

‘THE “PILGRIMAGE” OF THE SINGLE WOMAN:
THE SEARCH FOR THE COSMOPOLITAN SELF
IN *DEADLOCK* AND *REVOLVING LIGHTS*’

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Cosmopolitanism infiltrates and permeates the landscape of *Pilgrimage*. The narrative journey of Miriam Henderson begins in *Pointed Roofs* (1915), when she departs England for Germany at the age of seventeen for an appointment as a governess; it ends back in England, in the posthumously published *March Moonlight* (1967), with Miriam poised to recognise herself as the writer she has strived to be. In the sequence of novels between these two, there are moments when Miriam is physically re-located outside an English landscape – *Oberland* (1927), for example, is set in Switzerland – but, by and large, Miriam’s geographical location is London and its surrounding areas. The experiences interiorised by Miriam throughout *Pilgrimage*, however, are transnational. She encounters a multitude of national identities, both in London’s public spaces and in her lodgings: customers in a German café, Canadian boarders at Tansley Street, the Polish Dr Veslovski, and numerous Russians including the Lintoffs, Mr Rodkin and Michael Shatov. Miriam’s attraction to these cosmopolitan figures is intellectual: the knowledge they offer allows her access to an intellectual world that she increasingly craves to be part of.

In the case of Shatov, however, the attraction is also romantic. This means that Miriam’s intellectual journey becomes bound up in her negotiation of her subjectivity as a single woman. Throughout *Deadlock* and *Revolving Lights*, Miriam’s experiences of the cosmopolitan are largely mediated by and refracted through her relationship with the Jewish Shatov. In cultural and literary discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Jew was a symbol of exile, of the alien and of the displaced.¹ As

¹ This has been widely discussed in literary criticism, but for further examination of this in the context of modernism and modernity see: Erin G. Carlston, *Thinking Fascism: Sapphic Modernism and Fascist Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford

Jacqueline Rose has pointed out in her analysis of *Pilgrimage*, the Jew was therefore viewed as not only ‘the embodiment of cosmopolitan – that is, infinitely mobile, infinitely corruptible – capital’, but also (in anti-Semitic rhetoric) as a ‘parasite [...] on the community’ in which he moves.² As a single woman, Miriam is also a marginal and transgressive figure: she rejects the private, domestic sphere in the search for a legitimate space within the masculine domain of the modern city. Her English nationality, however, associates her with the imperialist, colonial legacy of the British Empire in which the cosmopolitan is marginalised, and the Jew is ‘othered’. This means that Miriam’s struggle to dissociate herself from this legacy and accrue cultural capital as a cosmopolite is marked by its interplay with conceptions of otherness, marginality and familiarity, in terms of both gender and race. Several critics have already addressed Miriam’s complex engagement with Jewishness in *Pilgrimage*.³ Rose, especially, has pointed to the difficulties of disentangling the question of assimilation and Jewishness from feminist discourse concerning the individual and the race.⁴ The fact that Shatov is a Jew undoubtedly plays a role in Miriam’s ultimate refusal to marry him. In this article, however, I argue that Miriam’s fascination with the cosmopolitan also accounts for this refusal by reading her desire to accrue cultural capital in the context of her wider struggle to find subjectivity as a single woman in the urban sphere.

In fictions of the late-eighteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the single woman was often a transgressive figure. She appeared in various forms – as spinster, odd woman, New Woman, old maid – but was usually sexually ambiguous or conspicuous.⁵ I have argued elsewhere that suspicion of the single woman at the turn of the

University Press, 1998); Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

² Rose, p.120.

³ See, for example: Maren Tova Linett, *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Parsons, pp.82-112; and Rose, pp.117-32.

⁴ It should be pointed out that Rose reads this entanglement in the context of modernist women’s writing, and, particularly, how women modernist authors write the self.

twentieth century was linked to anxiety over how to distinguish between female heterosexuality and homosexuality at a time when feminine signifiers were becoming destabilised.⁶ But this suspicion was also an extension of the Victorian ideology that had dictated that the proper space for women was in the private, domestic sphere: women outside of this cult of domesticity were marginal figures. From around 1880 to the 1920s, there was a drive towards emancipation for women from oppressive and, at times, archaic legislation and social doctrine that insisted on separate spheres. This drive came from a range of sources, including legal reformers, the social purity movement, suffragettes and feminists. Although married women benefited from the resultant changes (particularly in relation to marital legislation), it was arguably the single woman who profited the most economically. In the 1890s, for example, the number of unmarried women employed in white-collar jobs in offices and schools rose dramatically.⁷ Other opportunities for work also arose in the metropolis. The modern city had been a particularly problematic location for single women. Public, urban space was typically a masculine domain: a woman alone in the city ran the risk of appearing as a potential prostitute and being associated with working-class sexual immorality.⁸ As Deborah Parsons has discussed, modernity offered the chance for women to take up socially sanctioned roles in the city both as

⁵ These figures can be found throughout British and American fiction of this period, but some of the most discussed novels regarding these types of single women include George Gissing's *The Odd Woman* (1893); Henry James, *The Bostonians* (1886); Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes* (1926).

