

'I WISH I HAD A REALLY STUNNING
DRESS': FASHION, POVERTY, AND
PERFORMANCE IN DOROTHY
RICHARDSON'S *PILGRIMAGE*.

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The least sophisticated of women, once she is 'dressed', does not present *herself* to observation; she is, like the picture or statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through which is suggested someone not there – that is, the character she represents, but is not.¹

Tamar Katz, in examining literary impressionism's preoccupation with the subjective and the objective, the inner and the outer, places emphasis on 'the newly mobile, feminized impressionist subject' as a key figure in modernism's reworkings of subjectivity through narrative.² The 'new woman', Katz suggests, possesses 'a kind of culturally important doubleness': 'as figures who could render the public and private self compatible – as subjects who could bridge a radical openness to the world and an enclosure from it'.³ The middle-class woman, newly launched out into the world of work, into walking city streets alone, and living in rented rooms, is no longer the domesticated subject, but something quite other. This opens new questions of what, to modernity, constitutes feminine subjectivity, and whether the feminine subject, now a part of the larger social world, is 'socially specified, formed by particular places' or 'universal'.⁴ Miriam Henderson believes in a universal, profound mystical interior to women, telling her lover Michael Shatov that there exists a 'real inside civilization of women, the one thing that has been there from the first and is not in the natural man, not made by "things"' (III 219). However

¹Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), p.505.

²Tamar Katz, *Impressionist Subjects: Gender, Interiority, and Modernist Fiction in England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p.7.

³*Ibid.*, p.11.

⁴*Ibid.*, p.13.

Miriam herself, in her new woman guise, venturing out into different job roles and different social roles, is presented precisely as being made by 'things'. She continually and consciously registers the influence upon her social self by her surroundings, and even consciously tries to shape herself according to those surroundings.

In an autobiographical sketch, Richardson gave an almost comical fast-paced summary of her life, laying emphasis on the sense she has that she is always performing:

Teaching, abroad, at home, in school and in family. Each a brief and fascinating and horrible experience. Strange poses of an untrained dancer. At last, London, clerical work, 'freedom'. The Quest. Love, all sorts, art, all sorts, religion, all sorts, all saying in chorus, 'Lo here, and Lo there'. But is not all this experience written about in a million volumes by a million writers? Thought, about everything. The beginnings of the divided mind. Recognition of the universality of the alternative interpretation. Of the difference between knowledge and knowing.⁵

Here we have the time span covered by *Pilgrimage* condensed into a single paragraph. The vagueness is deliberate: the repetition of 'all sorts', the reference to 'The Quest', which is ominously capitalised, and yet unspecified. The quest for knowledge? The quest to become a writer? The quest to understand the self? If the quest is one for self-knowledge, as the pilgrimage of the books seems to be, then what of these abortive beginnings? María Francisca Llantada Díaz characterises Miriam's 'quest' as 'a search for knowledge that is invariably carried out in two phases: an outer (or physical) life journey and an inner (or spiritual) development'.⁶ The 'fascinating and horrible' efforts at teaching (as well as London and clerical work) are thus as important as the ultimate inner realisations: 'thought, about everything'. The metaphor Richardson

⁵Dorothy Richardson, *Journey to Paradise: Short Stories and Autobiographical Sketches*, ed. by Trudi Tate (London: Virago Modern Classics, 1989), pp.112-113.

⁶María Francisca Llantada Díaz, 'Pointed Roofs: Initiating *Pilgrimage* as Quest Narrative', in *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies* No. 3 (2010), pp.53-74, p.58.

uses for her early forays into the world of teaching – ‘strange poses of an untrained dancer’ – emphasises her unsuitability and lack of training for these teaching roles, and also the lack of training for the physicality of the adoption of these roles: the poses she tries to hold, the image she tries to project, the performance she tries to carry off. Life, it seems to Miriam, requires you to choose some kind of part to play, and to play it well. Her attempts at finding a part, and learning how to play it, are inevitable precursors to her realisation that she is on a ‘Quest’: this is the physical journey she must undertake before she can really begin her inner journey.

Miriam is a woman in search of a visual identity. The first few volumes of *Pilgrimage* are primarily concerned with what this visual identity is to be: how will Miriam display herself? What do other people see? And how does this affect the reception of her whole self by society? Miriam, in trying to resolve these issues, is constantly aware of her attempt to control this as a kind of masquerade, and struggles to find a balance between being her own (implicitly invisible) self, and displaying some form of socially acceptable, but not too obviously false, visual persona. She is the embodiment of Katz’s figure of ‘femininity’s productive doubleness’. *Pilgrimage*, Katz states:

centers on the question of whether the female subject is open to and shaped by the details of the world around her, perpetually malleable, or whether she collects such impressions into an interior and stable self. In meditating upon feminine subjectivity, Richardson addresses the persistent problem of whether subjects are socially detailed, formed by local and historically specific contexts, or whether they stand apart from such details, inhabiting instead a realm of abstracted and permanent truth.⁷

However, Miriam is not a passive subject in this process of social shaping. Her malleability is something which she continually struggles to have under her control. The part of her that stands apart from full immersion in society, her ‘interior and stable self’,

