated 'social talk' as an inadequate communicative medium, what Gran 'knows' is never revealed. 'A secret'. The staccato sentence structure in this passage is a typical indication of Richardson's presentation of inner consciousness, and Gran's observation that her reality is only attainable with 'nothing going on' further suggests a fundamental inability to communicate the scenario linguistically.

An insight Gran does reveal, however, is her understanding of the simultaneity of her experiences of the past and present in one fusing moment in her subjective consciousness: 'together in my enraptured mind. And then the dog barked, and I forgot them' (101). After a time lapse of six decades, the experience not of her seaside joys, but her first discovery of the sky, is recalled vividly.

'Just now' she reflects, 'I felt the shock of it pass through me like an electric current' (101). Past and present remain enmeshed, even in the closing sentences of the story in which Gran recognises 'another evening moving towards its temporary end. Moving into store' (103).

'Moving into store' suggests that the 'moment', rather than fleeting and transitory, becomes a permanent part of the speaker's self and her inner reality, adding to the richness and changing centre of life as age advances. The apparently contradictory entities of an unchanging and evolving self are thus reconciled. Gran believes that the experience she has just undergone 'is not memory' (101). Alternatively, she recognises that 'it is the old who find, and that almost ceaselessly, cause for solicitude for shell-bound youth' (102). It is a more optimistic presentation of old age than the chilling portrait of superfluity depicted in 'Sunday'. For this grandmother, experience may be composed 'after the manner of a picture with all the parts in true perspective and relationship. Moving picture for moments open out, reveal fresh contents every time we go back into them, grouping and regrouping themselves as we advance'. Gran is thus afforded a privileged access to a form of revelation which her own experience tells her is as yet unavailable to the younger protagonists. In contemplating that Jane and Peter have yet to understand the 'worse than uselessness' of trying to hold their own future 'great moments', Gran surmises that:

already they have mourned, as in my own time I mourned,
over the passing of a scene, a mood, a set of circumstances.
Unable to recognise these as their possessions, immortal,
inexhaustible. Unable to discover their wealth until they are
old and 'wandering in their minds' (102-3).

There is a tacit connection here between the wanderings of the mind as 'wondering', and the wanderings associated with moments of transition: the movement and flux of consciousness, progressive temporal movement and a lack of fixity. To wander is to meander in an indirect pattern; implicitly, as Gloria Fromm suggests, to remain 'poised or balanced' between alternatives and to refuse the notion of a single explanation or reality or aesthetic

through which to express it.⁶¹ Richardson suggests in an essay entitled 'Continuous Performance' that the memory trope fulfils this function, asserting that 'memory proper, as distinct from a mere backward glance, as distinct even from prolonged contemplation of things regarded as past and done with, gathers, can gather, and pile up its wealth only round universals, unchanging, unevolving verities that move neither backwards nor forwards and have neither speech nor language.'⁶²

As the 'Sunday' protagonist recognises and *Pilgrimage's* Miriam Henderson comes to realise in her assertion that 'language is the only way of expressing anything and it dims everything', representing the reality aesthetic encompasses the 'surface' reality of material appearances and spoken language, as well as the incommunicable 'depth' reality embedded within subjective being and consciousness.⁶³ In 'Sunday' and 'Excursion', Richardson's depictions of moments experienced, recollected and moved 'into store' occur within the silence of reverie and are conveyed - albeit partially - in metaphorical, elliptical and fragmented language. The 'surface world' of spoken language interrupts on each occasion. The 1945 Gran's evening moves to 'its temporary end' when Peter says aloud: 'Our three and a half minutes are *bup*, Daph' (102). In 'Sunday', Grannie's whispered 'light the gas, dearie' ends the speaker's reflections, and the story concludes as the light 'spread its gold wings sideways from its core of blue. The evening stretched across the room, innocently waiting' (29).

The conclusions of both 'Sunday' and 'Excursion' conceivably illustrate Richardson's reference in her 'Foreword' to *Pilgrimage* to the 'failure of this independently assertive reality adequately to appear in the text'. Her stories reveal a recognition of language as an untrustworthy or at best incomplete communicative medium, and her use of metaphor and the fluidity of her aesthetic is

⁶¹ Ibid, p.338.

⁶² 'Continuous Performance: The Film Gone Male', in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 423-25, p.421.

⁶³ *Pilgrimage*, Vol.2. (London: Virago, 1979), p.99.

exemplified in the contrast between the genres in which she chose to work: a series of sub-novels comprising the longest 'novel' written in English, the short fiction in which implicit connections are made between characters of apparently discrete stories, and the briefest of sketches such as her *Saturday Review* 'middles'.

Examining these issues in relation to the work of Sinclair has revealed that these two writers contributed to informing modernism's reality aesthetic far more than just the common connection made between them - Sinclair's use of the stream of consciousness metaphor to describe Richardson's work and the influence of *Pilgrimage* on *Mary Olivier* - suggests. The modernist subjective consciousness explored in both writers' fiction was informed by a contemporary dialogue between literary and philosophical discourses focusing on reality and resting on a ceaseless flux of multiplicity whilst retaining a 'luminous core' of essential, unchanging being. The short fiction discussed in this article reveals that Richardson's use of experimental, modernist techniques: psychological prose, epiphanic moments and representations of memory and reverie, is illustrative of this epochal shift and contributed significantly to the development of her reality aesthetic.

Moreover, these techniques illustrate a series of aesthetic tensions between seemingly antithetical ideas which Richardson does not attempt to resolve. Gloria Fromm substantiates this point in the assertion that she 'saw herself as poised or balanced' between such positions, rarely committing herself fully 'to one or the other of the endless alternatives operating for her in reality'.⁶⁴ This is a conceivable reason for Richardson's rejection of the 'stream of consciousness' metaphor. Her modernism is positioned on the cusp between the dialectics of Being and Becoming, spatial and temporal forms of representation, and surface versus depth 'reality'. Neither Richardson nor Sinclair offer solutions to these conflicts. Their short fiction is revealing merely of the moments of irreconcilable tension at the core of their fictional explorations of the modernist subject, as well as their efforts to capture textually

⁶⁴ Dorothy Richardson, op. cit, p.338.

the experience of a reality behind, beyond or underpinning surface appearances. In endeavouring to articulate this 'independently assertive reality', May Sinclair and Dorothy Richardson thus draw attention consistently to the limits of language and of subjective consciousness, the shifting and intangible essence of 'reality' and, in consequence, the invariably elusive nature of its textual representation.