⁶ Emma Sterry, *Transgressive Sexuality and Cultural Hierarchy: The Representation of the Single Woman in Women's Fiction from the 1920s to the 1940s*. Diss. University of Strathclyde, 2011. Caroline Howlett has argued that that 'femininity had lost its stability as a signifier in the heterosexual economy' because the suffrage movement meant that 'feminine dress could no longer be assumed to denote feminine subservience': see Caroline Howlett, 'Femininity slashed: Suffragette Militancy, Modernism and Gender', in Hugh Stevens and Caroline Howlett (eds), *Modernist Sexualities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.72-91 (p.77). I suggest that this inability to detect transgression in women exacerbated anxiety concerning lesbianism and the single woman.

⁷ Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writing in English: Britain, 1900 – 1945* (London: Longman, 1998), p.18.

⁸ See Parsons for further details.

workers and consumers.⁹ While this offered a certain amount of economic capital to the single woman, the extent to which she could become part of an intellectual economy was more problematic. Although women's colleges emerged in Britain from the 1860s onwards,¹⁰ full access to degree courses was a slow process and access to Higher Education for middle-class women did not improve until the post-war years.¹¹

Miriam's urban wanderings are rooted in her quest to reclaim a legitimate space in the city for herself as a single woman, but they are also part of an intellectual journey during which she wishes to accrue cultural, rather than economic, capital. The concept of 'cultural capital' was developed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to account for social inequalities in education: it refers to those cultural attributes that individuals can acquire as a means of social mobility. In recent years, the term has been employed in discussions of brow boundaries – particularly in relation to middlebrow and modernist cultures – because of the way it invokes ideologies of class, taste and the literary canon.¹² Celena Kusch, for example, has suggested that Miriam's interest in transnational cultures is driven by her desire to 'escape from the limitations of her own meagre cultural capital as a lower-middle class, single woman within the imperial metropole'.¹³ While this is true to an extent, this argument is dependent on the assumption that the cosmopolitan signifies intellectual privilege or opportunity. Faye Hammill includes the term 'cosmopolitanism' in a list of words that 'used to name elements of what is elsewhere, or later,

⁹ Ibid, p.43.

¹⁰ The first of these, Girton College, was established in 1869.

¹¹ Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp.25-7.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction', in Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey (eds) *Power and Ideology in Education*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.487-511. Bourdieu would elaborate on the concept of cultural capital in later works: see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) and Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in J. G. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp.241-258.

¹³ Celena E. Kusch, 'Disorienting Modernism: National Boundaries and the Cosmopolis', in *Journal of Modern Literature* 30: 4 (2007), 39-60 (p.44).

called sophistication.¹⁴ Hammill's study is interesting because it positions sophistication within the discourse of cultural hierarchy: for example, Hammill observes how modernism 'often operates through the mechanisms of sophistication' while arguing that its 'formal practices began to be imitated as appropriated as signs of sophistication by middlebrow artists and audiences'.¹⁵ Cosmopolitanism, too, is implicit in this discourse, particularly because of its links with modernism. As a form of art that defined itself against 'mass' or 'low' culture, with its insistence on innovation and radicalism, modernism belonged to 'highbrow' culture. It was also a cosmopolitan phenomenon, with enclaves of modernist and avant-garde artists in London, New York and Paris. Moreover, as readings of British modernism especially have emphasised, a preoccupation with transnational cultures is often evident within modernist texts. Richard Began and Michael Valdez Moses, for instance, have highlighted 'how aesthetic innovation and formal experimentation so often associated with modernism is related to British colonialism', before suggesting the 'modernist revolution can be understood as a critical and artistic engagement with the British and, more broadly, European quest for empire'.¹⁶ Kusch has similarly argued that 'colonies and exoticised geographies worldwide constituted both the cultural context and aesthetic foundation for much modernist literature'.¹⁷ Accordingly, a cosmopolitan subjectivity emerges as a potential form of cultural capital within this hierarchy.

In reality, the conception of cosmopolitanism as a marker or even instrument of intellectualism is much more problematic. Critics have accused modernism of appropriating the 'otherness' of the cosmopolitan as a means of inscribing its radicalism: Kusch best expresses this when she argued that modernist texts are often characterised by a 'performance of otherness' that is part of a

¹⁴ Faye Hammill. *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p.6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.119.