⁷Katz, p.139.

is also the part of her that controls which aspects of her exterior life impact upon her and what aspects will go to make up her performative persona. Throughout *Pilgrimage*, this preoccupation surfaces from time to time, as Miriam surveys the women around her, and in Jean Radford's words, critically examines all the 'representations of women' she comes across:

in literature, paintings and photographs, opera and theatre. The heroine works her way through different representations of 'woman', confronting each image like someone in a hall of mirrors, searching for a reflection in which she can recognise herself.⁸

At the beginning of *Pilgrimage*, this confrontation of images is primarily one of observation and imitation. Each role Miriam takes on, (all roles that Richardson had taken on before her) is adopted self-consciously as an external marker. In doing so, she is not merely trying to make herself beautiful or socially acceptable to others, but is enacting a radical form of control over her own life. As Joanne Winning writes, this struggle for control, enacted as well in Miriam's questioning of the medical discourses about women's bodies, was a 'unifying', and a common one: the declaration of 'the basic right of women to claim their own experience and order their social identities accordingly'.⁹ Miriam's identity is in flux however, as the daughter of a middle-class man turned bankrupt; educated and cultured, but joining a new wave of underpaid women workers in the city. Her attempt to create a visual identity that expresses what she conceives of as her social identity then has a double significance: the identity itself, in a very postmodern sense, is created by Miriam. However, the continual journeying of *Pilgrimage*, and of Miriam's life, means that each role, and each visual persona, is necessarily short-lived. Miriam takes on a role, or adopts a pose, and then discards it when it no longer fits her position.

⁸Jean Radford, *Dorothy Richardson* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.75.

⁹Joanne Winning, *The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Richardson* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p.42.

At the beginning of *Pilgrimage*, Miriam still sees herself as the daughter of a gentleman, first and foremost. Her main frustration with her dress is that it doesn't display her gentlewoman status as it ought. In *Backwater*, for example, she tries to shame her mother into admitting that her grey dress is 'piggy'; and too old to wear (I 197). Mrs Henderson, already facing a host of financial difficulties, 'flushe[s] deeply' at the implication here, which is that she and her husband have failed to provide the clothes that their daughters need (I 198). The next day, Miriam is getting ready for a dance; the last that the Hendersons will be able to hold. Her friend Nan Babington is prettily dressed, and will be wearing red flowers ('splashes of scarlet, my dear. Splashes of scarlet') (I 211). Miriam, on the other hand, has nothing so effective to wear: 'I wish I'd got a dress like Nan's' (I 213), she says to Harriett, and then, when Harriett fails to respond, 'I wish I had a really stunning dress', to which Harriett responds: 'You needn't' (I 214). Miriam is looking for some recognition from her family that her clothes are not as they ought to be, but both her mother and her sister refuse to give her the consolation she needs: they both know that the state of her clothes reflects the real financial situation of the family.

It is when Miriam leaves the family home to teach in the North London school, later in *Backwater*, that her real situation is brought home to her. She feels it necessary to adjust herself to fit the role, and this adjustment is both material and psychological. Despite the despair she feels when she returns to the school after a holiday, and hears the 'jingle-jingle, plock-plock of the North London trams' (I 264) she tries to convince herself that "If you can't have what you like you must like what you have" (I 264), repeating this mantra to herself over and over as if for reinforcement. This shaping and adjusting includes austerity – Miriam says 'I wish I had been called "Patience" and had thin features' – and also a return to religion. Miriam, the self-declared agnostic, begins praying every night.

This performance requires a costume. Miriam's hyperawareness of the image she projects leads her to attempt many image transformations. She is aware that, as Anne Hollander states: 'Clothes make, not the man but the image of the man – and they

make it in steady, reciprocal accord with the way artists make, not lifeless effigies but vital representations'.¹⁰ Miriam takes the role of the artist in her self-conscious 'dressing-up'. The young teacher-Miriam tells herself: 'My appointments ought to be an influence in the room – until all my things are perfectly refined I shan't be able to influence the girls as I ought. I must begin it from now. At the end of the term I shall be stronger. From strength to strength' (I 266). Having refined clothes is seen as the key to achieving respect, but, crucially, also leads to becoming stronger, more able, and more powerful. The first acquisitions for this new wardrobe are two 'lengths of spotted net veiling', which Miriam sees as:

the beginning of getting a 'suitable outfit' [...] She got up to put a veil in the little top drawer very carefully; trying it across her face first. It almost obliterated her features in the dim candle-light. It would be the greatest comfort on winter walks, warm and like a rampart. 'You've no idea how warm it keeps you,' she could say if anybody said anything' (I 266).

The veil is meant as a defence against the enquiring eyes of passers-by, but Miriam is embarrassed at the fact that she feels she needs a defence, and has already prepared her alibi: the need to keep warm. Her desire to veil her features – which we have been told before are 'rounded' features, as indeed, Richardson's features were – is the desire to assume a recognisable character. The person she wishes she'd been – a woman called Patience – would have thin features to reflect her hard-working life, and the determination to be good. This buying of veiling is an early, crude attempt at controlling the image she projects.

