

PLATO'S TANK:
AESTHETICISM, DOROTHY RICHARDSON AND
THE IDEA OF DEMOCRACY

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In *Dorothy Richardson* (1931), John Cowper Powys places the author of the then nine-volume *Pilgrimage* within a pantheon of ancient philosophers, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, and Plato. Along with its philosophical greatness, he argues, *Pilgrimage* is also a work of art whose rendering of the 'peculiar feminine reaction to life' is an achievement of 'cosmic apprehension, or planetary aestheticism':¹ The phrase is ambivalent – highlighting both the idealist and the materialist aspects of the text. While the connections between Richardson's experimental form and nineteenth-century aestheticism are undeniable, it is also possible to argue that her concern with her young heroine's experience represents a materialist turn. In Powys's words, she 'has sunk a shaft into a new stratum of material', taking her place among those 'thinkers who, like Heraclitus and Goethe and Nietzsche, are intent on Life itself, in its mysteriously flowing stream, rather than any human hypothesis of its whence and whither'.² Without ignoring the dialogue with idealism that persists throughout *Pilgrimage*, in this article we want to suggest that the text's impulses are anti-Platonist and pro-democratic rather than idealist and elitist. However, in order to reach that point, it is useful to start with Richardson's relationship to nineteenth-century aestheticism, and one of its great representatives, Gustave Flaubert, an author whose best known novel, *Madame Bovary*, Richardson much admired.

The 'immortal Emma'

In his essay, 'La mise à mort d'Emma Bovary', 'Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed', Jacques Rancière argues that Flaubert, the advocate of 'pure literature', had to kill off Emma in order to

¹ John Cowper Powys, *Dorothy Richardson* (London: Village Press, 1974), p.17.

² *Ibid*, p.18.

renounce 'the harm done by Emma to literature' by her attempts to aestheticise the everyday.³ Although Flaubert's style gives the impression of treating all subjects with the same equal distance, in fact, Rancière suggests, he is engaged in a new distribution of the perceptible (*'partage du sensible'*):⁴ a division between the author, who has the right to aestheticise the everyday, and his character, the 'mistaken artist', who does not. In a subsequent article, Rancière expresses the matter more succinctly: 'Flaubert killed Emma so that his artistic plot – the dance of atoms – wins over her sentimental plot – the love story'.⁵

A first step towards understanding Richardson's materialist aesthetic might be to read Miriam Henderson, the protagonist of Dorothy Richardson's long novel cycle, *Pilgrimage*, as a kind of literary-political response to the murder of the character Richardson once referred to as the 'immortal Emma'.⁶ Insofar as Miriam is part of an attempt to achieve a new 'repartage du sensible', she represents a desire to bring Emma back from the dead in order to instil a new vision of democracy, where women have a right to an aesthetic grounded in their own experience.

Flaubert, of course, is as guilty as Emma of aestheticising the everyday in that the novel is drawn from bourgeois life. Unlike his protagonist however, Flaubert's notion of style, what he famously defined as 'the absolute manner of seeing things',⁷ insists on the primacy of art for its own sake rather than for the sake of love, and certainly not in the name of politics. As Rancière argues, Flaubert's style allows him to perceive 'a pure harmony of sensations, absolved of all history and all purpose' deployed as 'a sensorium of pure sensations, detached from the sensorium of

³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), pp.50, 54.

⁴ Ibid, p.55.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, 'The Wandering Thread: on the rationality of the novel', *Le tour critique*, 2, (Autumn 2013), 9.

⁶ Letter from Dorothy Richardson to John Austen, 1928, in Gloria Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), p.147.

⁷ Jacques Rancière, 'Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed', *Critical Inquiry*, 34, (Winter 2008), p. 241.

ordinary experience'.⁸ The Platonist roots of his aesthetic are made clear in an 1876 letter to George Sand, where Flaubert introduces the philosopher to clarify the difference between his own aesthetic and the realist aims of his friend Ivan Turgenev:

[...] for me the end of art [is], namely, beauty. I remember having felt my heart beat violently, having felt a fierce pleasure in contemplating a wall of the Acropolis, a perfectly bare wall (the one on the left as you go up to the Propylaea). Well! I wonder if a book independently of what it says, cannot produce the same effect! In the exactness of its assembling, the rarity of its elements, the polish of its surface, the harmony of its ensemble, is there not an intrinsic virtue, a sort of divine force, something eternal as a principle? (I speak as a Platonist.)⁹

Out of the 'harmony of its ensemble', Flaubert wants art itself (whether in the form of a well wrought wall or a book) to breed 'something eternal as a principle', a 'something' that, as his parenthetical phrase makes clear, could be understood as a kind of Platonic ideal. He does not ask, as does Emma, for literature and life to become one and the same. Instead, for Flaubert, 'style' is what counts and by achieving beauty the artist also achieves Platonic truth.

Still, what distinguishes Flaubert from Emma is not so much the aesthetic, but the capacity for distinction itself. Despite Flaubert's attempts to treat all his subjects with equal stylistic distance, he perhaps recognised that he and Emma were closer than is usually admitted. A.S. Byatt suggests that Flaubert's famous claim to Amélie Bosquet that '*Madame Bovary c'est moi!*' cannot be understood without its corollary: '*d'après-moi?*'¹⁰ That is, Flaubert's unstinting faith in the authority of his aesthetic vision, *la littérature pure* wherein *via le mot juste* the word and idea cohere, is perhaps

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ A.L. McKenzie (ed. and trans.), *The George Sand-Gustave Flaubert Letters*, (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2007), p.438.

