

## OF LANGUAGE, OF MEANING, OF MR. HENRY JAMES

*Mhairi Catriona Pooler*

In a letter to Rebecca West, H.G. Wells wrote from on board the *S.S. Adriatic* in 1921: 'If I have much more of this bloody steamship, I shall begin to write like Dorothy Richardson.'<sup>1</sup> The charge of 'unreadability' levelled at Richardson's style from many sources and defended in her 1938 Foreword to *Pilgrimage* is reminiscent of another writer's case, a writer she identifies in her Foreword as: 'a far from inconsiderable technical influence' – Henry James.<sup>2</sup> Reviews of *Pilgrimage* grew less favourable with the publication of *The Tunnel* and *Interim*, their distinctive style, as Gloria Fromm observes, 'could therefore be made fun of, as Henry James's novels had been not long before'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, far from being easily equivalent, Richardson's literary relationship with and assessment of Henry James is complicated and contradictory. I want to argue here, however, that a stylistic comparison of the two writers proves revelatory of a shared conception of the connection between style and truth, for, as Miriam Henderson observes on reading *The Ambassadors* in *The Trap*: 'Style was something beyond good and evil. Sacred and innocent' (III 410).

The criticism levelled at *The Tunnel* and *Interim* is not unfamiliar when compared to the early reviews of James's first volume of autobiography, *A Small Boy and Others*, which was published only two years before *Pointed Roofs*.<sup>4</sup> In 1913 James's autobiography was considered 'as different from all other books of the sort as Mr.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Heather Ingman, *Women's Fiction Between the Wars: Mothers, Daughters and Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) p.145.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* Vol. 1 (1938, repr. London: Virago, 1979) p.11. Hereafter cited with volume and page number in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Gloria G. Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1994) p.119.

<sup>4</sup> James wrote two more autobiographical volumes: *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) and the unfinished *The Middle Years*, published posthumously in 1917.

James is different from all other authors'.<sup>5</sup> The intimacy and self-revelation conferred by Richardson's particular style is comparable to the 'different' kind of autobiography that James produced towards the end of his career. A reviewer in the *Athenaeum* observed that James sets down his experience 'not probably as it was, but as it lives in his memory, as it re-emerges when he allows his mind to play upon it'.<sup>6</sup> Such reviews are one reason I will use James's autobiographical texts when considering his style beside that of Richardson. Furthermore, the novelistic techniques that James applies to the telling of his childhood are the reason some critics, such as Adeline Tintner, see his autobiographies as experimental fiction – creating the somewhat elastic genre distinction of 'creative autobiography', which could equally be applied to *Pilgrimage*.<sup>7</sup> Much has been written about the linguistic intricacy of James's style during and after the 1890s, the abstractions, unusual metaphors and complex syntax arguably disproportionate in relation to the content.<sup>8</sup> Frederick Dupee writes in his introduction to the collected edition of the autobiographies:

The writing of the book, as [James] remarks in a letter, was a delicate enterprise; and the reading of it requires a concentration exceptional even for a work of the later Henry James. The style is *late* late James and has its peculiar features.<sup>9</sup>

Yet James's use of language is intricately connected to, and essential for, the material it conveys. Therefore, I will focus on James's autobiographical texts as extreme examples of his style,

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Carol Holly, "The British Reception of Henry James's Autobiographies" in *American Literature*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (December 1985) 570-587, p.579.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.578.

<sup>7</sup> Adeline Tintner, *The Twentieth-Century World of Henry James: Changes in his Work After 1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000). Tintner writes: 'Henry James's memoirs [...] represent a new form of fiction, creative autobiography', p.121.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Seymour Chatman, *The Later Style of Henry James* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972); F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1947; repr. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1966); David Lodge, *Language of Fiction: Essays in Criticism and Verbal Analysis of the English Novel* (London: Routledge, 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Frederick W. Dupee, 'Introduction', in Henry James, *Autobiography*, F. W. Dupee (ed.), (London: W.H. Allen, 1956), p.xiv.

but also as comparably 'unreadable' endeavours to represent that elusive thing: personal truth. After examining the unconventionalities in each writer's style and some of the critical opinions these have produced, I will consider Richardson's views on James's writing and what they suggest about her own methods.

