

## DOROTHY RICHARDSON'S *PILGRIMAGE* AND THE SOCIETY OF THE STREET

*Lorraine Sim*

At six o'clock the front door closed behind her, shutting her out into the multitudinous pattering of heavy rain. With the sight of the familiar street shortened by darkness to a span lit faintly by dull rain-shrouded lamps, her years of daily setting forth into London came about her more clearly than ever before as a single unbroken achievement. Jubilantly she reassured, facing the invitation flowing towards her from single neighbourhoods standing complete and independent, in inexhaustibly various loveliness through the procession of night and day, linked by streets and by-ways living in her as mood and reverie, that to have the freedom of London was a life in itself.<sup>1</sup>

In the above passage from *Deadlock* (1921), the sixth volume in the *Pilgrimage* series, Dorothy Richardson describes Miriam Henderson's reflections as she stands at the threshold of her place of employment, a dental surgery at Wimpole Street, about to walk home through the streets of West London after a long day's work. This passage is representative of Miriam's remarkable and unconventional conception of, and relationship to, the street and city in *Pilgrimage*. By conventional standards the prospect of the street here is unappealing: it is winter in London, 1903,<sup>2</sup> shortly after the New Year. It is cold, wet and dark. Yet to Miriam the streets and the surrounding neighbourhoods are welcoming and invite her into their society. Their 'various loveliness' is inexhaustible, their network of 'streets and by-ways' encoded as a part of her own being and affective map: 'living in her as mood and reverie'.

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, Intro. Gillian E. Hanscombe, 4 vols. (London: Virago, 1979), Vol.3, p.106. Henceforth pages in text.

<sup>2</sup> For the best estimate of the dates during which Miriam's pilgrimage takes place, see George H. Thomson, *A Reader's Guide to Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage* (Greensboro NC: ELT Press, 1996), pp.17-56.

Miriam's reflection that her 'daily setting forth into London' is her 'single unbroken achievement' follows on from a scene in which she is taking tea with Mrs Orly and others at the surgery, attempting to feign sympathy for the Christmas-time dramas Mrs Orly is relating to her, and reflecting on the constraints and limitations of family and social life: 'They were all so hemmed in, so closely grouped that they had no free edges, and were completely, publicly, at the mercy of the things that happened' (III, 105–6). This section from *Deadlock* describes a central tension of the novel as a whole: Miriam's sense that in order to realise her own identity she must remain independent of any relationships that might threaten her autonomy or force her into the kind of normative social roles that she feels would be akin to an act of bad faith. Consequently, Miriam repeatedly turns to the society of the street rather than to other people for companionship. While the term 'society' generally refers to association and fellowship with 'one's fellow men [sic]' (and in some cases with animals), as I will discuss below, in *Pilgrimage* Miriam imagines the street not only as a companion but as a part of her own being, that is, as connected to her in kind.<sup>3</sup>

A considerable amount of scholarship on *Pilgrimage* has focused on the importance of different spaces – such as Miriam's private rooms and the city of London – to Miriam's emerging sense of identity as a New Woman in Britain at the turn of the century.<sup>4</sup> As Elisabeth Bronfen argues, Miriam's identity-formation is fundamentally shaped by her passage through, and experiences

<sup>3</sup> C. T. Onions (ed.), *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), Vol.1, p.2040.

<sup>4</sup> The studies most relevant to the present analysis are Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jean Radford, *Dorothy Richardson* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.44–65; Elisabeth Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text*, trans. Victoria Appelbe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); and Yvonne Wong, 'The Self in London's Spaces: Miriam's Dwelling and Undwelling in *Pilgrimage*', *Pilgrimages: The Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 3 (2010), 31–52. See also Abbie Garrington, 'Touching Dorothy Richardson: Approaching *Pilgrimage* as a Haptic Text,' *Pilgrimages: The Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 1 (2008), 74–96.

within, different spaces and places. Scholars including Deborah Parsons and Jean Radford have observed that Richardson's account of the city in *Pilgrimage* departs from canonical representations in male modernist writers and nineteenth-century discourses of urban modernity to the extent that Richardson figures Miriam's relationship to London in largely positive and enabling terms. London in *Pilgrimage* is, as Jean Radford observes, a '[c]ity with a difference' that sits in stark contrast to the anti-urban sentiment and dystopian figurations of cities such as London and other cities that were prevalent from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Analyses of urban space in *Pilgrimage* have tended to discuss Miriam's experience of 'London' or 'the city' in general. That is, the various sites that comprise the city – such as streets, squares, cafes, clubs, shops, parks, omnibuses and so on – are often discussed collectively or relationally. For example, Elisabeth Bronfen includes streets in the category of London's 'exterior spaces' (along with boroughs and parks) and incorporates her analysis of the street into a broader discussion of Miriam's relationship to London (for example, as companion and interlocutor).<sup>6</sup> These various urban spaces are of course quite different, as is Miriam's relationship to them and the relative amount of attention they are afforded by Miriam and within the confines of the novel. The present essay focuses specifically on Miriam's relationship to the physical streets of London; the pavements, roads and adjacent shopfronts and buildings. This focus is motivated by the fact that the street is one of the privileged sites in the novel (urban or otherwise). It is afforded a

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<sup>5</sup> Radford, p.62. Negative encodings of the city from the mid-Victorian period onwards assumed various forms in both literature and social investigative studies. The city of London was commonly portrayed as a space of vice, physical danger, moral decline and disorder (particularly in London's poorer East End districts), as well as an environment that induced feelings of alienation and a loss of community. For a discussion of the 'literary construct of the metropolis as a dark, powerful, and seductive labyrinth' in literary and sociological writings of the late-nineteenth century see Judith R.Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian England* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p.17.