¹⁰ A.S. Byatt, 'Scenes from a Provincial Life', *Guardian*, 27 July 2002.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jul/27/classics.asbyatt>, accessed 6 March 2014.

what caused Walter Pater to christen him the ‘martyr of literary style’.¹¹

Richardson, unlike the well-to-do Flaubert, could not afford such martyrdom. As both Richardson’s modest means and Miriam’s struggle to support herself make clear, the female artist’s life exacts very real financial and psychic costs. What is at stake in *Madame Bovary* is the relationship between the object of art and the world in which it exists, a problem that has both aesthetic and, as Rancière suggests, political dimensions. This was no less the case for Dorothy Richardson and, as for Flaubert, Plato is a key, if often submerged, reference point for Richardson, who even late in her life was still expressing scepticism about the possibility of being both a Platonist and a realist.¹²

Like George Sand who in an 1867 letter to Flaubert asks him to embrace “LIFE FOR LIFE’S SAKE”, arguing that it is unnecessary to ‘destroy the breast to draw the bow’,¹³ Richardson’s ‘feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism’¹⁴ also adjusted its aim to accommodate female flesh. Unlike Flaubert, the martyr of literary style and Platonist, who relentlessly polishes surface beauty into fixed truths, Richardson releases her female subject from her aesthetic prison in order to let ‘contemplated reality [have] for the first time [...] its own say’.¹⁵ Which is not to say that Richardson did not acknowledge the contradictory nature of her project. If writing was ‘the surest means of discovering the truth about one’s own thoughts and beliefs’, her immersive narrative reveals the ‘hundred faces’ of its subject ‘any one of which, the moment it is entrapped in the close mesh of direct statement, summoned its fellows to disqualify it’.¹⁶

¹¹ Walter Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style*, Alfred J. Drake (E-text ed.), (Kindle eBook text from the Macmillan Library Edition, 1910), p. 27.

¹² See Letter to Bryher, 1945.

¹³ A.L. McKenzie (ed.), op. cit, pp.104-5

¹⁴ Dorothy Richardson, ‘Foreword’, *Pilgrimage*, Vol.1 (London: Virago, 1979), p.9.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.10.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Immersion

Observation is based on self-immersion (Walter Benjamin)¹⁷

The idea that Richardson's aesthetic is one of free immersion in the self-conscious stream of thought began as early as J. B. Beresford's introduction to *Pointed Roofs*, where he wrote: 'Miss Richardson is [...] the first novelist who has taken the final plunge; who has neither floated or waded, but gone head under and become part of the human element she has described.'¹⁸ May Sinclair took up the metaphor in her famous article on Richardson in *The Egoist*, 'The Novels of Miss Richardson' (the article where she first applies the phrase 'stream of consciousness' to literature – a phrase Richardson herself disliked): 'She has plunged so neatly and quietly that even admirers of her performance might remain unaware of what it is precisely that she had done'.¹⁹ But the metaphor of immersion was also taken up by Richardson herself in her discussion of the novels of Henry James. Writing to the novelist E.B.C. Jones in September 1921, she compared Jones's novel, *The Singing Captives*, favourably to James's texts. The imagery of the letter is fluid and somewhat tangled as Richardson interweaves her discussion of Jones and James with an account of a film she saw the night before that featured a giant octopus. As she writes, the octopus becomes conflated with the figure of James himself:

all Henry James books are conceived & written in the vasty deep – he a large pale motionless octopus with huge eyes, suddenly throwing out huge tentacles – that yours are, too, but you are not & now never will be, in danger of motionless octopusity – that the difference between you is that his vasty deep was a tank, & he never knew it, yours began as a tank, but is full of holes through which the ocean flows.²⁰

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Experience', in M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (eds), *Selected Writings, Vol.2, 1927-1934*, (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p.553.

¹⁸ J.B. Beresford, 'Introduction', *Pointed Roofs* (London: Duckworth, 1915), p.vii.

¹⁹ May Sinclair, 'The Novels of Miss Richardson', *The Egoist*, 4, (April 1918), 57.

²⁰ Gloria Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press), p.53.

Either realising that the imagery is too difficult to decipher or in response to a request for help from Jones, Richardson follows up the letter with a card that contains a key:

Tank = Drawingroom.

R. the fish who escapes – into a larger tank with more numerous inhabitants.²¹

The drawing room is a frequent reference point in Richardson's discussions of James's work, which she sees as too confined by a limited social world view. R. is Roden Peel, a character in Jones's *The Singing Captives*, who breaks away from the drawing room and the class prejudices of his family by starting a relationship with a typist.²² Richardson would later expand on the idea of the drawing room in a review of Jones's novel, where she describes James's novels as creating a 'shut-in world of advantageously-placed people, guests in a hotel whose being and smooth running are taken for granted'.²³

Plato's Tank

But Richardson's image of James's fictional world as a tank might also be read as a submarine rewriting of Plato's allegory of the cave in Chapter VII of *The Republic*. The allegory needs little introduction. Plato's prisoners sit chained in a cave with their back to the entrance and a blazing fire, which throws shadows onto the back wall. Just as the octopoid Henry James sits in a tank he mistakes for the ocean, the prisoners mistake their cave for the world.²⁴ Just as the prisoners take the shadows and echoes that bounce off the cave walls for life, so James's tank, which in later elaborations becomes a 'resounding chamber', 'box', or a 'softly lit enclosure', takes echoes of the world for reality.²⁵ Enlightenment comes for Plato's prisoners when they are led out of the cave

²¹ Postcard to E.B.C. Jones, pmk. 26 September 1921, British Library.