Miriam's veil effaces her image and provides warmth and comfort, but it is more than that. The veiling displays her social-economic status: it is adopted as the most 'suitable' costume for the role of city-dwelling working woman. On a walk in North London, Miriam wears her 'prim bearing about her like a cloak' and specifically refers to the veiling as 'her governess's veil'. The veil signifies the governess, and conversely, the 'prim bearing' of the

¹⁰ Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (London: University of California Press, 1993), p.xv.

governess suggests the restriction and the comfort of a cloak. Clothing and social position are interchangeable. Miriam has set off on a walk in order to 'meet' the 'solitary spring air', but finds that her uniform will not let her escape into it. Between herself and the trees is her 'governess's veil, close drawn, holding them sternly away from her. The warm comforting communicative air was round her, but she could not recover its secret' (II 279). The veil is specifically mentioned as the cause of the estrangement of Miriam from her surroundings, and yet she does not take it off. As Yvonne Wong points out, Miriam's usual sense of Heideggerian 'dwelling' when amongst trees and nature is disrupted here by the veiling and all it symbolises: 'the feelings of severe destruction, loss, and threat that Miriam experiences at this moment reflect thoroughly her sense of undwelling in North London'.¹¹ A part of her wants to be rescued from this anonymity, and the space of North London that she dislikes so much, by a man. The lonely governess misses the comfortable middle class life which was once hers, and can imagine a romantic, novelistic escape.¹² This escape is suggested on a subsequent walk in the park:

One afternoon, far away, but coming towards her as if in answer to her question, was the figure of a man walking quickly. 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 stay until the end – and there would be other lives, on and on. She stood transfixed, trembling. He

¹¹Yvonne Wong, 'The Self in London's Spaces: Miriam's Dwelling and Undwelling in *Pilgrimage*' in *Pilgrimages: A Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies* No. 3 (2010), pp.31-52, p.43.

¹²Five pages on from Miriam's encounter with the 'North London clerk' in *Backwater*, we find her eagerly reading the sentimental novels of Mrs Hungerford: 'That is what is meant by happiness ... happiness. But these things could only happen to people with money. She would never have even the smallest share of that sort of life. She might get into it as a governess – some of Mrs Hungerford's heroines were governesses – but they had clouds of hair and were pathetically slender and appealing in their deep mourning. She read volume after volume, forgetting the titles – the single word 'Hungerford' on a cover inflamed her' (II, p.285). Miriam is entranced by the romance, even as she realises she cannot fully identify it. She is not 'pathetically slender', but her black clothes could be taken as mourning.

grew more and more distinct and she saw a handbag and the outline of a bowler hat; a North London clerk hurrying home to tea. With bent head she turned away and dragged her shamed heavy limbs rapidly towards home (II 280).

This indistinct man, walking towards her, could potentially be the understanding and strong man of a Mrs Hungerford novel. This kind of hero could bring back the 'light' and the sensation of nature, spring and fresh air; could rescue Miriam, and restore her much prized aesthetic perception. However, as the figure becomes more distinct, Miriam recoils from him. He is merely a North London clerk, and Miriam despises North London and its inhabitants, as 'hard, strong, sneering, money-making, noisy and trammy' (I 322). He is marked by his handbag and bowler hat. These items of clothing are *his* uniform, marking his profession much as Miriam's veil marks hers. He is similarly drab and anonymous and so cannot save Miriam from her anonymous state.

Miriam makes much of her clothing as both professional and secretive. Elizabeth Wilson, in her book on fashion and modernity, *Adorned in Dreams*, highlights this aspect of late nineteenth-century fashion:

The modern city had found its first appropriate style of dress for the street – the discreet and secretive style of the business or professional man. There was often a furtive masculinism in women's street dress too, since out of doors women went veiled, bonneted and cloaked in the dark colours that were necessary because they did not show mud or soot, and also suggested respectability.¹³

In *Backwater*, Miriam adopts dark 'governessy' clothes herself, as a symbol for her patience, stoicism, and respectability. Later she is required by *others* to adopt plain clothes. Miriam's position as a dental secretary requires her to wear plain, preferably black clothes. When met with the incredulity of her liberated friends Mag and Jan, Miriam tries to explain:

¹³Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p.136.

'I believe it's the fault of my predecessor. They told me she
rustled and wore all kinds of dresses –'
'I see – a series of explosions.'
'On silk foundations' (II 160).

Elizabeth Wilson calls this rustling femininity the 'characteristic "frou frou" sound of the period, an erotic rustling that allegedly send men's pulses racing'¹⁴. Wilson does not cite the source of her emphasis upon this 'alleged' arousal, but Miriam's emphasis on the word '*rustled*', and her friends' ready acceptance of this rustling as a reason for imposing clothing rules does hint at sexuality. Miriam's employment requires her gender to be concealed, then, but these clothes also emphasise her lowly position in the dental practice. Lou Taylor writes in *The Study of Dress History* that 'the rustle of crisp silk petticoats in the early 1900s was an indication of glaze silk linings rather than cheap cotton ones and also a much-remembered symbol of Edwardian femininity'.¹⁵ In Wimpole Street, any petticoats must be cheap cotton and all clothes must be black to keep Miriam in the background:

'It isn't an office you see. I have to be so much in the surgeries and interviewing people in the waiting-room, you know.'
'Yes – from dukes to dustmen. But would either the dukes or the dustmen disapprove of scarlet?'
'One has to be a discreet nobody. It's the professional world; you don't understand; you are equals you two, superiors, pampered countesses in your offices.'
'Well I think it's a beastly shame. I should brandish a pair of forceps at Mr Hancock and say "Scarlet – or I leave"' (II 161).