<sup>6</sup> Bronfen suggests that these 'exterior spaces' of London are 'perceived as [...] open, free, exciting and mysterious', and as spaces of 'movement and discoveries', p.20.

considerable amount of textual space, is a lived space of particular significance and value to Miriam throughout the novel, and her relationship to it is multifaceted and very unconventional for the period.

Through a close reading of selected passages from the middle ‘city’ volumes of the novel, I will examine the various forms or modalities that Miriam’s relationship to the street assumes – ontological, inter-subjective, epistemological and affective – foregrounding how the street takes on a central existential value in her life. This essay builds on previous analyses by Parsons, Radford and Bronfen to the extent that it foregrounds Miriam’s positive ‘city consciousness’.<sup>7</sup> As she seeks, through the musings of her protagonist, to challenge and rewrite patriarchal discourses on the ‘nature’ and possibilities of woman, so too Richardson effectively rewrites the ontology and phenomenology of the street. The present analysis differs from previous studies in terms of focus, in that it centres on Miriam’s relationship to the street rather than the city per se, or crowds, or cultural models of flânerie, although my analysis will refer to the two latter topics where relevant.

A further reason for my focus on *Pilgrimage* and the street is that the street assumes a privileged place in cultural histories and theories of the everyday, and *Pilgrimage* is of course centrally concerned with the realm of daily life and ordinary experience, particularly how new structures and forms of daily life (such as office work and independent living) were opening up for middle-class women from the late-nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> For critics including Maurice Blanchot and Ben Highmore the street is the quintessential site of everyday modernity.<sup>9</sup> In ‘Everyday Speech’,

<sup>7</sup> Parsons, p.7; Radford, p.62.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of representations and modes of dailiness in *Pilgrimage* see Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.59-91.

<sup>9</sup> In his analysis of the intersections between concepts of the everyday and modernity, Ben Highmore observes: ‘[i]t will become evident, as this book progresses, that the masculinist perspective predominates: it is the street rather than the home that is seen as the privileged sphere of everyday life’, Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London, Routledge: 2002), p.12.

Blanchot contends that if the everyday is anywhere ‘[i]t is in the street’. Everydayness ‘belongs first of all to the dense presence of great urban centres’, as it is within these ‘admirable deserts’ that the experience of the everyday overtakes us.<sup>10</sup> Blanchot’s characterisation of the street is a familiar one in terms of male-authored accounts of the city. He sees it as a site of anonymity and individualism – a space within which the individual exists outside of the realms of specificity, the ‘true and false’ and responsibility: ‘the man in the street is fundamentally irresponsible; while having always seen everything, he is witness to nothing’.<sup>11</sup> People pass us by ‘unknown, visible-invisible, representing only the anonymous “beauty” of faces and the anonymous “truth” of people essentially destined to pass by, without a truth proper to them and without distinctive traits’.<sup>12</sup> Miriam’s account of the street deviates from Blanchot’s characterisation in a few key ways. The first relates to modes of attention: what it is that Miriam notices in the course of her urban perambulations. As a modernist flâneuse, Miriam is a keen observer of her urban environment and inwardly critical of her fellow pedestrians, who exhibit what Georg Simmel coined as the ‘blasé attitude’; ‘the trooping succession of masked life-moulded forms’ with ‘unobservant eyes’, as Miriam describes it in *Revolving Lights* (III, 240).<sup>13</sup> However, unlike the male flâneur whose gaze tends to focus on the crowd (Blanchot’s ‘faces’ and ‘people’) – and particularly striking women within it – Miriam’s observations tend to centre on the physical streets themselves (pavements, buildings, shop fronts, the quality of light and so on) thereby removing (and herself avoiding) the power dynamic that is so

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Blanchot, ‘Everyday Speech’, *Yale Journal of French Studies*, 73 (1987), 12-20; p.17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.17.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.18.