¹⁶ Richard Began and Michael Valdez Moses, 'Introduction', in R. Began and M. Valdez Moses (eds) *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899 – 1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp.1-16 (p.5).

¹⁷ Kusch, p.39.

strategy of ‘controlling culture’.¹⁸ To engage in this kind of argument in regards to *Pilgrimage* is to assume that the text is a modernist one: this question is not, however, my primary concern. Instead, I am more fascinated by how the relationship between modernism and cosmopolitanism points to the tensions invoked by the word ‘cosmopolitan’ itself, and how these tensions impact on the single woman searching for a cosmopolitan subjectivity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers various definitions of the term ‘cosmopolitan’:

1. Belonging to all parts of the world, not restricted to any one country or its inhabitants
2. Free from national limitations
3. Diffused over the globe
4. Composed of people of many different countries¹⁹

These different meanings share connotations of transnationality and freedom. The sense of liberation evoked by these geographical significations is at odds with the British usage of the term in the early nineteenth century (which, as Jessica Berman has pointed out, was largely pejorative²⁰) and they certainly do not acknowledge how the term is bound up in ideologies of colonialism, imperialism and empire. In *Pilgrimage*, the struggle of the single woman to accrue cultural capital through the pursuit of the cosmopolitan is suggestive of the instability of both the cosmopolitan and the single woman as subjects.

Deadlock opens in Tansley House, the London lodgings where Miriam meets the Russian émigré, Shatov. Although Miriam begins tutoring Shatov in English, she appears anxious over her ability to do so: she fears that her ‘ignorance of English literature’ will be revealed, and hopes to learn more from Shatov before the exposure of her ignorance ‘brought the lessons to an end and sent him away to find people who were as learned as he was’ (III 23).

¹⁸ Kusch, pp.40-2.

¹⁹ ‘Cosmopolitan’. *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, 30 April 2012.

²⁰ Jessica Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.35.

Miriam wrestles with her feelings of inadequacy against the more intellectually assured (and formally educated) 'Russian student' (III 17). A moment in which she feels that they are 'students together' is perfunctory and when she sees a look of 'age and professorship' on Shatov's face she realises the moment 'could not come again' (III 23-4). The shifting dynamics of this teacher-student relationship are indicative of Miriam's difficulty in reading Shatov. At times, he appears as a 'baby'; at others, she observes that he has 'a strange look of middle age' (III 25) and although he exhibits the qualities of 'boyhood [...] his beard and his courtly manner and the grave balanced intelligence of his eyes might have belonged to man of forty' (III 29). Jane Garrity has argued that Miriam's frequent descriptions of Shatov as 'childlike, delicate and little' feminise him, and becomes a way of challenging his 'masculine privilege'.²¹ It seems more likely, however, that the alternating descriptions of Shatov as child and adult are an extension of Miriam's anxiety concerning her own intellectual status. Shatov's knowledge of languages and culture – signified at the moment when he speaks 'Norman English in German idiom with an intonation that she supposed must be Russian', before he 'passed into French' (III 28) – marks him as a cosmopolitan figure in Miriam's eyes. At only nineteen years old, Shatov epitomises the brand of intellectualism that Miriam craves – one that lies outwith that imperialist discourse that informs and constrains associated with Englishness.

This could account for Miriam's hyperawareness of her own Englishness, particularly in comparison to the cosmopolitan Shatov. Indeed, in the early stages of their relationship, the interplay between cosmopolitanism and imperialism constitutes part of their courtship. Frigerio has highlighted how:

one of the first places to which Miriam takes Michael is the British Museum, where the empire's appetite for collection is documented and displayed through the many pieces, artefacts, and *objets d'art* stockpiled with particular energy in the nineteenth century. The marvels of the empire, classified and

²¹ Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.112.

exhibited to celebrate the English power of identity, and educate the national audience, are in marked contrast to the reality of cosmopolitan Shatov, whose foreign voice sounds loud in the temple of Englishness and seems to profane it.²²

Miriam is complicit in this cataloguing of empire: Frigerio seems to be suggesting that Miriam appropriates this imperialist history to present herself as learned in other cultures and to signify her cosmopolitan desires. In fact, when Miriam remembers that ‘she could show him [Shatov] the Elgin Marbles’ (III 30), the text actually suggests that Miriam recognises the limits that imperialism places on her cosmopolitan ambitions. The Elgin Marbles take on a specific significance not only as a sign of imperial expansion and power, but also of the debates concerning cultural vandalism and looting that form part of anti-imperialist rhetoric. Furthermore, Miriam cannot be ‘deeply grounded in the economy of imperial Britain’, as Kusch claims, since as a single woman Miriam is a marginal and transgressive figure in the patriarchal structures of imperialism. Standing with the Jewish, foreign Shatov in the British Museum, Miriam, too, is an outsider.

