

THE THRILLS OF MODERNITY:
REPRESENTATIONS OF SUBURBIA IN
DOROTHY RICHARDSON'S *PILGRIMAGE*
SERIES

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In his poem 'Commission', Ezra Pound orders his 'songs' to: 'Go to the bourgeoisie who is dying of her *ennuis*/Go to the women in suburbs'.¹ For Pound, rousing art can only be imported into, never made in suburbia. Following Pound's lead, it is rare to find modernist works that take place primarily in suburbia, and even rarer to find scholarly studies of modernist fiction that make representations of suburbia their focus.² Misogynistic dismissals of suburbia were common among male modernist authors, who often presented the suburbs as too feminised and one-dimensional to inspire artistic innovation.

Between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century, the social structure of British cities changed. The period saw the introduction of universal elementary education, a significant expansion of the middle class, and the entrance of middle-class women into the public sphere as professionals and consumers. At the same time, an ever-expanding suburbia came to be characterised as an architectural expression of those processes by which English culture was brought down to its lowest common denominator. The fact that suburbia was originally conceived as a space whose most constant occupants would be women ('keeping house' for the male commuters who earned the household incomes), and as its spatial arrangements were therefore reaffirmed

¹ Ezra Pound, 'Commission', *Poetry* 2, 1 (April 1913), 10.

² Scholars who discuss the relation between modernism and suburban spaces in some depth include Elisabeth Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999); Anne Fernihough, *Freewomen and Supermen: Edwardian Radicals and Literary Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003).

through the notion of gender difference, it is hardly surprising that elaborations of suburbia's 'inferiority' were closely-bound to its status as a zone of feminisation.

John Carey and Laura Baker Whelan identify disparagements of suburban living among male modernist writers as a complex reaction to the change in women's status, the growth of suburbia, public education, and mass culture.³ Writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Clive Bell and George Orwell perpetuated stereotypes of femininity and mass culture, frequently formulating them by directly or indirectly invoking suburban imagery. In 'Matriarchy' (1928), Lawrence identifies women with the materialistic, violent masses and mocks the effeminacy of the suburban-like 'Daddy in the bosom of the family, wheeling the perambulator on Sunday'.⁴ Clive Bell, in his long essay *Civilization* (1928), scoffs at the 'flock instinct' of typically-suburban 'shop-walkers' who are swayed by advertisers and retailers, while noting that the rare ability in women to develop an elite artistic sensibility and rise above the masses is usually related to her friendships and sexual relationships with men.⁵ George Orwell describes suburbia in *Coming Up for Air* (1939) as '[a] line of semi-detached torture-chambers where the poor little five-to-ten pounds-a-weekers quake and shiver, everyone one of them with the boss twisting his tail and the wife riding him like the nightmare and the kids sucking his blood like leeches'.⁶

Anne Fernihough argues that modernist writers who rejected the realist mode of representation saw realism as 'the literary embodiment of suburbia'. Realism presented a homogenous and 'solid' view of the world that suppressed individualism and that was as 'drab' and 'undifferentiated' as early twentieth-century

³ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992); Laura Baker Whelan, *Class, Culture, and Suburban Anxieties in the Victorian Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

⁴ D. H. Lawrence, 'Matriarchy', in *Late Essays and Articles*, James T. Boulton (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.103-106.

⁵ Clive Bell, *Civilization* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1928).

⁶ George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (London: Secker and Warburn, 1948), p.14.

suburban architecture, with its rows of identical houses.⁷ Yet while some female modernist authors, such as Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson, do make connections between literary realism and staid suburban conventionality, their experimental aesthetic projects aim to subvert the unequal gender relations that form the basis of many male modernists' identification of suburbanism with mass culture and femininity.⁸ Furthermore, Richardson's representation of suburbia in her novel cycle *Pilgrimage* is intertwined with her exploration of the ways in which spaces associated with modernity create opportunities for women to construct non-traditional notions of privacy and gender identity.

Modernity's 'furious restructuring of space' was often experienced differently by men and women.⁹ As Rita Felski observes, 'Frequent descriptions of the modern period as a period of deepening despair, paralysis, and anxiety fail to address the visions of many female modernists, for whom the idea of the modern was to embody exhilarating possibilities and the potential for new and previously unimaginable sexual and political freedoms'.¹⁰ The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed significant changes in the status of English women, who were far more visible in public than before. Women gained limited suffrage in 1918 and full voting rights in 1928, as well as permission to take degrees at some universities (such as Somerville College, Oxford). Although the growth of suburban communities and the development of more defensive notions of familial privacy did suture an increasing number of women to the private sphere, physical redefinitions of the suburban and urban environments, changes in technology, and increasing social mobility opened up the possibility of exciting

⁷ Anne Fernihough, op. cit, pp.59, 69.