<sup>13</sup> For Simmel, as for Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin, the transition from the pre-modern to modern world posed all kinds of challenges to the subject’s psychic life and required various forms of psychic adaptation and protection. In ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (1903) Simmel contended that the sensory overstimulation integral to modern life precipitated a condition of nervous stress comparable to that of the neurasthenic, or conversely, an attitude of indifference which he termed the ‘blasé attitude’; Georg Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds), *Simmel on Culture* (London: Sage, 1997), p.178.

central to the gaze of the middle-class, male flâneur. As I will discuss, the conventional subject-object dichotomy as it is constructed in traditional male-authored models of flânerie becomes transformed under Richardson's/Miriam's gaze. Secondly, while Miriam's experience of the street coincides with Blanchot's characterisation of it as a site of anonymity (one which Miriam values), it is not encoded as a site of individualism or emotional and social anomie. Miriam may, for the most part, remain aloof from her fellow pedestrians but she becomes literally and figuratively interconnected with the streets themselves. Therefore, as one of the most detailed and innovative explorations of ordinary experience and everyday life in modernist literature, Richardson's representations of Miriam's 'daily setting forth' (III, 106) into the streets of London not only comprise a significant intervention in cultural histories of gender and urban space but also critical and cultural histories of modernity and the everyday.

*I am part of the dense smooth clean paving stone*<sup>14</sup>

Throughout *Pilgrimage*, Miriam's positive city consciousness is aligned with West London, specifically the streets and squares between the British Museum and the Euston Road. This is the area within which she lives and works from the start of the fourth volume, *The Tunnel* (1919).<sup>15</sup> She first moves to London in about 1896 at the height of the fin-de-siècle, a cultural milieu and mood which permeates the middle volumes of *Pilgrimage* such as *The Tunnel*. In general, Miriam's perceptions of the streets of West London lie in stark contrast to her characterisations of North London which she typically associates with homogeneity, ugliness and a constraining middlebrow culture: 'Here was the wilderness, the undissembling soul of north London, its harsh unvarying all-embracing oblivion' (II, 313). Indeed, this is the comparative framework that Yvonne Wong adopts in her Heideggerian analysis of space in the novel, contending that Miriam achieves a state of dwelling in Central London (which Wong aligns with feelings of

<sup>14</sup> Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, Vol.1, p.416.

<sup>15</sup> At this stage of the novel, Miriam is working as a dental secretary at a surgery in Wimpole Street and renting a room at a boarding house in Tansley Street run by Mrs Bailey.

security, belonging and identification) and remains in an alienated condition of undwelling during her time in North London.<sup>16</sup> While this is certainly true for much of the novel, one of the first scenes in *Pilgrimage* which deals with the theme of Miriam finding her – in quite literal terms – footing on the streets, and in which she acquires a sense of the possibilities that the city presents to her, occurs when she is walking through North London in the second volume of the series, *Backwater* (1916). At this stage of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam is working at a small school in Banbury Park, North London. Finding herself increasingly exhausted towards the end of the winter term, Miriam is advised by her doctor to get more fresh air, so she starts to take afternoon walks between school and tea-time (I, 279). Initially, she walks in a nearby park but finds that the pleasure and ‘reality’ (I, 279) that she had obtained from this space leaves her – the companionship with nature’s beauty breaks down:

Looking up uneasily into the forest of leaves above her head she found them strange. She walked quickly back into the sunlight, gazing reproachfully at the trees. There they were as she had always known them; but between them and herself was her governess’s veil [...] The warm comforting communicative air was round her, but she could not recover its secret (I, 279).

In the following days she struggles with the ‘empty vistas’ of the park and momentarily imagines that her loneliness and anomie might be resolved through heterosexual romance (possibly marriage), as she watches the ‘figure of a man’ walking towards her through the park: ‘For a moment her heart cried out to him. If he would come straight on and, understanding, would walk into her life and she could face things knowing that he was there, the light would come back and would stay until the end’ (I, 280). But Miriam knows that this would be an act of bad faith: ‘she turned away and dragged her shamed heavy limbs rapidly towards home’ (I, 280). At this stage of her pilgrimage, neither marriage nor nature will provide Miriam with the companionship or sense of ‘reality’ she seeks. Thus the subsequent passage (which is set a little later, in early May), sees Miriam walking through the streets of

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<sup>16</sup> Wong, op. cit, p.37.

North London, an experience that while initially confrontational brings her a fraction closer to her urban identity as well as the scene of reading/writing.

Approaching the railway station on the way to the shops, Miriam finds herself walking against the heavy flow of peak-hour pedestrian traffic and initially feels herself out of place: ‘Hard intent faces, clashing umbrellas, the harsh snarling monotone of the North London voice, gave her the feeling of being an intruder’ (I, 280). Yet she persists ‘against the tide’ and soon finds herself ‘in a quiet street [...] looking into a shop window’ at packets of notepaper and then notices a sign advertising a ‘Circulating Library’ (I, 280–1). In this shop Miriam rediscovers books deemed taboo for her as a young woman (‘Ouida’s books’), realises that out of the confines of the family home she is now free to read whatever she chooses, and begins to indulge in the pleasures of late-night reading. Through this she rediscovers the ‘refuge of silence and books’, her ‘intimate self’, and the promise latent within her own hands (I, 282):

[I]t was herself, her own familiar secretly happy and rejoicing self – not dead. Her hands lying on the coverlet knew it. They were again at these moments her own old hands, holding very firmly to things that no one might touch or even approach too nearly, things, everything, the great thing that would some day communicate itself to someone through these secret hands with the strangely thrilling finger-tips. (I, 282–3)

In this episode from *Backwater*, the crowd is presented as an obstacle, adversary and challenge whereas the street itself functions as a site of opening and possibility. Miriam’s determination to walk against the tide of human traffic flowing from a railway station in North London not only symbolises the ways in which she will insist on pursuing her own path and refuse the conventional feminine roles and behaviours expected of women of her time, it also anticipates the central role that the street, and the experiences it offers, assumes in her passage towards the scene of writing.