Throughout *Deadlock* and *Revolving Lights*, Miriam exhibits considerable resistance to her appearance as an English insider. Her reluctance to translate a French text into English at Shatov’s suggestion is indicative of how she is wary of mediating other English access to non-English cultures. Shatov, however, urges Miriam to ‘[t]ranslate, translate!’ and dismisses the importance of whether or not anyone will read it, instead asserting that the ‘work will be good for’ Miriam (III 140). It is suggested that the ability to translate forms part of a cosmopolitan subjectivity, but while the narrative describes how the move would ‘would set her standing within the foreign world she had touched at so many points during the last few years, and that had become, since the coming of Mr Shatov, more and more clearly a continuation of the first beginnings at school’ (III 119), it remains unclear whether this is Miriam’s own belief or an extension of Shatov’s viewpoint. The

²² Francesca Frigerio, “Imperialism Wants Imperial Women”: The Writing of History and Evolutionary Theories in Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, in *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 1 (2010), pp.6-25 (p.9).

latter would seem more likely, given that Miriam's hesitation is manifest: when she and Shatov sit down together to read Tolstoi, she cannot keep pace with the more capable and assured Shatov. She refuses to read in a linear fashion, looking at dialogue first, before skimming over the remainder of each page. Miriam is 'chilled by the fear of detecting the trail of the translator' (III 59-60); the act of translation for Miriam runs the risk of cultural misappropriation, a transformation of language that reveals more about the translator than it does about the text itself. Tellingly, when Miriam finally acquiesces to Shatov's wishes, she appears to translate the text first into German, then into English. Although the act of writing appears to consumer her, she disassociates herself from the finished text: 'The story was turned away from her towards people who were waiting to read and share what she felt as she read. It was no longer even partly hers; yet the thing that held it together in its English dress was herself, it has her expression, as a portrait would have, so that by no one in her sight or within range of any chance meeting with herself might it ever to be contemplated' (III 143). She also disassociates herself from her Englishness, implying that this is a performative category, rather than one which can signify an essential identity.

Pilgrimage's narrative strategy – its emphasis on interior consciousness – similarly emphasises Miriam's Englishness as a construction, composed as it is of her *own* perceptions of herself, and her perceptions of *other* perceptions of her. For Miriam, Shatov 'gave her her nationality and surroundings' and 'the fact of [her] being England to him made everything easy' (III 167). But in referring to herself as the 'the unintelligent Englishwoman of foreigners' experience' (III 238), she hints at how her attempts to reclaim her subjectivity are hampered by the double bind of being both 'English' and 'woman'. Her relationship with Shatov offers her the opportunity to refute her Englishness: she declares to him 'I am neither English nor civilised' (III 108), and when they kiss for the first time, she remarks to herself 'He had kissed a foreign woman' (III 193). Attempting to inscribe her own otherness through her relationship with Shatov is possible only as an interior process, though, either metaphorically (in Miriam's consciousness) or physically (within the confines of the private home). In the

public, urban spaces of London, Shatov's foreignness allows Miriam to belong. Subject to shouts of xenophobic insults when walking with Shatov, she confronts the group of men responsible and demands that they explain themselves; one responds: "Miss, we know the sight of you going up and down Miss, he ain't good enough *for ya*". This leaves Miriam 'speechless' and she thinks to herself: 'In all these years of invisible going up and down...' (III 138). In this scene, Miriam's reputation is secure because Shatov's 'otherness' eclipses her own. Miriam's familiarity is constructed in opposition to Shatov's unfamiliarity, and her position on the city street is legitimised.

This creates something of a paradox in the text. If we read Miriam's urban wanderings, her 'pilgrimage' through the streets of London, as part of a desire to demasculinise the city and claim a legitimate space for the single woman, then the presence of Shatov as a romantic suitor paradoxically threatens her status as a single woman as it simultaneously legitimatises it. Her refusal to marry Shatov signifies her rejection of the domestic sphere:

This was man; leaning upon her with his burden of loneliness, at home and comforted. This was the truth behind the image of woman supported by man. The strong companion was a child seeking shelter; the women's share an awful loneliness. It was not fair. (III 212)

