

WHY WON'T MIRIAM HENDERSON MARRY MICHAEL
SHATOV?

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Let us *approach Pilgrimage* with an innocent eye. Like the Buddhist monk who, when asked if he did not find all the bowing required of him tedious, replied 'I do it always as if it were the first time'; let us pretend we are reading *Pilgrimage* for the first time, that we have never heard of its author, that we know nothing about this Dorothy Richardson except that she was writing at about the same time as Proust. We certainly have no idea that the central character Miriam Henderson, round whom everything revolves, or rather, into whose pool of consciousness the reader is plunged, is the author's *alter ego*. Let us see if Miriam, who veers constantly between the first and third person, can find balance and stand on her own two feet with Proust's Swann, Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway.

Here she is. A bright teenager accustomed to a comfortable life style, enjoying the attention of young men at dances and tennis parties. But those carefree times are about to end: 'That summer, which still seemed near to her, was going to fade, desert her. Leaving nothing behind [...] There would still be blissful days. But she would not be in them.'¹ The young man, who has asked her to play 'Abide with Me' has not said 'Don't go' or 'When are you coming back?' (I 16) Her father is seeing her off on her journey to Germany where she is to be a pupil teacher to help the failing family finances. He makes out she is going there to finish her education, attempting to retain the aura of the English gentleman: 'Poor dear. It was what he had always wanted to be, he had sacrificed everything to the idea of being "a person of culture and cultivation"' (I 28). Neither her father nor the young man who purports to be in love with her can do anything towards mitigating Miriam's sense of being an outcast from the good life.

¹ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, Vol. 1 (London: J.M. Dent & The Cresset Press, 1938), p.16. From here on, page numbers in text.

When bankruptcy has made a nervous wreck of Mrs Henderson, it is Miriam not her father who takes her to the seaside in the hope that some sort of equilibrium might be restored. But “it is too late,” said Mrs Henderson with clear quiet bitterness, “God has deserted me.” (I 489). In the very next paragraph Miriam, weeping, is being clasped by a bony old woman who is telling her never to blame herself. For what? It is not made explicit in the writing. Miriam feels herself to be in a ‘dream’: ‘I am in eternity.’ (I 489-90).

By the time Miriam meets Michael Shatov she has adjusted, even if she never becomes reconciled, to the family misfortunes. ‘I shall always have myself to be with’ has become her leitmotif. Overcome by the sense of dislocation she feels, in a rush of ontological greed, that ‘It is only by the pain of remaining free that one can have the whole world round one all the time.’ (III 20) But she is unable to avoid adding more pain to that which the world has already inflicted on her. The one thing that has not been taken from her is her Englishness. ‘There were things in England with truth shining behind them. English people did not shine. But something shone behind them.’ (III 240). Well, whatever that may be, it certainly does not shine behind the young Russian Jew to whom she feels so drawn. From the moment Mrs Bailey in Tansley Street suggests her as a teacher for her new lodger Michael Shatov, Miriam is intrigued even though she is still hankering after ‘the manner of another kind of life.’ (III 17).

Michael Shatov becomes increasingly attractive when he mentions his interest in philosophy. But even in the midst of fascination, there is doubt ‘people interested and attracted by a response that at first revealed no differences so that they all in turn took one to be like themselves’ but ‘It made a relationship that was as false as it was true.’ (III 18) Yet as the lessons progress so does their closeness. ‘For that moment they had been students together, exchanging photographs of their minds. That could not come again. It was that moment that had sent him away at the end of the lesson, plunging lightly upstairs, brumming in his deep voice, and left her singing in the drawing room....’ (III 23) So that when he

fails to turn up for a lesson she is out of all proportion disconcerted. 'On the first floor there was a glimmer of blue light. It was the street lamp shining in through Mr Shatov's wide-open empty room. When she reached her own room she found it was one o'clock. *Already* he had found his way to some horrible house. She wrapped her evening round her, parrying the thought of him. There should be no lesson tomorrow. She would be out, having left no message.' (III 39-40) Why does she immediately assume that he has found his way to a *horrible* house?