The difference between Mag and Jan's office attire and Miriam's need to be a 'discreet nobody' is also a *fin-de-siècle* concern. Miriam is still treated as a member of the servant class, while by the 1920s, the standard of dress for women in offices was focussed much

¹⁴Wilson, p.35.

¹⁵Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.111.

more on style (although a discreet elegance, and still not scarlet gowns) rather than invisibility. Vike Plock, in a discussion of fashion in Elizabeth Bowen, makes this point:

By associating the image of modern and stylish femininity with the attractive picture of women's competence and efficiency, the fashion industry, in the 1920s, had started to set standards for female dress and demeanor in the workplace... Not individuality ... but compliance with the ready-made image of female professionalism is in high demand on the 1920s job market.¹⁶

In the midst of popular satires on the difficulty of telling between the maid from the mistress, and office girls going to work looking like Duchesses, this emphasis on the difference between being 'a discreet nobody' and being a 'countess' is telling. Lou Taylor, for example, points to the 'middle- and upper-class readership' of *Punch*, as an explanation for the 'series of stereotypical characters' in their pages, including 'over-elegant maids and shop girls'. The overdressed working girl had become a laughable figure.¹⁷ Miriam did not want to be laughed at, and so she accepts the rules of dress: her black clothes are designed to make her an invisible presence, a lower-class sexless and unthreatening presence, much as maids and other domestic servants at this time were expected to wear black.¹⁸

Despite, or perhaps because of the limitations upon her own freedom to dress as she likes, Miriam is fascinated by the dress of others. She is often preoccupied with analysing other people's clothing, working out how they have achieved their 'effect', and deciding what their social status must be based on their apparel. Miriam's first employer, Fräulein Pfaff, is an obvious role model for the fledgling adult that is Miriam, and she spends a lot of time observing not only her actions, but her clothes. Fräulein, standing

¹⁶Vike Plock, 'Sartorial Connections: Fashion, Clothes, and Character in Elizabeth Bowen's *To The North*' in *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (2012), pp.287-302, p.294.

¹⁷Taylor, p.144.

¹⁸Ibid. pp.36-37.

by the window, is described as ‘graceful’, and more specifically as a graceful *heroine*, as someone to look up to and imitate:

a curious dignified pannier-like effect about the skirt that swept from the small tightly-fitting pointed bodice, reminding her of illustrations of heroines of old serials in old numbers of the *Girls’ Own Paper* (I 52).

As Jean Radford notes, Miriam’s cataloguing of Fräulein’s style here is not merely an imitation, but ‘an imitation not of an original but a copy’, with Miriam, though aware that her employer’s dress reminds her of ‘heroines of old serials’, not yet aware of the full implications of this resemblance. Fräulein Pfaff’s self-design, as graceful, independent heroine is in Radford’s words, ‘no simple process of copy/original ... both women are caught up in a more complex process, a chain of representations which pre-exists both of them’.¹⁹ Anne Hollander writes that this chain of representations with no original is not confined to dress, but is echoed in pose and posture. The ‘ones one naturally imitated’, are themselves imitating something else: they ‘unconsciously wear clothes and use gestures in some style approximating to a very generalized “fashion plate”’.²⁰ ‘Movements of the head, behavior of the legs, stance, and so on, are not just individually determined but also inwardly conceived as conforming to a general image that everybody agrees is natural and acceptable to look at’.²¹ Miriam registers Fräulein’s attitude, ‘gracefully tall’, and looking out of the window, but does not attach as much importance to it as to her dress. Although she herself is trying to control her pose, ‘watching the girls with an air – as nearly as she could manage – of indulgent condescension’, she is not aware of the same effort in Fräulein (I 52). Miriam, as yet, merely sees Fräulein’s dress as a symbol of her superiority within the school, and her own inferiority by contrast.

Miriam’s respect for well-dressed people stems from her sense of herself as a displaced middle-class woman. Her displacement into poverty and the freedom of work both bar her from imitating

¹⁹Radford, p.75.

²⁰Hollander, p.315.