The second example also comes from one of the earlier volumes of *Pilgrimage*, *Honeycomb* (1917), and is representative of the way in which Richardson quite pointedly dissociates Miriam's relationship to the street from the conventional middle-class, gendered activity of shopping, instead foregrounding a relationship that is inter-subjective, whereby Miriam imagines the street to be a part of her own being or ontology. That is, rather than being in or on the street, Miriam frequently feels herself to be a part of it, an experience that recurs throughout the middle volumes of the novel. Chapter six of *Honeycomb* describes one of Miriam's perambulations around the West End, walking along Regent Street and eventually making her way to a nearby newspaper shop where she writes a letter to her friend Bob Greville. The chapter is fragmented and impressionistic, detailing Miriam's close attention to the streets and buildings and the sensations and feelings her urban surroundings elicit in her: 'The West End street ... grey buildings rising on either side, angles sharp against the sky ... softened angles of buildings against other buildings' (I, 416, original ellipses). She imagines the pavement to be not only an aesthetic space but a sacred one, 'The pavement of heaven' (I, 416). The pavement is also likened to a kind of life force, '[...]ife streamed up from the close dense stone', which becomes part of her own being, 'I am part of the dense smooth clean paving stone' (I, 416). The street elevates her mood: '[w]ith every footstep she felt she could fly [...] walk along the radiant pavement of sunlit Regent Street, for ever' (I, 416–7), and leads to a sense of expansion of her being:

The edge had gone from the keenness of the light. The street was a happy, sunny, simple street – small. She was vast. She could gather up the buildings in her arms and push them away, clearing the sky ... a strange darkling, and she would sleep. She felt drowsy, a drowsiness in her brain and limbs and great strength, and hunger.

The adjectives that Miriam assigns to the street here – such as 'clean', 'radiant', and 'happy' – are a counterpoint to conventional characterisations of the street as dirty, dull (the colour of asphalt) and, of course, inanimate and impersonal; for example the

'blackened', 'sawdust-trampled street/With all its muddy feet' of T. S. Eliot's *Preludes*.<sup>17</sup> Rather than producing a sense of anonymity and insignificance (whereby the subject is dwarfed by the scale and/or impersonality of his/her urban surroundings) in this passage from *Pilgrimage* the street facilitates an experience of subjective expansion, plenitude, 'strength' and 'hunger'.

On her walk through the streets in this chapter, Miriam does not engage in the act of window shopping through the conventional matrix of commodity fetishism but instead perceives the objects in the window in abstract, aesthetic and affective terms. Indeed, in the previous chapter Miriam accompanies her employer Mrs Corrie hat shopping, an expedition Miriam finds frustrating and exhausting (I, 410–12).<sup>18</sup> In Chapter six, as she speeds along the shop fronts of Regent Street, Miriam looks 'at nothing. Shops passed by, bright endless caverns screened with glass' (I, 417). When she does recognise objects in the window in terms of their commodity status they are described in negative, threatening terms ('forests of hats', 'sly, silky, ominous furs', 'close prickling fire of jewels') and she reflects on the 'strange people who bought these things' (I, 417). When she stops in front of one shop window which is filled with glassware, the items are not perceived as commodities but as a constellation of light and colour which she imagines, like the pavement, to merge with her own body:

She pulled up sharply in front of a window. The pavement round it was clear, allowing her to stand rooted where she had been walking, in the middle of the pavement, in the midst of

<sup>17</sup> T. S. Eliot, *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p.24, p.25.

<sup>18</sup> As part of the feminist revisionist account of flânerie, critics including Judith Walkowitz and Anne Friedberg have argued that from the middle of the nineteenth century activities such as shopping provided a legitimate basis upon which women could occupy and move around the city, opening up forms of urban participation and visual consumption that had historically been thought the exclusive province of the (male) flâneur; see Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, pp.46–50 and Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), Chs.1–3. However, Richardson generally distances Miriam from conventional forms of window shopping and cultures of consumption – besides that of eating – but Miriam's participation in even that form of consumption is limited because of her paltry salary.

the pavement, in the midst of the tide flowing from the clear window, a soft fresh tide of sunlit colours . . . clear green glass shelves laden with shapes of fluted glass, glinting transparencies of mauve and amber and green, rose-pearl and milky blue, welded to a flowing tide, freshening and flowing through her blood, a sea rising and falling with her breathing. (I, 417)