⁸ Fernihough mainly discusses Woolf's 'Mr Bennett and Mrs. Brown' and Richardson's *Pilgrimage* series.

⁹ Thacker, op. cit, p.47.

¹⁰ See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). Gilbert and Gubar identify a crisis of 'male dispossession and female self-possession' in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries occasioned by 'dramatic achievements of a growing number of notable women' in fields ranging from literature, painting, music, political activism, anthropology, psychology, and theosophy (p.34).

reconfigurations of spaces and ways of moving. An expanding suburban population energised the development of more efficient and varied forms of urban transportation, which in turn contributed to the spread of outlying suburbs. The number of mechanically propelled buses in London, for instance, rose from 241 in 1905 to 3,522 in 1913, a change that parallels the acceleration of suburban building in the areas that were not close to railway stations.¹¹ These changes facilitated women's entrance into the public sphere, enabling contact with new urban and suburban cityscapes. Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* was one work of modernism that charted these interactions.

Miriam Henderson, the heroine of Richardson's series, is able to use her middle-class education to find employment and explore several alternative models of social life in the city and, often, in the suburbs.¹² Although the majority of *Pilgrimage* is set in central London, Miriam works in, lives in, visits, and has strong and changing reactions to numerous London suburbs throughout her early professional life – especially in *Backwater* (1916), *The Tunnel* (1919), and *March Moonlight* (1967). For most of the series, Miriam categorically rejects suburban living, which she associates with gender inequality. Fernihough reads Miriam's negative reaction to suburbia as suggesting 'an elitist and profoundly anti-democratic' streak in Richardson's work. This reading, however, fails to account for the fact that there is a contradiction between Miriam's vehement dislike of all things suburban and her positive and even liberating experiences in a variety of London suburbs. It is precisely this contradiction that indicates an ironic distance between the text's narrative voice and the young, somewhat immature heroine. Through Miriam's reactions to suburbia, Richardson shows the character's resistance to conventional femininity but also subtly critiques her binary worldview, which prevents her from seeing the potential for pockets of resistance to be produced within any type of environment, including a suburban one.

¹¹ Alan A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport, 1900-1939* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), p.29.

¹² Wendy Gan, *Women, Privacy, and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.13.

Henri Lefebvre outlines three, co-existent types of space in *The Production of Space* (1974): *perceived* (the space of daily reality as experienced by users); *conceived* (the dominant space of ‘scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived’); and *lived* (the symbolic imagery of artists and users). This typology helps chart the course of Miriam’s rejection of patriarchy and suburbia, her developing sense of self, and her growing consciousness about different ways to perceive and practise space.¹³ Lefebvre explains that ‘conceived space ... bears clear traces’ of the ‘dominance of the male principle’.¹⁴ Since the spread of suburbia relegated many women to the isolation of the family home, the rows of familial houses in the suburbs could be viewed as one of the most striking physical manifestations of the governmental organisation and gendering of its subjects. Lefebvre, however, observes that the control of space by planning fails to ‘master it completely’, for people use it in unintended ways and thus destabilise or even ‘shatter’ the dominant spatial codes.¹⁵ Accordingly, ‘social space is a social product’, always in the process of change, created as much by those who live in it and by the artists who seek to critique or decode it as it is by the urban planners and scientists who conceive it.¹⁶ Miriam’s rejection of suburban life and its environs thus shows her limited point of view and inability to understand that dominant spatial codes can be destabilised even in those spaces that are most obviously structured by patriarchal spatial codes. She cannot see the difference between suburbia as a planned space of heteronormativity and suburbia as it is experienced on a daily basis by people, many of whom relished escaping from crowded London apartments and some of whom lived in non-traditional suburban households.

The ironic distance between the *Pilgrimage*’s narrative voice and that of Miriam finally disappears in *March Moonlight* (1967), the last

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.410.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.26, 42.

chapter-volume of *Pilgrimage*, in which the character opens herself up to the possibility of creating a household within a London suburb, where she begins to write her non-traditional novel. In Lefebvre's terms, Miriam finally begins to differentiate between 'conceived' spaces and 'perceived' spaces of daily reality, experiencing artistic inspiration and a sense of liberation when she realises that she can create 'lived' spaces of symbolic imagery to subvert what she perceives as oppressive, patriarchal spatial codes.