²¹Ibid., p.315.

fashionable clothing convincingly, and increase her understanding of clothes as an effect. Middle-class women, who Miriam at times feels kinship with, and at times feels utterly alienated from, are adept at producing effects. Their clothes are a production of self, and Miriam even wonders if their stated opinions are produced for the same purpose: a masculine trick of talking in 'statements' rather than expressing 'all the real things'. Miriam muses: 'Did they really think and take an interest in the things they said, or was it a trick, like "clothes" and "manners"' (II 108). The 'trick' of clothes, as well as the 'trick' of witty repartee, is one that Miriam is eager to learn. Miriam spends a lot of time selecting clothes, considering their effect, and being alternately delighted or dismayed in perceiving the way this effect is received by others. In Germany, the trying on of her first blouses causes frowns and desperation, as 'they had no shape. They were square and the sleeves were like bags' (I 122). She can't work out how to put the blouse on, and conjures up comfort for herself in the form of sisterly guidance: 'She heard [Sarah's] encouraging voice saying, "You haven't half got it on yet. It'll be all right"'. However, imagined guidance does not have the same effect as real human approbation from the other girls in the school. Minna's "'Jetzt mag' ich Sie leiden. *Now* I like you'" (I 123) makes Miriam smile, but it isn't until Jimmie's practical advice that Miriam can really feel at ease in this startling new apparel. Jimmie expostulates:

"The blouse is all right, my dear, but it's all round your ears and you've got all the fullness in the wrong place. There Bless the woman, you've got no drawstring! And you must pin it at the back! And haven't you got a proper leather belt?" (I 124).

Jimmie's obvious experience with the art of wearing blouses bolsters Miriam's confidence. The knowledge that there is a right way and a wrong way, and being shown the right way by someone with such experience assures Miriam that the clothes are acceptable, and that the effect she was trying for is achieved. The experienced Jimmie provides a model for conscious imitation. If Miriam follows her advice, then she will be safe, and will blend in with the crowd of 'socially correct' blouse wearers. Georg Simmel,

in 'On Fashion', written in 1904, examines this anxiety of imitation: 'Whenever we imitate, we transfer not only the demand for creative activity, but also the responsibility for the action from ourselves to another. Thus the individual is freed from the worry of choosing'.²² It is responsibility that Miriam is avoiding: she misses the shared responsibility of her predominantly female family unit. It is only much later, when Miriam is living in London, that she feels confident enough to assemble her own outfits:

The clothes lying on the bed were transformed. 'I say,' she murmured, her cigarette wobbling encouragingly from the corner of her lips as she spoke, 'they're not bad.' She strolled about the room glancing at them from different points of view. They really made quite a good whole. It was the lilac that made them a good whole, the fresh heavy blunt cones of pure colour. In the distance, the bunched ribbon looked almost all green. She drew the hat nearer to the light, and the ribbon became mauve with green shadows and green with mauve shadows as it moved. The girl had been right about bunching the ribbon a little way up the sugar-loaf and over the wide brim [...] The black part of the hat was right for the tiny check. That is the idea of some smart woman I did not think of it in the shop, but I got it right somehow, I can see now. It's right. Those might be someone else's things (II 153).

The clothes are so 'right' and go so well together that Miriam is amazed at finding she owns them, and is surprised at her ability to get this effect right: the effect of 'some smart woman'. But even when she has been surprised like this at her own ability to summon effects, she still needs the approbation of others, and it is Mag and Jan, the fashionable pair with the 'self-confident set of their this-season's clothes' (I 152) who provide this reassurance:

'Goodness gracious, *isn't* she a swell!
'Are they all right?'

²²Georg Simmel, 'On Fashion', 1904, from *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings* ed. by Donald N Levine (London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p.295.

‘Are you a millionaire my dear? Have they raised your salary?’
‘Do you really like them?’
‘Yes. I’ve never seen you look so nice. You ought always to go
about in a large black hat trimmed with lilac’ (II 159-160).

The commentary of Mag and Jan here shows the changing nature of the economy. Paul Fortunato summarises this impact of mass-production on the spectacle of clothing in modernity: ‘Completely transformed by industrialization and other changes in the second half of the nineteenth century, clothing design had already become a vehicle for transforming the spectacle of class difference. Ready-made clothes were becoming available at lower and lower prices’.²³

As Mag and Jan point out, Miriam’s performance of looking a ‘swell’ here is enabled by the ready-made: ‘Do you realize how lucky you are in being a stock size?’ (II 160). This one successful fashion experiment, however, is an anomaly. Miriam generally finds it incredibly difficult to carry off the effects she observes in others, and even when she feels that she has achieved an effect, she needs the approval of other, more feminine women before she feels at ease in her costume. The people who have a self-assurance about their dress, therefore, intimidate Miriam: one girl in the German school is described as ‘terrifyingly stylish’ (I 40), and an intimidating fellow-boarder at Mrs Bailey’s has her ‘fearfully consulting the small sheeny satin dress, with the lace collar, the neat slipper on the fender [...] Perhaps she was a lady.’

Satin, lace, and ‘small’ ‘neat’ clothes are associated with successful femininity, as with the fashion writer Mrs Eric Pritchard’s definition of feminine dress in 1907 as ‘requiring “delightful transparencies, wonderful laces ... daintiness”’, but Miriam also associates these clothes with money and middle-class luxuries.²⁴ She feels herself when in her black working clothes to be dowdy and ugly. In the cold at her Wimpole Street desk, she is ‘offended at the sight of her red wrist coming out of the harsh cheap black

²³Paul L. Fortunato, ‘Wildean Philosophy with a Needle and Thread: Consumer Fashion at the Origins of Modernist Aesthetics’ in *College Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 3. (Summer 2007), pp.37-53, p.39.