Feeling ‘rooted’ to the pavement like a tree in its natural habitat, the shift from ‘middle’ to ‘midst’ likewise indicates the transition from a distinct subject-object relation demarcated in terms of location, to a sense of ontological merging, as the ‘tide’ of colour and light flows from the window into her blood and commingles with her breathing. In this passage Richardson disrupts conventional models of exchange and identification between woman and the commodity form: Miriam only perceives the objects in the window in positive terms when they lose their commodity status and are perceived, like the pavement, as part of her own physical and affective geography. This sense of being a part of the street’s ontology, whether imagined in bodily terms or as a mode of kinship, recurs throughout the middle volumes of *Pilgrimage* and reflects the fundamental and reciprocal relation that Miriam feels she shares with the streets and spaces of West London.<sup>19</sup> In a reverse sense, Miriam also increasingly feels that the city becomes her: ‘Now, once she was free again, to be just a Londoner, who would ask nothing more of life [...] She would be again, soon ... not a woman ... a Londoner’ (II, 266). Towards the end of chapter six of *Honeycomb* it is clear that Miriam is intimidated by the prospect of going into a small, unfamiliar newspaper shop to write her letter to Bob. Significantly, the unfriendliness and brusqueness of the shopkeeper is then contrasted to the welcoming embrace of the streets which ‘revelled and clamoured softly all around her’ (II, 419).

This chapter from *Honeycomb* indicates a number of ways in which Miriam’s modes of urban observation and her methods of ‘knowing’ the streets differ from the models we find in canonical accounts of flânerie by writers such as Charles Baudelaire and

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<sup>19</sup> See also *Pilgrimage*, Vol. 3, pp.85–8.

Walter Benjamin. On the one hand, Miriam's flânerie does not aspire to the encyclopaedic forms of knowledge of the city and its inhabitants that tend to underpin canonical masculine models of flânerie as well as the writings of middle-class urban 'explorers' and philanthropists such as Charles Booth and Henry Mayhew.<sup>20</sup> For example, Baudelaire's flâneur is a 'man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses'. He desires 'to know, understand and appreciate everything that happens on the surface of our globe', and is a 'spiritual citizen of the universe'.<sup>21</sup> Like Richardson herself, who felt from childhood 'a deep-rooted suspicion of "facts" and ordered knowledge',<sup>22</sup> Miriam criticises totalising and encyclopaedic paradigms of knowledge at various points in *Pilgrimage* and views them as inherently masculinist in nature (III, 37, 111). Miriam's 'knowledge' of the street (and city more broadly) never aspires to totalising forms or ordering functions and is not acquired solely through the visual. Rather, it relies on other sensory, often synaesthetic, modes and is affective, aesthetic and sometimes spiritual as opposed to intellectual in nature. Such an epistemological and experiential model is in sharp contrast to Georg Simmel's canny metropolitan subject who copes with the excessive stimulation of the city by reacting with 'his head instead of the heart', that is, in a detached and intellectual fashion avoiding the personal risks of affectivity in the urban realm.<sup>23</sup> As Catherine Nesci argues of the urban writings of the French feminist and

<sup>20</sup> Walkowitz suggests that mid- and late-Victorian urban investigators such as Friedrich Engels, Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew attempted to 'read the "illegible" city, transforming what appeared to be a chaotic, haphazard environment into a social text that was "integrated, knowable, and ordered"; *City of Dreadful Delight*, p.18. The theme of il/legibility is central to Ben Highmore's study *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), which writes against the historical/cultural tendency to perceive the illegibility of the city as a problem.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), p.7.

<sup>22</sup> This quotation comes from the sketch 'Data for a Spanish Publisher', which was posthumously published in the *London Magazine* in 1959 and is cited in Deborah Longworth, 'Subject, Object and the Nature of Reality: Metaphysics in Dorothy Richardson's *Deadlock*', *Pilgrimages: The Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 2 (2009), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', op. cit, p.176.

socialist philosopher Flora Tristan (1803-1844), Miriam's relationship to the street is not centred on issues of power, mastery and control but rather ideas of 'participatory exchange' with the being of the street itself.<sup>24</sup> As such, Miriam's encounters with the street are often represented by Richardson in terms of a fundamental breaking down, rather than a reiteration of, the subject-object dichotomy. Miriam imagines herself as a participatory part of the street rather than a discrete subject who must intellectually master or shield themselves against the myriad impressions that, in the tradition of Simmel and Benjamin, threaten the individual's psychic integrity.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the models of inter-subjectivity that we find in canonical models of flânerie differ from the versions presented by Richardson via the experiences of Miriam. Baudelaire's 'man of the crowd' seeks to merge with the anonymous crowd and become 'one flesh' with it.<sup>26</sup> This is of course a crowd within which the male flâneur never thinks to question his right to be or his capacity to remain inconspicuous given that he is always in possession of, not the object of, the gaze. By contrast, for the female wanderer such as Miriam, who is still negotiating and seeking her rightful place within that 'tide' (I, 280), she seeks kinship and a becoming one flesh with the material stuff of the street itself: 'I am part of the dense smooth clean paving stone' (I, 416). Indeed, later in the novel-series the religious dimension of that becoming one flesh with the city is made explicit when Miriam likens her relationship to London as a 'continuous communion' (III, 223). In her analysis

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Nesci, 'Flora Tristan's Urban Odyssey: Notes on the Missing Flâneuse and Her City', *Journal of Urban History*, 27 (2001), 709-22, p.711.