In *A Small Boy and Others*, the narrative point of view is firmly placed inside the mind of the narrating author as he recalls and reflects on the early growth of his consciousness. James tells his story while simultaneously conveying its perceiving consciousness, which, because his intention in his autobiography is to recount 'the history of [his] fostered imagination', is the text's substance.<sup>10</sup> Paul Theroux's recent comment that Henry James's autobiographies: 'tell us very little of the man and, couched in his late and most elliptical style, are among his least readable works' is misguided.<sup>11</sup> As an aside in an essay entitled 'The Trouble with Autobiography', Theroux's assessment demonstrates the familiar tendency to expect personal confession and historical clarity from autobiography, failing to see the complex style's inherent necessity for James's particular form of artistic self-revelation in which the growth of his imagination takes precedence over factual detail.

As conscious experience is only partly verbal, the textual expression of the same requires the transformation of consciousness into language that can suggest the pre-verbal textures of cognition. It is this awareness that leads James to refer to the 'impressions' that motivate his thought and his autobiographical texts, a term that captures the multidimensional aspect of what he calls the mind's 'immense sensibility'.<sup>12</sup> Contained within the term 'impressions' that recurs repeatedly in his autobiography is both the cerebral and sensory apprehension of both or either mental and physical phenomena, as well as the emotional and intellectual responses these generate. The *OED*

---

<sup>10</sup> Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others* (1913, repr. London: Gibson Square Books, 2001) p.59.

<sup>11</sup> *Smithsonian* magazine (Jan. 2011) <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/The-Trouble-With-Autobiography.html> [accessed 03/04/11].

<sup>12</sup> Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction' [1884], in *Major Stories and Essays* (New York: the Library of America, 1999) 572-593, p.580. Hereafter cited as *MSE*.

offers a definition of 'impression' as 'an effect on the mind, conscience, or feeling. An effect produced on the senses.'<sup>13</sup> The drive for a verbal, literary, expression of this amalgam of the mind's reception of impressions – Virginia Woolf's 'incessant shower of innumerable atoms'<sup>14</sup> – leads James to ever more complex syntactical creations, and increasingly delimited narrative points of view. By the time he came to write his autobiographies towards the end of his life, these stylistic tendencies were very finely honed. The revelation of consciousness as it is experienced by a single figure is a particularly modern facet of the autobiographical act, so it is little surprise that Richardson refers to James's technical influence in her Foreword.

Miriam's reading of James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) in *The Trap* leads her to announce that James had 'achieved the first completely satisfying way of writing a novel', continuing effusively that '[t]here *was* something holy about it. Something to make, like Conrad, the heavens rejoice' (III 410). The effect James's novel has on Miriam as both a reader and a future writer is profound, despite any later reservations Richardson herself may have expressed.<sup>15</sup> There are references in *The Trap* to 'the book that had suddenly become the centre of her life', she feels it 'draw her again with its unique power', while the opening chapter becomes 'part of her own experience' (III 407-8). The limited focalisation and the lack of omniscient intervention form the basis of James's influence on Richardson's own method, as Leon Edel has discussed at length in *The Psychological Novel*.<sup>16</sup> Such comparisons of method are not novel, but they lay the groundwork for the more interesting evaluation of Richardson's distinctive use of language in *Pilgrimage*

---

<sup>13</sup> See the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, sixth ed., fourth entry for 'impression'.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *Collected Essays* Vol. I (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966) p.105.

<sup>15</sup> Although she does not name *The Ambassadors* directly in *The Trap*, there is plenty of evidence that this is the book Miriam is reading as she names both Waymarsh and Maria Gostrey. Leon Edel notes that this failure to name the book in question is in fact 'a defect in the internal monologue' as it is difficult to believe that neither the title nor the author's name would once enter the heroine's mind, 'for she fondles the volume and thinks much about it.' *The Psychological Novel 1900-1950*, (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955) p.33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, pp.32-38.

as a development of James's late style. Although Richardson rejected suggestions of any stylistic kinship with James as the opinion of 'one of those who look for derivations and relationships, primarily, always missing essentials',<sup>17</sup> I am willing to risk such a judgement in order to discuss what I think is the real value of Richardson's 'unreadability'.