²⁴Taylor, p.96.

sleeve and the fingers bloated by cold' (II 65). The cold increases her sense of ugliness, as well as the cheapness of her garments. As Bryony Randall points out, Miriam is continually, and awkwardly, aware of the clothes she is wearing and how they must make her appear to the people around her: 'she displays awareness of what certain clothes mean socially and culturally. She is often conscious, for example, that her clothes display her financial hardship'.²⁵ For Miriam's middle-class sensibility, there is something shameful in being visibly poor. Randall uses as an example of this the scene where Miriam's shoes crack when they are drying before Mag and Jan's fire. More significant than the misfortune itself is that the stylish Mag and Jan are not told about the shoes: 'she braced the muscles of her face and said nothing. It must be forgotten before she left the room that they were nearly new and her only pair; two horrid ideas, nagging and keeping things away' (II 95). Mag and Jan must not know, and Miriam is even censoring her own thoughts so that the disastrous effects of poverty are hidden even from her own mind. Her mind can only embrace 'things'; experience life to the utmost, if the illusion of a life free from poverty is maintained. In *Interim* Miriam, on entering a restaurant for the first time, foresees a permanent deflation of her self-confidence when she imagines that a waiter has:

seen the shifts and miseries that haunted all her doings. They were apparent in the very hang of her cloak. She could not first swing down the restaurant making it wave for joy, as it did when she walked across Trafalgar Square in the dark, and then order a roll and butter. After this it would never wave for joy again (II 359).

The situation Miriam finds herself in of only being able to afford a roll and butter in a restaurant stops the cloak from being a mere item of apparel, able to echo Miriam's joyful stride in its own wave, and makes it a symbol of her poverty. Again, visible poverty robs Miriam of any 'joy' she has when she is in the dark and invisible.

²⁵Bryony Randall, 'Dailiness in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*', in *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.68.

In *Deadlock*, visible aspects of poverty are not only conquered by imagining them away, but by self-conscious styling. Miriam is 'satisfied' when Mr Leyton pronounces that he thinks her new hat '*fast*': 'She would be able to tear down Oxford Street, no matter how ugly the cold made her feel, looking *fast*' (III 52). This is tempered with the observation that Mr Leyton does not know that the 'wings' of the hat are cheap, and that the effect he sees in the hat is a result of this. The ugliness she feels is brought about by the cold and the cheapness of her clothing is banished by the knowledge that she has successfully brought about an effect: of a liberated, slightly risqué young woman.

Other characters in Miriam's life overcome their poverty *through* dress. Mag and Jan's stylishness is contrived and schemed for, with their clerk's wages being stretched to breaking point. Eleanor Dear manages to look respectable even when she can find no work in her profession as a nurse. When she turns up at Mrs Bailey's boarding house in her 'shabby thin blue serge' skirt 'rubbed shiny' and 'skimpy cotton blouse' with an 'ugly greyish stripe and badly cut shoulders' there is still a 'soft beauty' (II 436) about her. Eleanor borrows a lace tie from Miriam and works an almost magical transformation of her costume:

With lifted chin she deftly bound the lace round and round close to her neck, each swathe firmly pinned, making a column wider than the width of the lace. Above her blouse, transformed by the disappearance of its ugly collar, her graceful neck went up, a column of filmy lace. Miriam watched, learning and amazed (II 437).

Despite Miriam's desire to learn the secrets of this trickery, the ultimate effect of Eleanor's beauty and style is that Miriam feels herself, once more, as the protective masculine patron of her friend. Miriam talks to Eleanor at dinner 'in a lover-like undertone' (II 439) and then sits 'flirting with Eleanor at Donizetti's' (II 441), Miriam's favourite restaurant. Eleanor's femininity, however, in forcing Miriam into the role of suitor, also makes her feel trapped. She is the man caught by feminine wiles; the lace tie becomes a 'tether' at which she 'tugs' (II 441).

The lace tie can not only tether one person to another, but can tether the self to the social construct of self: the person becomes the image. In a conversation with Mag and Jan, Miriam makes the link between being 'sociable', and being willing to work to produce a social persona:

'It's no good. I have come to the conclusion I like dowdiness. I'm not smart. You are.'

'This is the first we have heard of it.'

'Well, you know you are. You keep in the fashion. It may be quite right, perhaps you are more sociable than I am.'

'One is so conspicuous if one is not dressed more or less like other people.'

'That's what I hate; dressing like other people. If I could afford it I should be stylish – not smart. Perfect coats and skirts and a few good evening dresses. But you must be awfully well off for that. If I can't be stylish I'd rather be dowdy, and in a way I like dowdiness even better than stylishness.'

The girls laughed (II 150).