The 'loneliness' that Miriam refers to, however, takes on a double meaning, representative of both the estrangement she feels from Shatov as a potential husband and the estrangement she feels from herself. For Miriam, marriage is a threat to her autonomy and subjectivity: it stands for '[t]ragedy; the beginnings, before its dry-eyed acceptance, of womanly tragedy, the loss of self in the procession of unfamiliar unwanted things. In the company of a partner already re-immersed in his own familiar life (III 459). The construction of the domestic sphere as the legitimate and proper function for women, meanwhile, is inverted: in becoming 'unfamiliar', it becomes alien, foreign. For Shatov, conversely, it offers 'home', and an opportunity to erase his foreignness. This is alluded to in an earlier exchange between Miriam and Shatov in

Deadlock. When Shatov declares that '[n]o nation can assimilate the Jew', Miriam cites 'intermarriages' as a solution (III 167). Although Shatov concedes that Miriam may have a point in the 'minority' of cases, the question of what marriage to a Jew may mean for an English woman remains. For Miriam, marriage to Shatov would not only compromise her pilgrimage as a single woman; it would also threaten her attempts to accrue cultural capital by potentially erasing the cosmopolitan identity of Shatov. The dynamics of Miriam and Shatov's relationship reveal how the cosmopolitan is not a fixed or stable subjectivity, but one that is transmutable.

Nonetheless, Miriam's romance with Shatov is vital to her exploration of her selfhood; her suggestion in *The Trap* (1925) that '[m]ost people, all the time, in every relationship, seek only themselves. Past selves, if they are old' (III 464) is one that has already played out in *Deadlock* and *Revolving Lights*. Miriam describes Shatov as 'the man who knew her thoughts' (III 192), but the morning after he kisses her, Miriam struggles to retain a stable sense of her 'self':

The woman facing her in the mirror as she put on her hat was the lonely Miriam Henderson, unendurably asked to behave in a special way [...]. How to turn and face him and get back through the room and away to examine alone the surprises of being in love? Her image was disconcerting, her clothes and the act of rushing off to tiresomely engrossing work inappropriate. It was paralysing to be *seen* by him struggling with a tie. The vivid colour that rushed to her cheeks turned her from the betraying mirror to the worse betrayal of his gaze. (III 194)

Under her lover's gaze, the 'betraying mirror' reveals the disconnection between Miriam and the image she sees reflected back at her. If Miriam's love for Shatov is narcissistic, and if he is an extension of herself, then Shatov may not simply be conscious of her thoughts but is actually constitutive of them. His gaze is a 'worse betrayal' than 'the betraying mirror' because it represents Miriam's recognition of the fluxes of subjectivity she experiences even as an unmarried woman. In the urban sphere, though, Miriam

can embrace these fluxes as part of her interior journey. Note Miriam's reaction following the end of her romance with Shatov:

to-night the spirit of London came to meet her on the verge. Nothing in life could be sweeter than this welcoming [...]. What lover did she want? No one in the world would oust this mighty lover, always receiving her back without words, engulfing and leaving her untouched, liberated and expanding to the whole range of her being. (III 272)

With the city as her lover, Miriam is liberated. Moreover, when she asserts that '[n]o-one in the world' could rival London, it is possible to infer that this liberation stems from the way in which the city allows her to explore a range of subjectivities: her pursuit of the cosmopolitan is a part, not the sum total, of the intellectual journey that Miriam is invested in.

The cosmopolitan in *Pilgrimage* is not merely a method of accruing cultural capital; it is a facet of Miriam's desire to experience the 'whole range' of the single woman's 'being'. In the closing pages of *The Trap*, Miriam observes:

I must create my life. Life is creation. Self and circumstances the raw material. But so many lives I can't create. And in going off to create my own I must leave behind uncreated lives. Lives set in motionless circumstances. (III 508)

As a single woman, Miriam is able to refigure the reproductive female body so that she is the creator of her own life, rather than someone else's. The city may function as both a physical and imaginary landscape in which the single woman can create herself outside of the domestic sphere but, as Jesse Matz has highlighted, *Pilgrimage* presents us with 'a myriad of selves'.²³ Miriam, therefore, creates not *life* but *lives* out of the 'raw material' of the self. The search for a cosmopolitan self is not an end in itself, but part of her pilgrimage as a single woman. *Pilgrimage* plays with, inverts and

²³ Jesse Matz, 'Dorothy Richardson's Singular Modernity', in *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 1 (2008), pp.8-26 (pp.13-8). Matz is one of several critics to comment on Miriam's name as a play on 'myriad "I am's"'.

destabilises conceptions of otherness, foreignness and marginality to illuminate the fractured subjectivities available to the single woman, but simultaneously suggests that these might still offer the single woman her freedom.