In her Foreword Richardson writes: 'when [my] work is danced upon for being unpunctuated and therefore unreadable, [I am] moved to cry aloud. For here is truth' (I 12). Richardson had championed the case for unpunctuated, or at least loosely punctuated, prose in her short essay 'About Punctuation' that appeared in the *Adelphi* in April 1924. By suggesting in this essay that the rules of punctuation are a relatively recent addition to written language, she admonishes criticism of her own style. Despite not mentioning the particularly feminine quality of such prose (given as the reason for her style in the Foreword), Richardson's essay lauds the charm of unpunctuated ancient manuscripts for: 'the slow attentive reading demanded', which gives 'the faculty of hearing [...] its chance' until 'the text *speaks* itself'.<sup>18</sup> Notably, careful, concentrated reading is what James's autobiographies require, as Dupee says. The impression of a voice in the text itself is precisely the aim of Richardson's narrative technique in *Pilgrimage*, so that not only can the reader 'hear' the protagonist's thoughts, she can do so through the author's own 'voice' – her distinctive linguistic expression. While this may seem contrary to Miriam's dislike of authors breaking in to spoil her reading, the physicality of such authorial presence in the black and white of the text nonetheless constitutes a kind of readable portrait of the artist. After all, Miriam does 'read books to find the author!' (I 384)

Richardson's uncommon use of punctuation and its consequences for the shape of her sentences was the root of her reputation as a

---

<sup>17</sup> Gloria G. Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995) p.589. Hereafter cited as *WM*.

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Richardson, 'About Punctuation', in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, p.415.

‘difficult’ writer. Particularly in the first editions of *The Tunnel* and *Interim*, as John Mephram notes, ‘Richardson introduced new layout, punctuation and notations for reported speech that were unlike anything that she used in any other volume of *Pilgrimage*.’<sup>19</sup> The fifth section of Chapter 1 of the first edition of *Interim*, for instance, is a single, very long paragraph running for some ten pages. The section includes extensive dialogue between Miriam and her friends, with each utterance bracketed by dashes, and only irregular use of other punctuation:

I can *see* Grace – she drove on carrying them with her, ignoring the swift eyes upon the dim things settling heavily upon her heart – *gazing* out of the window in the little room where I was supposed to be holding a German class – Yes I know Miriam darling, but now you know me you know I could never be good at languages – – You’re my pupil – – It seems absurd to think of you as a teacher now we know you chuckled Florrie.<sup>20</sup>

Fromm remarks that Richardson came to blame her problematic reputation on ‘the chaotic state of her commas’ (307). However, if we consider Richardson’s comments in her essay on punctuation, it is the reader rather than the author who is likely to fail in the face of an unpunctuated, or unconventionally punctuated, text that requires special concentration. In Virginia Woolf’s view of the seventh ‘Chapter’ of *Pilgrimage, Revolving Lights*, Richardson had in fact:

Invented [...] a sentence [...] of a more elastic fibre than the old, capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> John Mephram, ‘Dorothy Richardson’s “Unreadability”’: Graphic Style and Narrative Strategy in a Modernist Novel’, *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 43, 4 (2000): 449-464, p.449.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Interim* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1920), pp.34-35. The comparison between the layout of this section in the later collected edition of *Pilgrimage* (II 307) is remarkable, highlighting the unconventionality of the original text. I will discuss the difference between the editions below.

<sup>21</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘Romance and the Heart’, in Andrew McNeillie (ed.), (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III 1919-1924*, London: The Hogarth Press,

Sentences fitting this description were already apparent in *Pilgrimage's* earlier 'Chapters', but especially in the more radical developments begun in *The Tunnel* and fully apparent in *Interim*. Miriam's impressions of Mr Hancock's photographs of stained glass in *The Tunnel* are expressed in one such sentence:

There was something in this intense hard rich colour like something one sometimes saw when it wasn't there, a sudden brightening of all colours till you felt something must break if they grew any brighter – or in the dark, or in one's mind, suddenly, at any time, unearthly brilliance. (II 107)

In Richardson's attempt to get at the essence of Miriam's experience of colour the frail particles of past impressions are gathered together and suspended in a line behind the dash. The sentence loops between abstract and concrete impressions, alternating between too few and too many commas, and ending somewhat inconclusively in terms of both grammar and sense. Woolf went on to state that:

It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither proud nor afraid of anything she may discover in the psychology of her sex.<sup>22</sup>

Although this designation of 'a woman's sentence' has attracted much critical attention, Woolf's initial picture of 'a more elastic' sentence is more descriptive of Richardson's achievement – particularly in the experimental Chapters – as a stretching of syntactical units in order to render the 'something' of non-verbal experiences.