In *Pilgrimage* suburbia figures both as a symbol of patriarchal spatial planning and as the site for new and exciting potential reconfigurations of space, time, and everyday life.¹⁷ Unlike early twentieth-century 'architects, urban planners, educators, politicians, women's clubs, and popular periodicals', who, according to Jessica Blaustein, increasingly equated privacy with a 'suburban [familial] conception of private space', Richardson uses suburban settings and imagery to formulate her non-traditional version of middle-class women's individual privacy and to subvert the notion of sealed female interiority that bolsters the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres.¹⁸ Rather than reading suburban spaces in *Pilgrimage* as featuring what Morag Shiach terms 'narrative ends rather than beginnings', Richardson creates a strong semantic link between the diverse suburban landscapes of London and women's resistance to patriarchy. At a crucial stage in Miriam's long, politicised and, in the end, revelatory relationship with urban space, Richardson positions the inception of the idea for an experimental aesthetic project in a suburb.¹⁹ To analyze the role suburbia plays in these novels is thus to show how a female modernist who consciously sought to undermine gender norms through her literary projects did so in part by creatively utilising that which was ignored or disparaged by many of her modernist contemporaries.

¹⁷ Although Richardson wrote the *Pilgrimage* series between 1913 and the late 1940s, her novels deal with the period between the late 1880s and 1913.

¹⁸ Jessica Blaustein, 'Counterprivates: An Appeal to Rethink Suburban Interiority', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3 (2003), 39-63. p.49.

¹⁹ Morag Shiach, 'Modernism, the City and the "Domestic Interior,"' *Home Cultures*, 2 (2005), pp.251-67. p.253.

Backwater: Suburban Non-Spaces

Richardson's second novel is the only one in her *Pilgrimage* series that takes place almost exclusively on London's periphery. *Backwater* alternates between Miriam's middle-class family home in Barnes, a south-western suburb, and her workplace, a girls' school, in a fictional northern, predominantly lower-middle-class suburb called Banbury Park. From the opening pages, Miriam characterises the latter location in negative terms, usually by comparing it with the more spacious southern setting. While she is being interviewed for the teaching post in the school owners' drawing room, she emphasises the crowded nature of the room: it is 'little', 'full of old things', and 'noisy' from the 'disturbing' jingling of the passing trams (the working- and lower-middle-class citizens' primary means of public transport).²⁰ North London, as Miriam observes from the top of an omnibus (*not* a tram) that takes her away from the suburb, is filled with 'small dim gardens of little grey houses' (I 194), its roads cluttered with unattractive tram lines and 'dingy blue' trams (189). When the omnibus finally approaches a more affluent area of London, Miriam sits back and draws 'a deep breath' (197), relieved at the sight of '[b]right white-faced houses' (196). Several pages later, her family home is portrayed as light and spacious. Entering the property, Miriam observes that 'light shone through' the trees onto the 'open garden' and the 'large centre bed' of flowers. The front door of the house is wide open, letting in fresh air and sunlight (200).

Elisabeth Bronfen remarks on the difference between Miriam's perceptions of the two suburban settings, noting that Banbury Park's exteriors seem to be rigidly demarcated from its interiors.²¹ By describing her impending move to Banbury Park (necessitated by her family's financial troubles) as a process of being 'shut up and surrounded' (198), Miriam expresses her dislike of the lower-middle-class suburb in terms of constricted space. Once at her post, she fantasises about an escape to 'some huge open space'

²⁰ Richardson, *Pilgrimage* I (London: Virago, 1979), pp.189-346 (henceforth page numbers in text).

²¹ Bronfen, *op. cit.*, p.14.

(288), later commenting on her 'desire for space' (322). Yet, Bronfen does not observe that Miriam also expresses the yearning to escape as she strolls daily along Banbury Park's 'clear green slopes in the flood of afternoon' light and enjoys the 'solitary spring air' (279). The suburb, filled with relatively small houses and gardens, also features green space, but Miriam's interpretations of 'open space' and what is 'spacious' are radically different from the meaning attached to these terms in the Open Spaces Acts, which were passed by the British government in 1877, 1881, 1887, and 1906. This legislation charged local authorities with ensuring that the construction of housing was not performed on select stretches of land, so that these sites could be left for, among other things, walking and exercise. In Miriam's case, however, 'space' does not denote a lack of housing in an area or an isotropic entity that can be measured and, as Lefebvre would term it, 'conceived' or 'planned'. It refers primarily to her class-inflected perception of women's opportunities for escaping the limits imposed on their gender. She implicitly positions herself as opposed to space conceived by 'scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers' as a 'means of control', of which the suburban model of separate, gendered spheres is a prime example.²²