And again, she is immensely put out when she thinks he has failed to meet her as arranged by Holborn Library. All she can see is a sinister looking foreigner in yellow boots, an overcoat of an evil shade of brown who does turn out to be Mr Shatov after all. She is embarrassed to be taking this disreputable looking character into the British Museum but 'The eyes had come back....They gleamed again with intelligence; but their brilliant beauty shone from a face that looked almost dingy in the hard light...' (III 54) Has it occurred to her that may be his expression is an echo of the dismay he sees in hers?

The rapport between them does re-establish itself. 'But perhaps the things that occur to you suddenly for the first time in conversation *are* the things you have always thought without knowing it...that was one of the charms of talking to Michael Shatov, finding out thoughts, looking at them when they were expressed...' (III 93) Their conversations take on a more personal note: 'You would like my father, he hasn't a scrap of originality, only that funny old-fashioned English quality from somewhere or other heaven knows...' (III 109) Here the mention of Englishness, which is at the root and core of Miriam's being, does not yet assume a divisive quality. It becomes more poignant when she reminisces to him about the lost security of her early childhood, about the day they left their first home 'sobbing most bitterly and knowing my life was at end'. And she goes on: 'I often dream I am there...and I feel then as if going away were still to come, an awful thing that had never happened.' (III 124). Does Miriam feel free to pour out her heart like this to Michael because he too is far from home? Is he even more of an outsider than she

is? But then suddenly she is filled with doubt again, is she leaning on him too hard? 'He knew his need. Perhaps she fulfilled it less than she thought Perhaps it was her alone ?' (III 191) Uncertainty is momentarily eclipsed by one of her many, sometimes contradictory, instants of ontological certainty: '...the magic shifting gleam that had lain always day and night, year-long in tranquil moments upon every visible and imagined thing, came at last into her very own. It *had* been love then, all along. Love *was* the secret of things.' (III 195)

Even now, she can never hold misgiving at bay for long. Immediately after the moment when they had been 'exchanging photographs of their minds' she feels 'the best way would be to consider him as something superfluous, to be forgotten all day and presently, perhaps quite soon, to disappear altogether.' (III 23) And again: '...London was her pillow of clouds....life's free gift...He had come to meet her...invading her street. She fled exasperated.' (III 107) Misfortunes have so eroded Miriam's capacity to trust her own emotions that the man she loves turns into an invader rather than someone by whose side her London might become even more magical. And yet...he is, after all, a poor lonely little man who can be pitied. Pity leaves her uncommitted. *Poor, brave, lonely* - don't those words describe her as well?

Not only is this poor brave lonely little man about as un-English as it is possible to be, he is also Jewish. Miriam has come into contact with Jewish people since her schooldays: there were the Hyamson girls with their distinctive voices, there was Max Sonnenheim who appeared briefly at those idyllic parties to whom she felt greatly attracted. Yet there was something about Jews that made people uneasy. What was it? What did everybody mean about them? The Brooms said Banbury Park was full of Jews in patient, contemptuous voices. Mr Hancock seemed to think being Jewish was some sort of disgraceful joke. On the other hand, England, which could assimilate anything, had been a home for Jews for many years. For a moment Miriam feels that 'the mysterious fact of Jewishness could remain in the background....the hidden flaw....as there was always a hidden flaw in all her possessions.' (III 193).

Of all Miriam's reflections, this is one of the most extraordinary. What flawed possessions is she thinking of? Flawed in that they were taken from her? Are people possessions? She surely cannot consider Michael in those terms, she, of all people, who will not, cannot allow herself to be possessed! She continues to torture herself because the thought of life entirely without Michael is unbearable. In a calm moment she tells herself 'No one was to blame: neither he for being a Jew nor she for her inexorable Englishness.' (III 292) Even though she can't stand English Jewesses (Michael is himself disappointed in the English Jews he has met), she wonders whether social life with him might after all be a possibility, even amusing? She decides to visit an English woman married to a Jew.

Straight away piercing the joy of her escapade comes 'the dark certainty that there was no help awaiting her.' (III 225) Such mood swings undermine everything that involves Miriam's emotions. She wonders before she has even met her whether Mrs Bergstein has ever 'thought what it must be like to have always at her side a Jewish consciousness'. (III 225) These thoughts are reinforced when Miriam sees 'a short squat polished wealthy old English Jew with curly grey hair and an eager busy plunging gait' go into a room full of men. Miriam does not consider that perhaps this English woman loved her Jew enough to overcome any scruples, if indeed she ever had any. And when she can't help saying that she finds it impossible to associate with Jewish women, Mrs Bergstein replies stiffly 'That is a point you must consider very carefully'. Miriam immediately feels that 'they were at one - English women with a common incommunicable sense' (24). Incommunicable when it has just communicated itself? And is that really what Mrs Bergstein is feeling?