John Mepham points out that the text of the first edition of *Interim* was later cleaned up by Richardson for inclusion in the collected edition, indicating her concession to the trouble her experimental style caused her readers:

---

1988) p.367.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

in the now standard edition of *Pilgrimage*, which she herself prepared in 1938, *Interim* in particular was drastically re-set, without explanation or comment, so that modern readers tend to have no idea of the extent of Richardson's earlier stylistic experimentation.<sup>23</sup>

To compare even the opening page of the text of a first edition of *Interim* with that in the later collected editions of *Pilgrimage* reveals marked differences. The 1920 text, for example, divides the chapters into numbered sections, the very first of which has no paragraph breaks, uses no quotation marks, relying instead on excessive dashes. This edition contains many irregularities, however, with some chapters using familiar narrative lay out and marking of dialogue. The later text dispenses with the numbered sections, replacing them simply with double spaced gaps to indicate a break in the narrative, while the opening section uses both regular paragraphing and speech markers. The clarity added by these concessions is notable, especially when the narrator omits indications of who speaks. The 1920 text reads:

Bring her *in* scolded Mrs. Philps from the dining-room door. Grace took her by the arm and drew her along the passage. I'm one mass of mud. – Never mind the mud, come in out of the rain, scolded Mrs. Philps backing towards the fire, you must be worn out. – No, I don't feel tired now I'm here, oh what a heavenly fire.<sup>24</sup>

Here, Miriam's arrival at her friends' house is a continuous flow compared with the re-set standard edition, which reads:

'Bring her in,' scolded Mrs Philps from the dining-room door. Grace took her by the arm and drew her along the passage. 'I'm one mass of mud.'

---

<sup>23</sup> Mepham, op. cit, 449-50.

<sup>24</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Interim* (1920) p.9. Richardson also made changes between the 1919 *Little Review* serialised text and the first book edition, as John Mepham has pointed out – cf. p.461. Mepham attributes these alterations to 'hesitation, indecision, perhaps even of panic', p.461.

‘Never mind the mud, come in out of the rain,’ scolded Mrs Philps backing towards the fire, ‘you must be worn out.’  
‘No, I don’t feel tired now I’m here; oh, what a heavenly fire.’  
(II 291)

Besides the addition of paragraphing and quotation marks to distinguish the dialogue, this later version also includes more regular commas that pace the scene more conventionally. Richardson’s later changes regulate not only the characters’ exchange, but Miriam’s impression of the rush of arrival in a familiar place, so that the reader’s ease is achieved at the cost of the immediacy of the scene. Some irregularities in layout are retained in the later version, however, suggesting that Richardson was not prepared to overly standardise her text.

Richardson’s emphasis on unusual style led Virginia Woolf to find the unconventionalities of the preceding ‘Chapter’, *The Tunnel*, a ‘disappointment’ because they keep the reader ‘distressingly near the surface’.<sup>25</sup> Woolf begins her review by observing that Richardson’s method ‘demands attention, as a door whose handle we wrench ineffectively calls our attention to the fact that it is locked’.<sup>26</sup> Woolf’s judgement suggests that the style of *Interim* was not a sudden, radical departure, but a further stage in a process of experimentation that began most pointedly in *The Tunnel*.<sup>27</sup> For example, Chapter 24 of *The Tunnel* is divided into sections of uneven length that include ‘stream of consciousness’ passages interspersed with quoted phrases and images conveyed through disjointed and incomplete sentences that are retained unchanged in the later collected edition of the text:

‘Nature’s great Salic Law will never be replaced.’ ‘Women can never reach the highest places in civilization.’ Thomas Henry Huxley. With side-whiskers. A bouncing complacent walk.

---

<sup>25</sup> ‘The Tunnel’, in McNeillie (ed.), op. cit, p.11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>27</sup> That Richardson made progressively more changes to the original texts when she revised them for the collected edition also emphasizes a stylistic evolution. See George H. Thomson, *The Editions of Dorothy Richardson’s Pilgrimage: A Comparison of Texts*. [<http://www.eltpress.org/richardson>].