Miriam decides, at this moment, that she must embrace 'dowdiness', as her only valid option, but later, she changes her mind. Miriam deplores dowdiness in other people, as when she meets Lucie Duclaux at a lecture:

She had seemed, all the evening, a well-dressed presence. But her little oval toque, entirely covered with a much washed piece of cream-coloured lace and set back from her forehead at the angle of an old-fashioned flat lace cap, had not been bought at a shop, and the light grey garment so delicate in tone and expression, open at the neck, where creamy lace continued the effect of the hat, was nothing but a cheap rain-cloak. Either she was poor, and triumphing over her poverty with a laborious depressing ingenuity, or she was one of those people who deliberately do everything cheaply. There was something faintly horrible, Miriam felt, about the narrowness of her escape from dowdiness to distinction.... Washable lace was the simplest possible solution to the London hat

problem. No untravelled Englishwoman would have thought of it.... Behind the serenity of her smooth white brow, behind her cold wide clearly ringed sea-blue eyes, was the dominant intelligence of it all, the secret of the strange atmosphere that enveloped her whole effect; so strong and secure that it infected her words and movements with a faint robust delicate levity' (III 159-160).

Lucie Duclaux has worked wonders with her piece of lace much as Eleanor Dear had three years before, and Miriam is still surprised at the effectiveness of the trick. She is still 'admiring' of the effect, but with the difference that she recognises in Duclaux a 'dominant intelligence' which both initiated the choosing of the clothes to produce the 'effect' and also produces an atmosphere which 'envelopes' this effect. Unlike Eleanor Dear, Duclaux has an active inner life, and a lively intelligence: attending lectures and knowing about books. The struggle with dowdiness, and the preoccupation of a search for knowledge are both familiar battles for Miriam, and yet she feels that there is something 'faintly horrible' about Duclaux's marginal 'triumph' over dowdiness, and her achievement of distinction through intelligence. She still has a 'determination to be free' as the two leave the lecture hall together: a determination which 'kept her blind and dumb' (III 164) in the hurry to get away from this woman. The two women's negotiations between poverty and distinctiveness of dress, and between intellectual occupation and femininity, are similar, and it is Duclaux's success which scares Miriam away. She has always felt inferior in the art of producing clothing effects, and has begun to formulate an excuse relating to the richness of her inner life and the intelligence which she feels cannot coincide with a reliance upon a picturesque social persona for effect. A woman who has succeeded in both is 'faintly horrible', or unsettlingly superior.

Miriam's excuse for her fashion ineptitude takes several forms. One declaration is an impatience with fashion due to having other, more important intellectual concerns. On returning from the lecture, and the meeting with Duclaux, Mag and Jan tease Miriam, saying: 'You will lose your colour, my child, and get protuberances on your brow' to which Miriam's response is 'What then?' (III

165). Miriam wants to make it clear to her friends that intellectual expansion is more important to her than attractiveness, and that the hard work and money it takes to achieve 'smartness' is time wasted, as in this earlier conversation with Mag and Jan:

[...] Aren't you glad you are alive to-day, when all these things are happening?'
'What things, little one?'
'Well, cycling and things. You know girls, when I'm thirty I'm going to cut my hair short and wear divided skirts.'
Both faces came up.
'Why on earth?'
'I can't face doing my hair and brushing skirts and keeping more or less in the fashion, that means about two years behind because I never realize fashions till they're just going, even if I could afford to – all my life.'
'Then why not do it now?'
'Because all my friends and relatives would object. It would worry them too – they would feel quite sure then I should never marry – and they still entertain hopes, secretly' (II 149).

On the one hand, Miriam is Georg Simmel's 'emancipated woman of the present', who, because the easiest route to freedom lies in copying men's behaviour, 'lays particular stress on her indifference to fashion'.²⁶ Miriam does consciously stress her indifference to fashion, but simultaneously expresses the desire to adopt a different form of dress: one which would require little time and effort to maintain. The divided skirt was an issue of much debate, and was hated by men and women alike. The emancipated Mag and Jan are obviously shocked at the very idea of wearing one. Oscar Wilde engaged in this debate in an article of 1884, announcing his approbation of the freedom of wearing divided skirts, with the stipulation that 'it must give up all idea of "being identical in appearance with an ordinary skirt"; it must diminish the moderate width of each of its divisions, and sacrifice its foolish frills and flounces ... I feel sure that there will be found many graceful and charming girls ready to adopt a costume founded on these principles, in spite of Mr Wentworth Huyshe's

²⁶Simmel, p.310.

terrible threat that he will not propose to them as long as they wear it'.²⁷ Wilde's vision of the divided skirt is one of a practical, elegant and unfussy item of apparel, which requires no great effort on the part of the wearer. Miriam's idea of the divided skirt is a similar one: she simply does not want to make an effort when she dresses. Miriam is acting the part of a nonchalant non-participant in fashion to Mag and Jan, without acknowledging that the explicitly radical style that she proposes as her alternative is a clear and unequivocal 'symbol of the wearer's tastes and politics'²⁸, as Elizabeth Wilson puts it:

All art draws on unconscious fantasy ... hence [fashion's] compulsiveness, hence our ambivalence, hence the immense psychological (and material) *work* that goes into the production of the social self, of which clothes are an indispensable part.²⁹