<sup>25</sup> Anticipating Freud's theory of the stimulus shield, Simmel maintained that the metropolitan person 'develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him', and develops responses that are intellectual rather than emotional in nature; Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', *Simmel on Culture*, p.178. For Benjamin's famous account of 'shock' as integral to the experience of modernity and which is developed with reference to Freud's theory of the stimulus shield, see his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), in Hannah Arendt (ed. and Intro.) *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp.217-54.

<sup>26</sup> Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, p.9.

of the opening chapter of *Revohing Lights*, Deborah Parsons has argued that Miriam, like later conceptions of the flâneur in Benjamin, adopts a perspective on the city and crowd that is at times panoramic and detached:

Miriam may be a supreme example of a female flâneur who walks in the streets of her city, but she also shares this tendency to a panoramic position away from the street, in a position of superior detachment [...] she is torn between sympathy with the crowd and the constant assertion of independence that is the mark of her feminism.<sup>27</sup>

As I discuss in more detail below, while Miriam does express a desire to remain aloof from the crowd – and other people in general, given her overall desire for autonomy and self-determination – for Miriam, modes of attachment, embeddedness and community are repeatedly relocated away from people and onto the physical streets themselves. Her ‘detachment’, I would suggest, is specific to the crowd, not the street.

#### *‘not a woman ... a Londoner’<sup>28</sup>*

Deborah Parsons observes that modernist women writers including Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson reflect in their fiction on the ‘essential dilemma’ common to many women venturing into the city in the 1880s and 1890s: namely, ‘the attempt to resolve the public/private dichotomy of street/house, independence/company, in a connective relationship of the three realms of street, private room and workplace’.<sup>29</sup> Women had to actively construct a sense of being ‘at home’ in the city whilst negotiating new conceptions of self and identity.<sup>30</sup> Throughout *Pilgrimage* Miriam values autonomy, is committed to a project of self-realisation, and periodically reflects on the threat that she perceives close personal relationships and conventional ‘society’ pose to that project. As a New Woman Miriam resents the

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<sup>27</sup> Parsons, p.76.

<sup>28</sup> Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, Vol.2, p.266.

<sup>29</sup> Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p.110.

<sup>30</sup> Walkowitz, pp.46–7; Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, pp.110–16.

feminine masquerade and is critical of women who dress, talk and behave in ways that pander to conventional patriarchal ideals of femininity.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, she not only rejects several of the conventional professional and social roles available to her – such as governess, carer and wife – but also sacrifices some of her closest emotional and intellectual relationships, such as her romance with the Russian-Jewish émigré Michael Shatov, as she feels they threaten her own ‘personal realization’ (III, 75). Thus, Miriam’s desire for freedom and autonomy and her commitment to solitude frequently lead her away from companionship with people and make her personal relationships fraught with tension or a sense of impossible compromise. As such, in the volumes spanning *The Tunnel* to *The Trap*, Miriam often turns to the street for a different kind of society: one which satisfies her need for companionship but that does not threaten her project of self-discovery and autonomy. The sociality of the street that Richardson imagines in the middle volumes of *Pilgrimage* is not one that centres on concrete social relationships between people in an urban setting but rather the kind of social and affective ties that Miriam feels she shares with the street itself.

As an instance of Richardson’s interrogation of the Victorian dichotomy of public and private spheres, Miriam increasingly comes to associate the street with qualities historically aligned with the home, and it is these qualities that in part facilitate the sense of sociality with the street that I am investigating here. Miriam takes pleasure in her increasing sense of familiarity with the streets and areas that connect her room, work and favourite urban haunts (such as ABC cafes and restaurants), a sense of familiarity that leads her to repeatedly describe the street as safe, protective and homely (II, 29; III, 235). The public realm is often, and paradoxically, figured as a ‘shelter’ from private realms (III, 235). In chapter nine of *The Tunnel*, Miriam reflects on the range of social invitations open to her during the coming weekend (from her friend Alma, her fellow emancipated women Mag and Jan, her sisters and so on), but determines not to leave the familiarity and

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<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Chapter 9 of *Honeycomb* in which Miriam is invited downstairs to join the Corries and their party of upper-class guests for the evening; *Pilgrimage*, Vol.1, pp.434-37.

security of Bloomsbury: ‘all the people who half-expected her, the Brooms, the Pernes, Sarah and Harriett, the Wilsons, would be in their homes far away; she safe in Bloomsbury, in the big house, the big kind streets, Kenneth Street; places none of them knew; safe for the whole length of the week-end’ (II, 146). Thus, Richardson contradicts the conventional nineteenth-century characterisation of the street as a site of physical danger and moral corruption, particularly for women, and instead suggests that the street takes on the role of protector (indeed, protecting her from the threats of the suburbs). This characterisation is partly due to the fact that Miriam primarily conceives of her relationship with the streets of the West End in existential terms: they facilitate and protect her independence.