Thomas Henry Huxley. (*Thomas Babington Macaulay*.) The same sort of walk. Eminent men. (II 222)

Richardson weaves Miriam's impressions of what she is reading with snippets from what we assume is the text in front of her, but the reader is left to decipher the sense of the whole in the context of the rest of the chapter. Nonetheless, this example shows Richardson's reliance on stylisation for her effect, as Miriam's mood of disdain is conveyed through the juxtaposition of the truncated sentences and the quoted passages.

The suggestion of the pointlessness of prominent method in Woolf's comment ironically matches an observation made by Miriam herself in *The Tunnel*:

If books were written like that, sitting down and doing it cleverly and knowing just what you were doing, and just how somebody else had done it, there was something wrong, some mannish cleverness that was only half right. (II 131)

Richardson's – and Miriam's – purpose, however, is that in writing something necessarily new without considering how others had done it, frees her method from this trap of conscious cleverness. As in the example above from Chapter 24 of *The Tunnel*, the reader is being shown rather than told what is going on. Mephram notes that 'Woolf's point, and it is one which other reviewers were to reiterate, was that she could not detect, beneath all the detailed surface impressions, any underlying 'unity, significance or design'.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this judgement says more about Woolf's own anxieties than it does about Richardson's work, nonetheless the assumption that appearance is all is a characteristic response to overtly stylised prose, and one that James suffered from equally. In 'The Art of Fiction', James writes that his method, like that of a painter, 'attempt[s] to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning'.<sup>29</sup> Thus, just as Richardson's method suggests, style is a means of *rendering* rather than subordinating meaning.

---

<sup>28</sup> Mephram, op. cit, p.451.

<sup>29</sup> James, 'The Art of Fiction', op. cit, p.581.

Despite this shared belief, Richardson herself made unflattering remarks about what she considered James's overly conscious style, for example in a letter to Henry Savage from August 1948:

His style, fascinating at a first meeting for me can only be, very vulgarly, described as a non-stop waggling of the backside as he hands out, on a salver, sentence after sentence, that yes, if the words had no meaning, would weave its own spell.<sup>30</sup>

The suggestion that James's emphasis on style makes up for something lacking in his meaning is interestingly hypocritical considering the struggles Richardson herself had to have her style recognised for its significant connection with her content. Perhaps the impact of H.G. Wells's contentious opinion of James's writing plays a role in Richardson's assessments, bearing in mind Wells's initial influence on her thinking. Although she eventually also sees Wells as a literary opponent, their personal connection was such that his public falling out with James – notably over Wells's remarks on James's literary method – could not have softened her towards the older writer. Wells's account of James's style in 'Of Art, of Literature, of Mr Henry James' in his 1915 pseudonymously published *Boon*, is undeniably echoed in the judgements made by Richardson two decades later. Wells writes:

Having first made sure that he has scarcely anything left to express, he then sets to work to express it, with an industry, a wealth of intellectual stuff that dwarfs Newton. [...] He brings up every device of language to state and define.<sup>31</sup>

In her next letter to Savage, Richardson refers to James as 'a sophisticated octopus in a tank he mistook for the universe'.<sup>32</sup> The image emphasises her view of James's restricted and shallow worldview that contrasted with his own impression of farsightedness and depth. The similarity to Wells's well-known

---

<sup>30</sup> Fromm (ed.), op. cit, p.588.

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Parrinder and Robert M. Philmus (eds), *H.G. Wells's Literary Criticism* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), p.214.

<sup>32</sup> Fromm (ed.), op. cit, p.589.

description of James as a caged hippopotamus attempting to pick up a pea is notable. Yet Richardson and James both strive to convey detailed nuances through their method, to ‘catch the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life’, as James puts it in ‘The Art of Fiction’.<sup>33</sup>

Richardson’s assessments of James also suggests that she was not amenable to reading James’s work as carefully as she would have had her own work read. The insinuation is that her own style carries more meaning because it presents something new and untried in the form of represented female consciousness, yet the syntactical looseness, evidenced for instance in *Interim*, strives to encapsulate a cerebral life similarly communicated in James’s tightly formed sentences. As Miriam observes her friend Grace, for example, the sentences meander with the help of ellipses between explanation and impression:

They were unaware of anything, though they had easy fluent words about everything. Underneath the surface that kept Grace off they were ... amoebae, awful determined unconscious ... octopuses ... frightful things with one eye, tentacles, poison-sacs.. . The surface made them, not they the surface; rules. (II 317)

The style has a two-fold effect here, for not only is Richardson communicating Miriam’s mental impressions, Miriam’s ability to observe the nuances of other people’s thought processes distinguishes her own far-sightedness. Had Richardson considered James’s autobiographies as well as his fiction, she would have found a comparably personal representation of consciousness, albeit expressed rather differently.