²² E.B.C. Jones, *The Singing Captives* (London: Richard Cobden-Sanderson, 1921).

²³ Dorothy Richardson, 'The Perforated Tank', *Fanfare*, 1 (15 October 1921), 29.

²⁴ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd Edition, Allan Bloom (ed. and trans.), (USA: Basic Books of Harper Collins, 1991), pp.193-194.

towards the light of the sun, which represents the ideal of Platonic truth. Socrates argues that in his opinion:

[...] in the knowable the last thing to be seen, and that with considerable effort, is the *idea* of the good; but once seen, it must be concluded that this is in fact the cause of all that is right and fair in everything—in the visible it gave birth to light and its sovereign; in the intelligible, itself sovereign, it provided truth and intelligence—and that the man who is going to act prudently in private or in public must see it.²⁶

If Plato's prisoners are released to dry out in the sunshine of truth, Richardson instead abandons her tank for the ocean, opting for total immersion, an option that puts her work at the opposite end of what we might call wet aesthetics. In *The Republic*, only the philosopher-kings plunge back into the cave, and this, as Socrates makes clear to Glaucon, they do as martyrs, sacrificing themselves to the ideal of knowledge. For Richardson, however, a submarine existence in the 'vasty deep' is her preferred option, the medium of water representing a better metaphor for a narrative where truth claims are always 'in play' and in-process.

This messy, unfixed view of the relationship between experience and knowledge is fundamentally anti-Platonist. Despite elements of formal disorientation within *The Tunnel*,²⁷ certain of its images and allusions seem to ground Richardson's reader in a familiar symbolic system – symbols that the young and apprehending

²⁵ See Richardson's, 'Foreword', op. cit, where she describes James as 'a venerable gentleman, a charmed and charming high priest of nearly all the orthodoxies, inhabiting a softly lit enclosure he mistook, until 1914, for the universe' (p.11). Ten years later, in a 1948 letter to Henry Savage, Richardson again refers to James's limited representations of reality, as she complains that *The Ambassadors*, which she greatly admired, represents reality as 'drama in a resounding box' and humanity as 'pitifully adrift in vacuo': see Gloria Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens GA: University of George Press), p.589.

²⁶ *The Republic of Plato*, op. cit, p.196.

²⁷ See for example, Chapter VII of *The Tunnel*, which is written as a single paragraph in the first person, depicting Miriam's psychic, linguistic, and geographic disorientation when she loses her way in London: *Pilgrimage*, Vol.2. (London: Virago Press, 1979), p.136.

Miriam is, at times, eager to understand in absolute terms. For instance, when Miriam emerges from a bicycle tunnel in the countryside, a male passer-by exclaims, ““*Good Lord* – it’s a woman!”” Miriam, eager to assert, at least to herself, her right to independent mobility thinks: ‘Yes. Why not? Why that amazed stupefaction? Trying to rob her of the darkness and the wonderful coming out into the light’.²⁸ Miriam’s understanding of her emergence from the tunnel here (the only place in the chapter-volume where a tunnel is even indirectly referenced) is unmistakably archetypal; as such, she reads it as a clear moment of rebirth or enlightenment: a ‘coming out into the light’ that indirectly recalls the movement of Plato’s prisoners who similarly emerge from the cave’s darkness to the clear enlightenment of the sun. And yet, while Miriam interprets her emergence from this tunnel as symbolic of greater awareness and independence, for Richardson, things are not so simple. As the episode proceeds, the narrative urges caution where overly reductive views of reality are concerned, regardless of whether those views are the unknowing male observer’s or Miriam’s. Of her male observer’s thoughts Miriam hastily concludes: ‘A young lady, taking a bicycle ride in a daylight suburb. That was what she was. That was all he would allow. It’s something in men’ (234). Although Miriam seems cocksure, the reader is not, as s/he is left with the knowledge that Miriam is guilty of the same essentialism to which she objects. Thus, while Miriam may take comfort in fixed Platonic truths, the reader’s delight or *jouissance* is that s/he is denied them every step of the way as the text’s depiction of Miriam’s incomplete understanding of her world encourages its readers to acknowledge the larger epistemological and cultural contingencies surrounding Miriam’s necessarily limited perception of her world.

If *Pilgrimage*’s complex epistemology is in part a riposte to Platonic ideals, the extent to which it is also a gendered critique is underlined in the only overt appearance Plato makes throughout the novel’s thirteen volumes. In *The Tunnel*, Mr Taunton, a clergyman who is considering marriage to Miriam’s friend, the invalid Eleanor Dear, tries to recruit the unmarried Miriam as an

²⁸ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* Vol.2. (London: Virago Press, 1979), p.234. Henceforth, page references in text.

informal domestic help and nurse for his future wife. At a meeting, which appears to be an interview, almost the first thing he says to Miriam is:

‘I have a volume of Plato here.’

‘Oh, yes’, said Miriam doubtfully.