But all this pales when in great trepidation Michael tells her 'that he had been lost to her forever long ago.' (III 204). To put it bluntly, he is not a virgin. It is Miriam's sense of absolute parity between the sexes that is so shattered when she hears this. 'When he first kissed me' started her mind 'those women were all about him. They have come between us forever.' (III 206) How wrong

she is, how little, after all, she understands him. For her 'The greed of men was something much more awful than the greed of prostitutes' (III 208). So, is it the fact that Michael has been with prostitutes rather than had love affairs that so shatters her? More than ever, Miriam's belief that men are not worthy of women is reinforced. All men? All women? Or in this particular instance: Michael not worthy of Miriam? In a calmer moment she asks herself what after all has changed though she cannot allow Michael to touch her now. 'It is not an idea or prudishness. It's more solid than the space of air between us. I can't get through it.' (III 211) When she tells him that she sees exactly where he stands and he comes back with 'Let us rather go have tea' (III 216) I pretty well fell in love with him myself!

So they go and have tea in a small dark room behind a little shop where Miriam is appalled by the presence of a Negro. Given that at the end of the nineteenth century there were few black men in London, it is nevertheless difficult to understand Miriam's deep disgust. The one redeeming feature for her is that Michael no longer seems alien. Even so, 'there was no *time* to shake off the contamination.' (III 217). What does she feel contaminated by? What is the significance of the black man's appearance at precisely this point? What has turned this unknown black man into such an ogre? Does he symbolise a sexuality she is suppressing in herself? Does she feel she would be defiled if she gave herself to Michael in body as well as soul? Somehow the sight of the Negro seals the rift between them 'You know how separate we are' (31) she tells him. She is 'returning unchanged to loneliness....the unbelievable severance is already made.' (III 305) A severance of her own making and of course she is not unchanged!

However, the pain of severance from Michael is eased by increased socialising with Alma and Hypo Wilson, loosely married to each other. They are indisputably English and what Hypo lacks in gentlemanliness is more than compensated for by his fizzy intellect. Miriam comes into her own over weekends with them, exchanging ideas with bright people. Hypo exhilarates and stimulates her intellectually, it is a relief to have roles reversed, she is learning rather than instructing. She laps up Hypo's admiration,

laced with irony as when he tells her that though she doesn't come off all the time 'When you do, you come off no end.' (III 390).

Gradually the intellectual tingle is eclipsed by the physical tingle, at least as far as Hypo is concerned. For him any relationship with a woman has sooner or later to turn into a sexual one. When Miriam comes back to London after her break in Switzerland she finds that 'He was "in love" in his way once again. But behind the magic words was nothing for her individually.' And his brilliance, the mental qualities she has hitherto found so full of charm, had somehow, unaccountably, become overshadowed.' (IV 141-2) When finally she gives in to him, knowing absolutely that they do not love each other, the disappointment is inevitable: 'His body was not beautiful. She could find nothing to adore, no ground for response to his highly spoken tribute. The manly structure, the smooth satiny sheen in place of her own velvety glow was interesting as partner and foil but not desirable. It had no power to stir her as often she had been stirred by the sudden sight of him walking down a garden or entering a room. With the familiar clothes something of his essential self seemed to have departed.' (IV 231-2)

So what has possessed her? Why has she had sex with this physically unattractive married philanderer when she has refused Michael, a man who loves her so much he is ready to give up his religion for her? Hypo will give up nothing, on the contrary, he is simply adding her to his collection of virginites. Is it because she knows Hypo is exacting no *forever* from her? Why does she find it more shocking that Michael is not a virgin than that Hypo is serially unfaithful to his wife? She cannot help but acknowledge that 'everything coming from Michael had been good; even the alien unacceptables.' (IV 416) 'He had never failed to put the whole of his mental and moral power at the service of every situation she had encountered during their long friendship.' (37) She does realise 'with the whole force of her generous nature the cruelty of deserting Michael.' (IV 291)