At the same time, Miriam is clearly unable or unwilling to recognise the difference between space as it is planned and space as it is practised and 'perceived' on a daily basis. When two pupils are admonished by the older schoolteachers for running hatless in a park, for instance, Miriam thinks that 'nobody had any right to interfere with them' (241), but soon dismisses the thought from her mind: the 'common' North London girls are destined to grow up into materialistic North London women, so they probably 'ought to be suppressed' (241). Miriam's bourgeois prejudice against the lower echelons of a fragmented middle class is obvious, but her disparagement of the North London population also seems informed by a perception that very few of the Banbury Park women can resist its stultifying conventions.

²² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp.26, 38.

Although Miriam does not characterise lower-middle-class suburbia as feminised, her descriptions of Banbury Park are in many ways reminiscent of the prevalent turn-of-the-century disparagements of suburban philistinism:

Off every tram-haunted main road, there must be a neighbourhood like this where lived the common-mouthed, harsh-speaking people who filled the pavements and shops and walked in the parks. To enter one of the little houses and peek and speak there to its inmates would be to be finally claimed and infected by the life these people lived, the thing that made them what they are. (289)

Miriam associates the North London suburb with scraping by on 'twenty pounds a year' (322) as well as with people who have 'street voices' and loudly scorn all that is not 'materially profitable' (334). She repeatedly differentiates herself from the Banbury Park residents:

Her feelings and thoughts, her way of looking at things, her desire for space and beautiful things and music and quietude would never be their desire ... North London would always be North London, hard, strong, sneering, money-making, noisy, and trammy. (322)

Even though she meets young women in this suburb who are kind to her and have distinct personalities, Miriam frequently characterises them as a monolithic group, stating, for example, that North London girls are 'capable of anything in the way of horridness' (241). The clear juxtaposition of Miriam's diverse experiences in Banbury Park with her generalisations and dismissal of its inhabitants suggests that Richardson wished to signal her strongly biased point of view.

Miriam's experience of her family abode throughout the first half of *Backwater* is significantly different from her view of Banbury Park; the Hendersons' home is usually suffused with light and filled with young, vivacious visitors who flirt, dance, and wander in and out of the house. Increasingly bitter about the fact that she has

to trade in her Barnes existence for an unfulfilling teaching position in a drab part of North London, Miriam juxtaposes the two sites:

She was going to be shut up away from the grown-up things, the sunlit world, and the people who were enjoying it. She would be shut up and surrounded in Wordsworth House, a proper schooly school, amongst all those strange roadways. It would be cold English piano and dreadful English children—and trams going up and down that grey road outside. (198)

For Miriam, the residents of Banbury Park represent the majority of the English population, which, to her, seems lower-middle-class, semi-educated, and materialistic. Miriam, on the other hand, aims to become a cosmopolitan, professional woman. In Barnes already boundaries between interiors and exteriors are less clearly defined, suggesting a movement across spaces and a potential for less conventional behaviour and thinking. It is here, for example, that Miriam smokes her first cigarette, an experience she finds both liberating and physically enjoyable. Nevertheless, over the course of the novel, she becomes gradually aware of and resistant to the conventions of Barnes's bourgeois inhabitants. She realises that the power relations that structure the rhythms of a typical middle-class household are characterised by the suppression of women and their voices. Her father repeatedly comments on the 'gullibility of women' (234) to his wife. Middle-class housewives, Miriam observes, spend their lives involved in petty gossip and matchmaking schemes, and are unlikely to encourage their daughters to do anything else but marry. Most of the characters' experiences in Barnes, furthermore, revolve around flirtations with various young men. Reading a novel by the popular sentimental novelist, Rosa Nouchette Carey late at night in North London, Miriam decides that it is in fact better 'to be alone and suffering and miserable' (284), (and, it might be added, employed) in Banbury Park than to become a complacent and dependent suburban housewife in Barnes.

Realising by the end of *Backwater* that both her Banbury Park and her Barnes existence are lacking in what she perceives to be an

adequate amount of ‘open space’, Miriam begins to view all suburbia as a stagnant backwater that stifles creativity. However, it is clear from the beginning of *Pilgrimage* that Richardson’s use of suburban settings reveals the contradiction between Miriam’s own bourgeois prejudices and her rejection of traditional femininity. To begin with, she lacks the imagination to understand how women might reconceive oppressive space in a creative, potentially liberating manner. Consequently, as a young heroine, Miriam believes that the only way to practise a non-traditional way of life is to physically escape suburbia. Lefebvre’s notion of the different types of space makes sense of the ironic distance between the narrative voice and Miriam as a young, often insecure character, who is trying to elaborate her resistance to traditional femininity. By creating this distance, the text suggests that suburban living is not as one-dimensional as its rebellious protagonist seems to think – a fact that becomes increasingly obvious in *The Tunnel* (1919).