‘Are you familiar with Plato?’

She pondered intensely and rushed in time to prevent his speaking again.

‘I *should* like him, I know – I’ve come across extracts in other books.’ (II, 277)

Taken at face value, Miriam’s response is an admission of ignorance in the face of Mr Taunton’s knowledge. Given what we know about *Pilgrimage* as an experiment in epistemology, however, her words seem more carefully chosen. Her partial knowledge, ‘extracts’, is counterposed to Mr Taunton’s familiarity with the text. As we shall see, Miriam’s incomplete knowledge is one of the things that makes for *Pilgrimage*’s formal difficulty, but that incompleteness does not equate to no knowledge or to a lack of intelligence. And, by this point in her journey, she is also crafty. Her intense pondering, the reader can assume, is as much about how much she wants to admit she knows as how much she actually knows. Later in the conversation, she judicially edits her responses, thinking much more than she says:

You are something of a scholar; but there is a way in which my time is more valuable than yours. There is a way in which it is more right for you to be tied to this woman than for me. Your reading is a habit, like most men’s reading, not a quest. You don’t want it disturbed. (279)

Meeting the Plato-reading Mr Taunton, Miriam sees another male octopus in a tank, and she makes sure to stay clear of its tentacles, a free swimmer in the ocean, a medium that is diametrically opposed to Plato’s source of truth outside the cave. In *The Republic*, the dry truth is represented by the sun which at first blinds the prisoner, but which, once he has become accustomed to its light, opens his eyes to the damp simulacrum of reality he has hitherto

experienced. The watery deep, in contrast to the sun, cannot represent a single truth. It is a medium, not a source, which may explain why Richardson was so unhappy with May Sinclair's use of the phrase 'stream of consciousness' which implies a source, an originary moment of awareness, rather than a continuous state of being.

The image of total immersion suggests such a state of being, where the subject experiences without at first knowing, and then, where knowing that which is already there, although not perhaps in unified form, in 'extracts' like Miriam's knowledge of Plato, comes gradually, and the ability to articulate what you know comes even later. While in *Clear Horizon*, the older Miriam is sanguine about the uncertainty implicit in this experiential philosophy – 'Look after the being and the becoming will look after itself' (IV, 362) – the younger Miriam of *The Tunnel* and *Interim* is not so sure. Steeped in a tumult of professional, intellectual, and artistic stimuli of London, and by the fragmented memory of her mother's recent suicide, Miriam, at times, seeks the simplicity of 'pure truth' or a Platonic ideal, an effort that the narrative itself persistently thwarts.

Recycling her octopoid rendering of James, Richardson applies the metaphor to various other uniquely male threats throughout *Pilgrimage*. In *Interim*, for instance, the avowedly single Miriam compares marriage to the lurking danger of 'motionless octoposity'. While visiting over Christmas, Miriam listens to her former pupil, Grace Broom, describe the suburban family into which she intends to marry. For the newly independent and employed Miriam, Grace's would-be in-laws are a more pernicious version of the Jamesian octopus:

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. They were civilization. (II, 317)

As in the letter to Jones, the imagery is again tangled, though purposefully so. Indeed, the lifelike lifelessness of these distinctly male amoebic cephalopods of civilization reveals twin anxieties about marriage: that it will compromise the independence of Miriam's London life as well as her future as a female artist. Rendered in overtly phallic terms, these one-eyed octopi with their poison-sacs threaten to pull Miriam back onto the surface where she would have to, like Grace, comply with civilisation's rules for women, namely the norms of marriage and family. That Miriam views their poison-excreting 'sacs' and their amoebic asexuality as 'awful' and 'frightful' undoubtedly expresses a fear that such patriarchal social norms will forcibly penetrate the womb of the Bailey Street boarding house room where she is, at this point, free to read and write without intrusion. Earlier, in *The Tunnel*, Miriam expresses a similar concern that her literary endeavours will be corrupted by male intervention: 'Books were poisoned. Art. All the achievements of men were poisoned at the root.' (II, 222). Adhering strictly to Miriam's perceptions, however incomplete, Richardson maintains authorial distance, so it is difficult to say whether these anxieties belong to Richardson as well as Miriam. Nevertheless, and considering the goals she outlines in her 1938 Foreword, we might fairly identify within the preceding passage the beginnings of Richardson's own manifesto, a proposal for a new 'Art' that seeks to privilege and legitimize women's ways of knowing even as it acknowledges (and, through its dense intertextual layering, makes use of) a hierarchical and patriarchal tradition.

Hyperaesthesia

This project was, however, fraught with doubt. Although we cannot attribute the young Miriam's anxieties to Richardson's own, Richardson's letters from this period display an uneasy combination of assurance and uncertainty about her position as a writer. In April 1919, she responded to a letter from Lady Ethel Desborough, who hosted a literary salon. Desborough had written:

Dear Madam, I do hope that you will forgive a letter from a stranger. I have read your four books with very great interest