The above quotation describing the streets as ‘kind’ indexes another way in which their social dimension is figured in *Pilgrimage*: through a series of personifications whereby the street is conceived as akin to a friend, interlocutor and even lover. The following passage from *Interim* (1919) once again demonstrates how Miriam’s experience of the street is not – in the tradition of the male flâneur or urban investigator – intellectual, distant, or grounded in a desire for totalising forms of knowledge, but rather visceral, affective and imagined in inter-subjective terms:

Roaming along in the twilight she lost consciousness of everything but the passage of dark silent buildings, the drawing away under her feet of the varying flags of the pavement, the waxing and waning along the pavement of the streams of lamp-light, the distant murmuring tide of sound passing through her from wide thoroughfares [...] the rising of the murmuring tide to a happy symphony of recognizable noises, the sudden glare of yellow shop-light under her feet, the wide black road, the joy of the need for the understanding sweeping glance from left to right as she moved across it, the sense of being swept across in an easy curve drawn by the kindly calculable swing of the traffic, of being a permitted co-operating part of the traffic, the coming of the friendly kerb and the strip of yellow pavement, carrying her on again. (II, 373-4)

Miriam's entire conscious experience here focuses on her passage through the street, a street that is described in co-operative and 'friendly' terms. Her knowledge of the space and its operations is an embodied and affective one: she feels herself a part of the general 'happy symphony' of sound and movement. She understands and reads the rhythms of the street (the knowing 'glance' at the traffic from 'left to right'), yet is at the same time propelled along by those rhythms ('the sense of being swept across in an easy curve'). Thus, if Baudelaire's flâneur seeks to become part of the rhythms of the crowd, Miriam sees herself as a part of the rhythm of the physical streets themselves: her bodily movement shaped by the geography of pavement, road and traffic, as well as the 'symphony' of familiar sounds.<sup>32</sup> To describe the experience of walking in the city in such intimate and resolutely positive terms is uncharacteristic for the period, but to describe the traffic as 'calculable' and 'co-operating', and the pavement as 'friendly', is unconventional indeed. In stark contrast to the many vitriolic accounts of modern traffic and its threat to the defenceless pedestrian that is played out in much mainstream modernism from Le Corbusier to E. M. Forster to Virginia Woolf, Richardson here proposes an uncharacteristic blending of the organic and inorganic (as in the earlier example where Miriam imagines herself to be 'rooted' to the pavement), the human and technological aspects of the street, imagining the city as one big, friendly and co-operative life force.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Miriam's passage

<sup>32</sup> 'For Baudelaire, *flânerie*, was an indispensable modality for reading urban modernity, it allowed a form of spectatorship that was simultaneously both detached and immersed in the rhythms of the crowd', Highmore, *Cityscapes*, p.40. For another passage – almost ecstatic in tone – in which Miriam's commingling with the rhythms, sounds and forms of the street take precedence over the presence of other streetwalkers see *Pilgrimage* Vol.3, pp.85–6.

<sup>33</sup> This is not to say that traffic is always presented positively in *Pilgrimage*. See Miriam's description of Oxford Street in *Revolving Lights*, *Pilgrimage*, vol. 3, p.246. For critical accounts of the automobile, particularly in terms of its threat to the pedestrian, see Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning* (1924), trans. Frederick Etchells (London: Architectural Press, 1971); Virginia Woolf, 'The cheapening of motor-cars' (1924), in Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke (eds), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1986–2011), vol. 3, p.440; E. M. Forster, *Howard's End* [1910], Oliver Stallybrass (ed.), (London: Penguin, 1983).

through the streets here, which is figured in terms of psychological absorption ('she lost consciousness of everything but the passage of dark silent buildings'), familiarity, physical intimacy, and a sense of ease, again indicates that this is not simply a spatial but an inter-subjective and affective relation. It presents, I would argue, the kind of easy, unselfconscious pleasure and inter-personal exchange that one might find in the company of a lover or close friend. Elsewhere in *Pilgrimage* the streets are not only described as 'friendly' but as a 'friend' and in terms that highlight a physical intimacy and playfulness that is absent from her comparatively reserved physical relationships with actual people: '[t]he tappings of her feet on the beloved pavement were blows struck hilariously on the shoulder of a friend' (III, 288).

Miriam's love of and 'continuous communion with [...] the West End' (III, 223) is often figured in terms of reciprocity. When Miriam feels alone, questions her life choices and the emotional sacrifices her quest for independence demands, the street and/or city is sometimes presented as responding to her need. For example, in chapter two of *Interim*, Miriam spends New Year's Eve 'alone in a cold bedroom' mending her stockings, and is struck by a feeling of sadness and a sense that 'the old year ought to be seen out with people' (II, 320). However, she also resolves that to have spent the evening with other people would have made 'life stop, while reality went on far away' and interfered with the sense of 'realization' and 'unbroken peace with the resolutions' she achieves during her evening alone (II, 320–1). As she meditates on the costs and fruits of extended solitude, her thoughts are interrupted by a 'tap [...] in the air' which touches 'the quick of her mind' – the chiming of St Pancras' clock (II, 322). Miriam responds to this invitation by flinging open the window to let the sounds and 'breath' (II, 323) of the New Year flow into her room: a colloquy of bells (St Pancras, Big Ben, bicycles), 'cab whistles, dinner bells, the banging of tea-trays and gongs', voices, cheers and song sounding up from the street – 'She could hear the Baileys laughing and talking on their doorstep' (II, 323). Thus, the dichotomies of private and public, solitude and sociality are again reshaped by the street which moves into Miriam's quiet room and enables her to have her 'share in a Bloomsbury New Year' without demanding