Then both Hypo and Michael recede into the background for the time being when Amabel comes on the scene - a young woman

who has voluntarily uprooted herself from her affluent background. Unlike Miriam's her background still exists intact. May be this is in part what attracts Miriam to her? She is another freedom seeker. There is an unparalleled sense of togetherness between them which 'No sharing, not even the shared being of a man and a woman, which she sometimes envied and sometimes deplored, could be deeper or more wonderful than their being together.' (IV 242)

With a kind of masochistic perversity it then occurs to Miriam that nothing could be better than to bring together the two people she loves most and who love her. Yes, she will see to it that they marry! 'There passed before her an inward vision, a picture of herself performing upon an invisible background the rite of introduction between Michael and Amabel.' (IV 285) Why is the background invisible? Because Miriam has not quite yet brought herself to clear her own foreground definitively of her two most intimate friends? Is she being supremely unselfish or supremely selfish? She has, after all, not considered the inclinations of either Amabel or Michael. What is this relentless drive towards an emotional *tabula rasa*? Is it the constant ineradicable fear of being betrayed? The conviction that none of the palpably good things in life are for her? Does leaving herself out of the picture somehow empower her?

Neither Amabel nor Michael are impressed with each other on first meeting. Yet Miriam's insistence and their affection for her establish a bond between them. To Miriam's astonishment, insouciant Irish Amabel 'with her unlocated half foreign being....could see nothing of the impossibility of spending one's life in Jewry.' (IV 292) Perhaps because it is not an impossibility? Amabel even goes on to say that she would love to have Michael's children and 'Miriam thrilled to the pictured future from which she was shut out' (42) But even while she is stage managing this unlikely union, Miriam is still immensely bound up with Michael. What she wants to tell him is that 'she would somehow make terms with what must surely be the agonised breaking up of her physical being...the incalculable regrouping of all the facets of her life.' (IV 300).

What is it that impels her to put herself through this? Is it a kind of thralldom to the notion of freedom? And even now, Michael urges her to marry him 'as brother'. There are not many indications in the text that Hypo has made Miriam pregnant. Perhaps, tangentially, when Amabel exclaims 'One feels one ought to dance out one's child in the market place.' (IV 283) Has Miriam told her to be quiet about it? Then quite explicitly Hypo tells her 'You Miriam, booked for maternity, must stand aside while the rest of us, leaving you alone in a corner, carry on our lives.' (IV 321) As if her impending motherhood has nothing to do with him! Isn't it astonishing that after this Miriam is able to amble amicably along with him, her elbow cupped in his hand, to her old haunt Donizettis 'bringing suddenly back only the harmonies of their long association.' (IV 325) Coolly he tells her that he believes her capable of devotion (a devotion he clearly does not want) adding unctuously that 'all this admirable young loyalty and singleness of purpose must attach itself somewhere or fizzle wastefully out.' (IV 331) Has he become a yearned for father figure for Miriam? Nothing comes of motherhood for Miriam though there is no explicit reference to a miscarriage, only indications that she is exhausted, in need of rest.

When she is looking after her sister Sarah '....she felt her own exhaustion return upon her : the fevered weakness that for so long had made every task an unbearable challenge and had given to the busy spectacle of life a quality of nightmare.' (IV 394) In *Dimple Hill* in the Sussex countryside with the Quaker Roscorlas Miriam begins to recover, begins to find herself as a writer, realising that to write is to forsake life. And yet what is it if not life that she is at such pains to capture? Miriam moves back to London to new surroundings in St John's Wood with a new landlady who commends her fellow lodger Mr Noble. The reader can attach no particular significance to this casually dropped name. Far more meaningful for the Miriam the reader has got to know and perhaps identify with is the arrival of Michael and Amabel's son Paul. At the very moment Miriam picks up the baby she feels that 'the essence' of her relationship with Michael 'remains untouched' (IV 658):

Something of the inexpressible quality of our relationship revealed itself in that moment she did not share, the moment of finding the baby Paul lying asleep in his long robe in the sitting room, gathering him up, and being astonished to feel, as soon as he lay folded, still asleep, against my body, the complete stilling of every one of my competing urgencies. (IV 658)

So we leave Miriam wrapped as always in metaphysical speculation, aware of every nuance of the changing day and season, every cadence of a person's voice, waiting, waiting, and just every now and then achieving that cosmic click when seeker and sought are one.