& admiration, & have just finished *The Tunnel*. The skill with which it is written seems to me to be consummate, but I wonder if you will at all understand a slight sense at the end of being halted & checked? Perhaps this will just make you feel me a most unworthy admirer, & perhaps it comes only from being middle-aged, but the sense of wanting “more” is so persistent that I cannot help expressing it to you? The *mise-en-scène* of life is so admirably, so perfectly given. The setting of the scene puts one’s mind on tiptoe with expectation – but then the promise seems to be withheld? I cannot grasp the mind or body or heart or soul of Miriam, only her sensations; they are so marvellously conveyed that one feels like Stevenson when he read Hazlitt – “I could think that he had been eaves-dropping at the doors of my heart” – only I do wish that you would allow it to be heart, & not only finger-tips eyes & ears! – Of course I know that some most subtle intention lies behind, only I feel baffled in trying to guess what it is?²⁹

Richardson responded:

Thank you for your letter. It may perhaps be answered in part by the remaining volumes of the series; I do not know. I agree almost entirely with your impatience with Miriam. She is so far nearly all hyperaesthetic senses. But there are glimpses of other aspects; a tussling mind; & solitudes with regard to some of her fellows, her mother, criminals, servants, strangers seen sympathetically in flashes. Still, these things do not come first with her so far certainly. Nor perhaps will they ever to the extent demanded by the view of life as entirely an affair of the heart. But if I can carry through there is something that should emerge, which will carry with it many other things blossoming fully in their right place. Appreciations & objections such as those in your kind letter help enormously the task of carrying through.³⁰

²⁹ Letter to Dorothy Richardson, 16 April 1919, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

³⁰ Letter to Ethel Desborough, 30 April 1919, Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies County Hall, Hertford.

In contrast to Flaubert's aestheticism, Miriam's 'hyperaesthesia' is an attempt to evade existing cultural, social, and sexual hierarchies by insisting on the legitimacy of the feminine voice. The text's rich sensorium of the visual, the musical, and the haptic, are only perceived through Miriam: the reader only sees what its protagonist, Miriam, sees, hears what she hears, feels what she feels. In principle, the narrative is only as self-aware as Miriam herself becomes self aware. This new '*repartage du sensible*' differs from that of Flaubert, but also from the aestheticism of Huysmans' protagonist, Des Esseintes, in *A Rebours* and his imitators in England, such as Dorian Gray. Where Des Esseintes or Gray submerge themselves in sensation to the point where a distinctive sense of self disappears, replaced instead with a fragmented identity – multiple selves – Richardson is concerned to reach back to the sensate self at its first inchoate moment of apprehension.

Yet, in other ways, the novel's registering of Miriam's hyperaesthesia is comparable to Flaubert's desire to find in detail a 'pure harmony of sensations'. As Richardson's reply suggests, it was at least her hope that as the narrative progressed, it would become more accessible; because Miriam would gradually become more self-aware and therefore more able to articulate her hitherto unmediated impressions. Her early inchoate moments of apprehension would start to bear fruit: 'many things blossoming fully in their right place'. In a letter written on 12 May 1921 to E.B.C. Jones, by which time two more volumes had appeared, she seems to think that this is beginning to happen:

This business of compression,³¹ so essential, if the unity & continuity of consciousness is to be conveyed, gets of course more troublesome as the material accumulates, though at the same time it is made a little easier by Miriam's increasing articulateness. It is this last factor, I think, that must be the

³¹ The term 'compression' is probably a reference to Sinclair's essay: 'Her novels are novels of an extraordinary compression and of an extenuation more extraordinary still.', op. cit, p.58.

“explanation” of your impression of a general increase of lucidity in the books.³²

Nonetheless, an account of the aesthetic of limits found in *Pilgrimage*'s early volumes can only partially account for what is a voluminous, limitless, unending (actually not finished at Richardson's death, although, like the incomplete *A la recherche du temps perdu*, it does have an ending) text. There is, in *Pilgrimage*, a productive contradiction between the emergence of a distinctive, unique, subjectivity (the feminine and gradually emerging feminist (modernist) subject in process) and the narrative's web of allusions, its rich intertextuality, its multiple references to the cultural ocean in which Miriam swims, 'hyperaesthetic', but only dimly aware (at first) of what lies beyond her myopic vision, her untutored ear, her fumbling touch.³³ A useful distinction can be made between Miriam's perceptions, what Desborough describes as 'only finger-tips & eyes and ears', and an alternative concept of experience which is closer to the inclusive concept used by Raymond Williams or Walter Benjamin's definition of *Erfahrung*. The latter probably comes closest to Richardson's idea of 'contemplated reality'.³⁴ In contrast, the young Miriam is all perception, 'hyperaesthetic'. As she gains experience she gradually achieves the ability to consider and reflect upon her immediate perceptions, and on what Richardson in her letter describes as 'many other things blossoming': the larger part of the culture, which the young Miriam perceives, but does not yet fully understand.

In this respect, set against her ebullient hyperaesthesia, it is easy to see why, in *Interim*, Miriam is so disturbed by the passionless productivity of Grace Broom's in-laws as amoebic creatures with enormous one-eyed heads. Though 'unaware', the cephalopodic creature is not unintelligent. Indeed, as Miriam imagines it, the large-headed organism is linguistically skilled, finding 'easy fluent

³² Fromm (ed.), op. cit, p.49.

³³ See Beresford op. cit: 'I saw her in typescript, as a blind creature feeling her way with sensitive fingers and reading the unseen by the emotions of her mind', p.vii.