that she relinquish the solitude and ‘inward calm’ she has opted for that evening (II, 321). Similarly, and as Elisabeth Bronfen has observed, the street is also figured as an ‘addressee for Miriam’s dialogue’, the silent interlocutor that assists her to develop her thoughts and make decisions. It is the subject who can offer comfort and companionship without compromising Miriam’s need for autonomy: ‘Miriam is able to be engulfed by [London] without losing herself, preserving her autonomy while in contact with another’.<sup>34</sup>

As the ‘mighty lover’ (III, 272) that remains a constant companion in her daily life, London is nevertheless at times imprisoning and, in the tradition of Simmel and Benjamin, poses a strain on Miriam’s metropolitan nerves (II, 224). However, throughout the middle volumes of *Pilgrimage* it is a welcome imprisonment, an ‘immortal compact’ that she daily renews (III, 215). The intimacy and intensity of Miriam’s relationship with the West End is at times a counterpoint to her intimate relationships with men, and from *The Tunnel* to *The Trap* London ultimately trumps her relationships with her potential suitors. In Chapter three of *Deadlock* (1921), following on from the quotation with which I began this essay, Miriam is reflecting on the ‘pillar of cloud and fire’, the ‘free gift’ that is London, only to find that her suitor, Michael Shatov, has come to meet her after work (III, 107). The encounter is described in physical, almost sexual, terms as a series of invasions, transgressions and manoeuvres between Miriam, Shatov and the street:

He had come to meet her . . . invading her street. She fled exasperated, as she slackened her pace, before this postponement of her meeting with London, and silently drove him off, as he swept round to walk at her side, asking him how he dared unpermitted to bring himself, and the evening, and the evening mood, across her inviolable hour. (III, 107)

When she turns to look at him, Miriam feels sympathy for Shatov’s loneliness and isolation, but nevertheless feels that it is he, not the

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<sup>34</sup> Bronfen, p.84, p.85.

streets or London, that is the ‘jailer, shutting her in’ (III, 107). As Shatov embarks on a description of his day, his ‘carefully pronounced sentences’ leave ‘the world she had come out to meet [...] disregarded all about her’ (III, 108). Later in *Deadlock* when Miriam’s relationship with Shatov encounters difficulties, both due to their different religious backgrounds and his confession to having had sexual relations with prostitutes as a young man, Miriam again finds solace in the streets which awaken her from an ‘abyss of [...] fatigue’ (III, 210) and disillusionment and provides a ‘balm’ (211) against her troubled thoughts: ‘Look at us, the buildings seemed to say, sweeping by massed and various and whole, spangled with light. We are here. We, are the accomplished marvel.’ (210). Thus, the many instances in which Richardson personifies the city in *Pilgrimage* do not amount to ‘mere rhetorical flourish[es]’ but reflect how spaces such as the street assume ‘a subject position in Miriam’s life which is equal to [and more-often exceeds] that of other people’.<sup>35</sup>

In *Pilgrimage* Richardson not only challenges the negative, dystopian conceptions of the city common to much canonical male modernism and discourses of modernity but undertakes a radical rethinking of the street and its potential relationship and meaning to the urban subject, particularly middle-class, working women who were relatively new to the city and forging their own distinctive position in, and relationship to, that sphere. Eschewing the traditional subject-object dichotomy that underpins the logic of modernity, Richardson rewrites the street as an inter-subjective and ontologically/subjectively generative site. It is the space to which Miriam returns most consistently during the middle volumes of the novel, one that increasingly becomes her, acts as companion, and guides her in her quest in both geographical and existential terms. So too Miriam does not, in the tradition of the male flâneur and urban investigator, seek to intellectually master and psychically order the street and its occupants through positivist or rationalist paradigms. She accepts and embraces the street as it metaphorically embraces her, and her sense and understanding of it are garnered in intimate, embodied and affective ways. Indeed, in

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<sup>35</sup> Bronfen, p.85.

*Revolving Lights* the identification between self and street is made complete. While reflecting on the ‘mighty lover’ (London) that ‘[n]o one in the world would oust’, and anticipating falling asleep to it ‘spread’ around her, Miriam reverses the conventional city as body metaphor,<sup>36</sup> instead imagining her body as akin to a radial system of streets flowing ‘outwards, north, south, east and west, to all [the city’s, and by extension her own] margins’ (III, 272–3).

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<sup>36</sup> On the city as body metaphor and metaphorics of the city more generally see Highmore, *Cityscapes*, pp.3-4; 131-9; 159.