Richardson writes of James in her essay ‘About Punctuation’: ‘to the utmost James tested, suspending from the one his wide loops, and from the other his deep-hung garlands of expression, the strength of the comma and the semi-colon. He never broke a rule’.<sup>34</sup> The difference in this description to her own style is

---

<sup>33</sup> op. cit, p.586.

<sup>34</sup> op. cit, p.416.

marked, but it belies an underlying similarity with the concern for precisely representative expression. An example of one sentence from *Notes of a Son and Brother*, James's second volume of autobiography, demonstrates how James's prose seeks to render subtle, sometimes scarcely definable, mental activities and to qualify the very words used within the context of a single sentence. Describing his reactions to the Civil War in which he was unable to take part, James writes:

My appreciation of what I presume at the risk of any apparent fatuity to call my 'relation to' the War is at present a thing exquisite to me, a thing of the last refinement of romance, whereas it had to be at the time a sore and troubled, a mixed and oppressive thing – though I promptly see, on reflection, how it must frequently have flushed with emotions, with small scraps of direct perception even, with particular sharpnesses in the generalised pang of participation, that were all but touched in themselves as with the full experience.<sup>35</sup>

The tendency to explain the presence of a particular word or turn of phrase within the fabric of the sentence is typical of James's very careful use of language and his awareness of its only tentative relationship to the meaning he intends. By qualifying his use of the words 'relation to' the war with inverted commas and an expression of caution, James makes clear that the reactions he is about to describe are of a particular or delicate nature, that might not come across without explanation. In this example, he writes from the perspective of the reflecting autobiographer while trying to do equal justice to his past thoughts and opinions through qualifying phrases introduced by a dash, and carefully placed commas. An example from *Interim* demonstrates a comparable wariness of the relation between words and the particular impression they are intended to give when rendering thought:

... Man is a badly made machine ... an oculist could improve upon the human eye ... and the mind wrong in some way too

---

<sup>35</sup> Henry James, *Notes of a Son and Brother* (London: Macmillan, 1914), pp.227-8.

... logic is a cheap arithmetic. *Imagination*. What *is* imagination? (II 408)

Rather than explaining her caution, however, Richardson uses italics so that the reader must pick up the emphasis placed on the word and intuit its reason. Richardson's tendency to show rather than tell her reader all that her sentences are not quite able to verbalise is reflected in their concrete appearance on the page. The more subtleties a sentence is required to reveal, the more disjointed its form and punctuation becomes. The ellipses reflect the pauses in Miriam's pondering, while the short one word sentence suggests a quick jump to a new idea, one that is then stressed with italics to demonstrate the weight she places on the word 'imagination' itself and what it might mean – as the following question then supplements. Compared with James's firmly structured sentence that attempts to carry the reader along the lines of the narrated thought in order to make his meaning as clear as language possibly can, Richardson leaves the reader to fall through the gaps in her sentences as if to show the limitations of linguistic representation.

The difference here from the gaps for which James's prose is known is the physical quality that Richardson provides by writing them into the text. The lack of specification in James's style is deliberate and reveals a significant aspect of his understanding and use of language. The 'blanks' in James's style, as Peter Brooks observes, 'both contain and efface central meaning'.<sup>36</sup> The point of the 'something or other' that haunts John Marcher in James's tale 'The Beast in the Jungle', for example, is that it *is* something and not nothing. The 'thing' that James does not quite describe in recounting his reaction to the Civil War is similarly an important sensation, despite the lack of specificity. In not minutely describing the content of the idea, James nods to his awareness of the uncertainty in the relationship between language and absolute meaning. Hazel Hutchison writes that James's 'indirect syntax and his tendency to write around things mean that his language functions not through what it says but through what it leaves to be

---

<sup>36</sup> Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p.189.

guessed'.<sup>37</sup> Both James and Richardson's methods reflect thought patterns as if they were being enacted before the reader's eyes. While James tries to get as much help from language and linguistic rules as possible to convey his sense, Richardson indicates her dissatisfaction with the correlation between the sign and the signified by loosening the syntactical bonds of her prose. *Pilgrimage* is littered with assertions such as: 'the words belonging to underlying things were far away, only to be found in long silences', or 'Silence is reality. Life ought to be lived on a basis of silence where truth blossoms' (III 181, 188). Even though the suggestion that truth is only expressed through silence is a self-defeating position for an author, such assertions go some way to explaining Richardson's visually significant textual layout.