³⁴ Richardson, 'Foreword', op. cit, p.10.

words for everything'. Yet, despite its fluency, Miriam distrusts this creature precisely because its easy words reveal nothing of its interior: in this instance, words are mere artifice – beautiful but vapid. Thus, Miriam concludes that '[t]he surface made them, not they the surface; rules' and that '[t]hey were martyrs, with empty lives' (II, 317). Richardson's words and narrative style, however, are not rule or surface bound. Instead, Richardson actively immerses herself and her readers in a narrative whose various literary, religious, political and cultural references defy authoritative, or surface, readings. Insisting on the multiple and contradictory identities of the modern individual, Richardson is no literary martyr seeking truth through the beauty of pure literature. Quite the opposite: *Pilgrimage* – whether through abrupt shifts in tense and point-of-view, innovative use of punctuation, or incorporation of blank space – seeks to pollute, rather than purify, its narrative waters. To that end, Richardson wants her readers to co-construct narrative meaning in a process that, as she says of *Finnegans Wake*, invites readers 'to plunge, provisionally here and there; enter the text and look innocently about'.³⁵ For Richardson, this mode of reading results in 'sheer delight', a feminist formulation that prefigures Kristeva's equally immersive notion of the *jouissance* achieved by and within texts that demand such interplay between reader and writer.³⁶

Writing against the idea of language as a 'unifying tool, one which totalizes and equalizes', Kristeva posits language as relational, as non-binary, and therefore more able to contain the plurality of the female (and feminist) experience. In order to achieve a more pluralistic view of feminine experience and language, she suggests:

[...] the role of what is usually called 'aesthetic practices must increase [...] [i]n order to bring out the singularity of each person and, even more, along with the multiplicity of every person's possible identifications [...] the *relativity of his/her*

³⁵ Dorothy Richardson, 'Adventure for Readers', in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) p.428.

³⁶ Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), p.210.

symbolic as well as biological existence, according to the variation in his/her specific symbolic capacities.³⁷

Like Richardson, who imagines that Miriam's hyperaesthesia will bear multiple beautiful truths, Kristeva believes that aesthetics will allow for 'the possibility of *jouissance*, for various productions, for a life made up of both challenges and differences'.³⁸ Thus, and rather than asserting any fixed certainties, *Pilgrimage*, as its title implies, places value on the search rather than the destination. That the entire novel ends in a question seems itself indicative of the way in which the text refuses singularity and looks beyond the confines of its own construction. In this way, Richardson highlights the relational and, thereby, shifting nature of female experience and of language itself.

Politics

The political stakes of Richardson's wet aesthetics become a little clearer in her recently rediscovered correspondence with the First World War poet, Robert Nichols. The letters are of great interest to Richardson scholars because there is very little other correspondence from this part of her life, and hardly any material where she discusses the early composition of *Pilgrimage*. Only six letters from 1917-1918 survive: five letters from Richardson to Nichols and one from Nichols to Richardson. Nichols had been invalided out of the army in 1915 with shell-shock. He was treated by Henry Head, the neurologist and poet, and it was probably Head who recommended that he read *Pointed Roofs*. Richardson was twenty years older than Nichols, but both were new writers. In 1917, Richardson had published the first three 'Chapter-volumes' of *Pilgrimage* and she was working on the fourth, *The Tunnel*. Nichols had published *Invocation: war poems and others* in 1915 and *Ardours and Endurances, also A Faun's Holiday & Poems and Fantasies* in 1917. The war poems from *Ardours and Endurances* were republished separately under the title of *The Assault* in 1918. There was a vast difference in life experience, Nichols had been to public

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, p.211.

school, Winchester, and had started at Oxford before joining up. Richardson had had an unorthodox education in a school run on Ruskinite principles in South London, but had had to leave at seventeen, because of her father's financial situation, to become a teacher and then a governess. Subsequently she had worked as a receptionist in a dental practice in Harley Street, for a pound a week.

In Richardson's letters to Nichols, we see her working through ideas of authority in relation to literature, education, gender, and philosophy; but, also present, if unarticulated, is another, hidden term, democracy: the entrance onto the stage of European politics of mass collective action. It is against this emergent and dangerous idea of democracy as a site of linguistic and social instability, that *Pilgrimage's* struggles with textual authority should ultimately be judged. In 1917, when Nichols first wrote to her, Richardson was the more established writer, but she responded with the self-doubt and self-deprecation characteristic of her letters at this early stage in her career.

Your letter was more than welcome.

It came when I was beginning volume IV³⁹ & it gave me just the sort of encouragement I needed. For Volume III⁴⁰ coming out, I fear very soon now, is very bad indeed.

I agree with D^r Head in preferring P[ointed].R[oofs]. – as a work of art. I think it has a beauty that is lacking in Backwater – though there's better stuff in the later Volume. But P.R. was written at a stretch during a solitary winter in Cornwall, before the war. Backwater in circumstances of great difficulty in an attic in London & Honeycomb in the same place in circumstances of even greater difficulty which last winter's weather did nothing to ameliorate.