Miriam is not here considering renouncing fashion, rather she is flirting with the idea of adopting a different fashion: one which involves less 'work', and yet still makes the statements about herself that she wishes to make. These statements are specifically related to a New Woman ideology: 'The New Women often shaped their own identities in a way that disparaged fashion-sense, that visibly rejected the popular trends and standards of beauty ... The New Woman was perceived, even by her critics, as one who spurned fashion'.³⁰ Miriam's statement here is not merely the impatience with clothes that she claims, but a broader issue: one of an intellectual and political self-fashioning. The impatience with conventional fashion is linked in Miriam's mind with the freedom of cycling and unimpeded movement, and also with the supposed sexual undesirability which comes with such freedom. Cycling brings divided skirts and short hair, but these things in turn bring spinsterhood: a spinsterhood which she seems to cheerfully accept

²⁷Oscar Wilde, 'More Radical Ideas upon Dress Reform' from *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art, 1850-1930* ed. by Radu Stern (London: The MIT Press, 2004), p.119.

²⁸Wilson, p.218.

²⁹Ibid. p.246.

³⁰Fortunato, p.40.

as the price of freedom. At the turn of the century, women's clothing was 'indelibly connected ... to social anxieties over women's rights', and Miriam is being disingenuous when she claims that her decision to wear divided skirts and to wear her hair short is based only on impatience with the brushing of both hair and skirts.³¹ Adolf Loos in particular sees the fashion for sporting clothing for women as an encouraging step towards the complete emancipation of women:

As to the [male] rider of the thirteenth century, the concession will be made to the twentieth century bicyclist to wear pants [trousers] and clothing that leaves her feet free. And with this, the first step is taken toward the social sanctioning of women's work ...

... No longer by an appeal to sensuality, but rather by economic independence earned through work will the woman bring about her equal status with the man. The woman's value or lack of value will no longer fall or rise according to the fluctuation of sensuality.³²

Loos, writing in 1898, sees the adoption of practical rather than sensual dress by women as the beginning of a new valuing of women, and the end of his pet hate, ornamentation. Miriam, in 1896, cannot see any possibility for reconciling freedom and the sensuality which in her mind leads to marriage, and so makes a choice.³³ She chooses economic independence, and proposes to embrace the costume which signifies that. Miriam never does cut her hair short, in fact, but small concessions are made towards the athletic image – shorter skirts, and the 'plaid-lined golf-cape' which helps her, as a neophyte London worker, to enter an ABC café 'confidently' (II 76).

³¹Taylor, p.96.

³²Adolf Loos, *Spoken Into the Void: Collected Essays 1897-1900*, trans. by Jane O Newman and John H Smith (London: MIT Press, 1982), p.103.

³³George H. Thomson, *A Reader's Guide to Dorothy Richardson's "Pilgrimage"* (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 1996), pp.27-30. Thomson charts in detail the chronology of *Pilgrimage*, and argues convincingly that despite Miriam's declaration at the beginning of *The Tunnel* that she is twenty-one years old, the year is 1896 and not 1897.

Miriam's preoccupation with her visible self does not preclude a preoccupation with her inner self; rather her efforts at self-display are presented as symptomatic of her mental development. Richardson is trying to show us the whole of Miriam:

Going along, along, the twilight hides your shabby clothes.
They are not shabby. They are clothes you go along in, funny;
jolly. Everything's here, any bit of anything, clear in your
brain; you can look at it. What a terrific thing a person is;
bigger than anything. How *funny* it is to be a person (II 256).

Miriam's shabby clothes are hidden by the dim light, but ultimately, she decides, they are 'funny' and 'jolly' in their role as a part of herself: the 'clothes you go along in'. The person she is is 'bigger' than that: her 'everything' includes her clothes, the way she 'goes along' the London streets, and the mass of things in her brain to 'look at'. Miriam here gets a glimpse of the whole of her self, performance and all, and is both amused and interested by the spectacle. All people are funny, when looked at in their entirety, including herself. For an observer to understand the character of Miriam, it is not enough to see her actions from the outside – that is just the costume, the props, the performance, the poses. Seeing through Miriam's eyes reveals also the mechanism behind these effects – ultimately the 'inner dancer' caught in the act of trying and failing to produce poses. The difference here is between the self-conscious acting that Miriam has been trying and failing to do, and a broader understanding of life-as-performance. In this scene, Miriam is a spectator of herself, from both within and without, watching the movements of herself, her attitude, her thoughts and her shabbiness with a detached amusement. This detachment recurs throughout *Pilgrimage*, and functions as a moment of clear focus, a brief external view of Miriam, which puts her and her preoccupations in perspective. It enables us to get a clearer view of *Pilgrimage* itself as performance, or as Susan Gervirtz calls it, the 'plotless, epic, written performance of Miriam Henderson's subjectivity in process'.³⁴ A polished, practiced, and elegant exterior implies that the self is a finished product: a whole self that

³⁴Susan Gervirtz, *Narrative's Journey: The Fiction and Film Writing of Dorothy Richardson* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p.7.

can be presented simply and received simply. Miriam Henderson is no such character, because she is ever-evolving, epically always 'in process'.