There are purposeful contradictions at work in Richardson's method. Miriam Henderson notes, *she* reads books for the portrait of the author that they reveal: 'I've just discovered that I don't read books for the story, but as a psychological study of the author' (I 384). This enthusiastic, significant declaration by the still slightly naïve Miriam would suggest that the autobiographical nature of a text is irrelevant to how much the reader can hope to comprehend of the author. Richardson extends this judgement in her short essay on reading *Finnegan's Wake*, 'Adventure for Readers', when she asserts: 'every novel, taken as a whole, shares with every other species of portrayal the necessity of being a signed self-portrait'.<sup>38</sup> The author's signature that she sees 'clearly inscribed across his every sentence' is therefore inherent in the author's very choice of words. So, while Richardson, in her attempt at writing a new kind of realism, tries to keep her own voice out of her novel and leave it in the hands of her designated 'fictional' protagonist, the strongly autobiographical nature of the text that in itself undermines her stance of authorial 'silence' is supplemented by her unique style. Richardson's use of language, particularly her punctuation, demands an unusual level of concentration from the

---

<sup>37</sup> Hazel Hutchison, *Seeing and Believing: Henry James and the Spiritual World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.40.

<sup>38</sup> Dorothy Richardson, 'Adventure for Readers' [1939], in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.) *op. cit.*, 425-429, p.426.

reader. If silence really were preferable to insufficient language, all of this stylisation would be in vain.

The 'difficulty' of the linguistic style foregrounds the text's formal features, thus highlighting the authorial presence that Richardson's firm focalisation through her protagonist's point of view wants to avoid. While reading Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon* for instance, Miriam decrees that he will have to 'go to purgatory; or be born again as a woman' because of the 'sudden smooth male voice' with which he interrupts the story (III 276). This contradictory feature of *Pilgrimage* – enacting the authorial absence its heroine both desires and tries to circumvent in her 'psychological' reading of the author through a complex narrative and linguistic technique that draws attention to issues of style – arises from the formal experimentation that is the result of the express desire to break with supposedly inadequate literary precursors like James, even while engaging with them in order to move beyond their scope.

'The best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style', according to Vladimir Nabokov.<sup>39</sup> The comparisons that can be drawn between Richardson's experimental prose and forms of poetry due to the significance of silences, of gaps, of punctuation and line divisions, and of the appearance of the language on the page, suggests that the extra-verbal significance in fact reasserts a connection between language and meaning, or style and truth. Importantly, the gaps that contain such implications can only exist between, and because of their distinction from, words. The fundamental contradiction of *Pilgrimage* then, is the comment it makes on the implicit meaning of language through the medium of its limits. The perfection of language usage would seem to be an attempt to transcend the very limits prescribed by aesthetics. The complication of James's language is repeated but reconceived by Richardson. However, it is as if Richardson has taken James's quest rather further than her linguistic ability, or perhaps language itself, can realise. In straining to represent Miriam's inner world as truthfully, or better said as realistically, as possible, Richardson puts her own lived experience

---

<sup>39</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, Interview with *Vogue*, 1969, in *Strong Opinions* (London: Penguin, 1973) pp.154-5..

that 'silence is reality' down in words. In thus straining beyond the borders of verbal communication, the elastic nature of Richardson's sentences becomes increasingly vital. Rather than tightening the linguistic web of sign and signification as James does, Richardson increasingly loosens it in order to maintain, paradoxically, the personal, *unnarrated* stance that is her literary stream of consciousness. What is revealed in both James's autobiographical volumes and Richardson's *Pilgrimage* is something far more subtle than a self-portrait – it is a portrait of the artist's creative processes, to be read in what they say about themselves, but also in the very style and method of their writing.