This is not a complaint. But I suffer so bitterly in the sense of the difference between those books as I "saw" them & the final result that I cannot resist an attempt at a part "explanation"; & I hope if you read Honeycomb you will

³⁹ *The Tunnel* (1919)

⁴⁰ *Honeycomb* (1917)

judge it gently & not allow it to give me a permanent bad mark.⁴¹

If the letter points to the difficulty of rendering the truth of experience as it is perceived, Richardson's response to Nichols' poems shows a comparable critical rigour with regard to his war experience. She wrote:

I find it difficult to get [your] war poems as poems at present – they are sheer experience & one cannot detach oneself – also one is perpetually distracted by the sense of how, for anyone who has faced it & got through to that moment of balanced clarity – cool madness – , the world must be forever & under all circumstances ablaze. Moreover I do not “understand” the world of poesie. It gets me, in all kinds of ways – but I'm no judge – as ‘poetry’ however, for me, the Pierrot poem comes first. I quarrel sometimes with your ‘philosophy’ – but there I am going to venture the bold suggestion that you are to some extent still entangled in a way of looking at things, a ‘classical way’ that is partly the result of “p. s.” & “u” education & experience!⁴²

Richardson's comments on the war are of interest for a number of reasons. First, because no other commentary on the war has survived.⁴³ Second, because of what they say about her understanding of perception and experience. In the letter, Richardson protests a combination of disqualification and lack of qualification. In *Pilgrimage* the absence of any mention of the war is perfectly consistent with a sequence that ends around the time Richardson started writing it, 1912, and which refuses scrupulously to admit anything except that which Miriam could have perceived. On the other hand, few would disagree that the war informs the temporal experiments of contraction and expansion, of disruption, fragmentation, reconstruction and re-composition, found in *Pilgrimage* and other long modernist novels, such as *À la*

⁴¹ Letter to Nichols, 1917, British Library, uncatalogued.

⁴² Letter to Nichols, 15 November 1917, British Library, uncatalogued.

⁴³ Although see her use of 1914 as the date when Henry James left his ‘softly lit enclosure’ in fn.25. above.

recherche du temps perdu or *Ulysses*, which were begun before and then continued after the years 1914-1918.

We don't even really know what Richardson's attitude to the war was, although comments in her column for *The Dental Record*, written during the war, her interest in the Quakers and support for her friend, the anarchist Charles Daniels, when he was prosecuted for publishing an allegedly pacifist novel, suggests the opposite of militarism.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, two things, at least, are clear in what she writes. First, a respect for an immediate experience, which she cannot hope to comprehend without herself having been in combat. This is the kind of respect that she would want to be accorded to the uniqueness of Miriam's sensations. And second, the recognition of the difficulty of putting that shock experience into artistic form. In a much later letter to the poet, Henry Savage, written on 2 September 1951, Richardson casts this difficulty in relation to Plato's insistence that poets could not be the philosopher-kings, or guardians, of his republic. She hypothesizes:

Plato, to pass on, in excluding the poets, as guardians, was surely merely expressing his awareness of the limitations of art, of literature, of any form of expression less than a life.⁴⁵

In her attempt to find a form of expression that is 'less than a life' but perhaps approximating its complexities, Richardson, as she makes clear to Nichols, is wary of overly schooled approaches. Thus, while she feels unable to comment on the war experience itself, she does feel able to criticise not the immediate apprehension of war (the experience that Walter Benjamin argued leaves the combatants impoverished, having lost something, not gained⁴⁶) but its processing, through philosophy in inverted commas and classical myth, a process which she sees as being limited by the traditional structures of the English ruling class, 'p.s' and 'u': public school and university.

⁴⁴ See her letter to Walpole thanking him for his gift of money to help Daniels's family, 1918/1919, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center.

⁴⁵ Fromm (ed.), p.673.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds), *Selected Writings, Vol.3, 1935-1938*, (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2002), pp.142-143.

What are the alternative models of feminine aestheticism suggested by Richardson? None explicitly, but there is in the words ‘cool madness’, which is taken from the final line of Nichols’ poem, ‘The Assault’, an implicit alternative. Against the refusal to judge the experience of war, the incorporation of that experience – in extracts – into Richardson’s own prose recognises that in addition to being a unique, individual experience, it has also been absorbed into the collective culture. We are back to the contradiction at the heart of *Pilgrimage*’s form: between immediate experience as a unique constellation of sensation perceptions and our suspension in a cultural ocean in which the long history of human experience is constantly being made and remade, but the full import of which the subject (of modernity) is largely unconscious, at least at first.

Richardson criticises the way Nichols’ poetry pays its dues to classical symbols of what knowledge is, counterposing her own more subtle, but also more opaque, use of textual and formal allusion, against which raw experience is tested and out of which knowledge is consciously constructed. We might talk about a distinction between a notion of self and a concept of the critical or reflective self.⁴⁷ This might be what Richardson means by feminine ‘egoism’, which is not selfishness,⁴⁸ hence her description of D. H. Lawrence as a ‘great sad insufficiently egoistic little egoist’, but a value given to the original apprehending self, one which is receptive to, but not necessarily comprehending, of past, present, and future: ‘Look after the being and the becoming will look after itself’ (IV, 362). This hyperaesthetic self, finding inherent interest, as opposed to Flaubertian ennui, in the everyday knows that the ‘classical’ is also part of the everyday. Just as Joyce appropriates Homer’s *Odyssey* and reshapes it to suit a modern Dublin, so *Pilgrimage* takes up myriad intertexts – Plato and James among them – and in re-presenting them through the thoughts

⁴⁷ See for example in the letter to Savage, cited above, where Richardson distinguishes between: ‘I & Me, or better [...] I & Myself’: Fromm (ed.), op cit, pp.672.

⁴⁸ “love of self is not self-admiration, not “narcissism”. For the narcissist loves neither himself nor others’: ibid, p.673.

and perceptions of Miriam, attempts to undo hierarchical designations such as 'high culture' and release literature from the 'entangled way of looking at things' that she associates with the restrictive prisons of schools, such as 'p.s.' and 'u'.

Returning to Rancière's argument that aesthetics is always also about politics, in her exchange with Nichols, as well as in *Pilgrimage*, there is an implicit debate about the nature of a democratic polity and the function of the arts therein. Richardson's struggle with textual hierarchies can also be cast as a demand for a democratic interaction not just with her work, but with her world. If again Plato is again an implicit rather than an explicit reference point in this debate, in her journalism, Richardson explicitly engaged with early twentieth-century debates about democracy, which then as now, was a disputed term. Negative attitudes toward democracy corresponded to what Jacques Rancière describes in *The Hatred of Democracy* as 'the reign of the limitless desire of individuals in modern society'. Interestingly, his definition closely echoes Richardson's gendered critique in her article 'Women and the Future', published in *Vanity Fair* in 1924, where she criticises those who claim to 'see ahead a democratised world, overrun by hordes of inferior beings, organized by majorities for material ends; with primitive, uncivilizable woman rampant in the midst'.⁴⁹ Importantly, such hyperbolic images of ignorant masses and wild women running amok alert us to the risible paranoia of those anti-democratists who fear women's civic participation. Far from wild, Richardson's democratic woman, the 'womanly woman' of this same essay, exists 'in the deep current of eternity [...] because she thinks flowingly, with her feelings'.⁵⁰ This modern woman's protean fluidity coupled with her ability to think with feelings – both her senses as well as her emotions – ensures her successful entry into the public sphere. Recalling Kristeva's semiotic *chora*, a term borrowed from Plato's *Timaeus* 'to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases',⁵¹ Richardson's aesthetics as well as her politics absolutely resist fixed categorization and,

⁴⁹ Dorothy Richardson, 'Women in the Future', in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism*, op. cit, p.413.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

instead, insist on the primacy of initial contact with the world through feelings as opposed to language. In seeking to record the *chora* – the fluid and preverbal self – *Pilgrimage* sets itself an impossible task, which could account for Miriam's distrust of words throughout. Nevertheless, Richardson does find, through her reworking of various 'classical' texts, a way, if not fully to convey the experience of the sensate and non-judging self, at least to disentangle her art from the kinds of ordered hierarchies of literary reference to which she objects in Nichols' poetry.

Pilgrimage attempts to stay true to an idea of experience for those like her who, as she writes to Nichols in 1918, 'have not had a shaped education & ordered life to get rid of[,] having lived in a various jumbled up hap-hazard way, stumbling on things I wanted'. Here, the description encompasses a different model of learning: one where the experiential self interacts with culture, rather than being shaped and ordered by it. Or, as Declan Kiberd argues with regard to Stephen Dedalus:

At the start of *Ulysses*, Stephen suffers from a self-inflicted wound. He is lonely, depressed, and melancholy mainly because, like so many intellectuals formed in the 1890s, he has chosen art over life.⁵²

Richardson's Miriam, for all her many faults, does not make the same mistake. While she may suffer bouts of despondency, in general Miriam embraces all of what she finds around her, making art not for its sake alone but rather for the sake of life. In turn, Miriam's boldness – her ability to enter into A.B.C. teashops and conversations with London's intelligensia with equal confidence – ensures the increased potency of her voice within a culture that, though not necessarily ready for the full expression of it, is starting to show a potential to be reshaped by it. *Pilgrimage* was an attempt to step out of the parlour or drawing room into a larger democratic sphere. If the novel doesn't fully resolve the

⁵¹ Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, op. cit, p.93.

⁵² Declan Kiberd, *Ulysses and Us: The Art of Everyday Living* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), pp.348-349.

contradiction between the privileging of Miriam's 'sheer experience', the experience of the potential, but currently disenfranchised, female democratic citizen, and its integration into a democratic polity where it might take its place in a more open and democratic culture, it does at least point a way towards that goal.

Nichols seems to have responded to Richardson's criticism with some self-criticism. She replied in Beckettian terms, suggesting that he might be able to fail better:

For although you have not put it yet into words you know that you are real & that the famous figments art & love & god are expressions of the reality within. Every 'thing' fails. But every 'thing' is an amazing extra added to 'everything'; & each brings its flash of revelation. A little further on, nothing fails.⁵³

This is more optimistic than Beckett and perhaps too optimistic about her own work. *Pilgrimage* for all its flashes of revelation incorporates failure into its method and the troubled history of its reception suggests that even now the hoped-for moment when 'nothing fails' has not yet been reached – although it might plausibly be argued that this is because the democracy it demanded did not, and still does not, exist. What is clear is that *Pilgrimage* was an attempt to offer a new '*repartage du sensible*', one that challenges what Rancière describes as 'police', politics as a policed order, where everyone is defined by their place, or lack of place. That negative conception of overly-simplistic and even authoritarian aesthetic and cultural order is vividly rendered by Richardson's submarine tank, in which both James's characters and his readers are imprisoned, cut off from that ocean into which she had, as May Sinclair put it, 'disappeared while [her readers were] still waiting for the splash'.⁵⁴

⁵³ Letter to Nichols, 27 August 1918, British Library, uncatalogued.

⁵⁴ Sinclair, op. cit, p.57.