The Tunnel: *Suburban Locations and the Metaphor of Suburbia*

The Tunnel is the fourth novel of Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* series, but the first where most of the action takes place in central London. After leaving her teaching posts at Banbury Park in *Backwater* and a country house in *Honeycomb* (1917), Miriam fulfils her dream of living independently in the city: she rents a room close to Euston Station and obtains a job as an assistant in a dental practice in the centre of London. Although she admits that her room is small and shabby, Miriam describes it using images of light and spaciousness. With its ‘brightness’ (II 12) and ‘unscreened happy little [window]panes’ (16), it creates a sense of well being, so that the chapter ends with Miriam’s ‘shout of joy’ (23). As in *Backwater*, Miriam’s sense of spaciousness has less to do with measured space and more with her subjective experience of personal freedom: ‘I’m free – I’ve got free – nothing can ever alter that, she thought, gazing wide-eyed into the fire, between fear and joy’ (76). Her reaction suggests the excitement and trepidation that late nineteenth-century women likely felt upon becoming a part of the busy, male-dominated urban centre, while the repeated use of the word ‘free’ implies Miriam’s rather naïve belief that she has

escaped patriarchal spatial codes (and 'being a woman') by escaping from suburbia, where her sisters still reside.

The non-traditional nature of Miriam's new lifestyle lies not only in the fact of her entrance into the public sphere as a city worker, but also in her redefinition of privacy. Unlike the private sphere of the traditional familial home, which was becoming increasingly associated with suburban living and identified with femininity (but which rarely offered women time or space away from family obligations), Miriam's room provides her with privacy in the individual sense: 'No interruption, no one watching or speculating or treating one in some particular way [...]' (17).²³ Miriam feels that her new existence in central London (in what Virginia Woolf might have called 'a room of her own') does not operate according to strict boundaries between interior and exterior spaces, for 'London could come freely in day and night' (16), nor is it organised around gender difference, for to be in London is to be 'not a woman ... a Londoner' (266). Relishing the opportunities for private reflection that strolls around London offer her, she wanders around the city in search of an A.B.C. café, often walking over to a flat rented by her friends, Mag and Jan, where she engages in effervescent conversations (75, 88).

Miriam's comment about being 'not a woman ... a Londoner', however, should be understood as another dramatic generalisation that the text does not necessarily endorse. The gendered nature of public, urban space is, for instance, made clear in the passage in which Miriam's sojourn is interrupted by a strange man's greeting on the street:

Miriam had a moment's fear; but the man's attitude was deprecating and there was her song; it was partly her own fault. But why, why ... fierce anger at the recurrence of this

²³ This is a very different situation from the one experienced by a middle-class housewife in Richardson's short story 'Tryst', in which the character describes her time away from home in terms of an illicit affair, or a tryst with a lover: returning quickly to her house, she ensures the comfort of her husband by finding his glasses and taking them to the library, the man's private room. See 'Tryst', in *Journey to Paradise: Short Stories and Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Virago, 1989), pp.56-60.

kind of occurrence seized her. She wanted him out of the way and wanted him to know how angry she was at the interruption. (96)

Miriam is so enthusiastic about her new-found independence that she chooses to ignore such events in her general estimation of London life. At this point in her life, Miriam does not see that multiple types of spaces and spatial codes co-exist in one place: while a busy urban hub such as London offers a woman like Miriam a degree of anonymity and a 'room of her own', it is also a male-dominated centre that perpetuates many of the patriarchal gender inequalities that inform the conceptualisation of suburban space.

Throughout the novel, Miriam's perception of her new style of living is defined by her rejection of suburban life. The boarding house in which she rents a room keeps her 'secure from all the world that [is] not London' (87), where 'not London' is represented by 'the northern suburbs' that Miriam has 'banished' from her life (15). At first, it seems as though Miriam is referring specifically to Banbury Park when she speaks of northern suburbia, but it later becomes obvious that she rejects all suburbs that lie in this direction. During a taxi ride with Miss Szigmondy, Miriam panics when she notices that the 'hansom had turned into the main road and was going *north*'; she feels an overwhelming sense of 'oppression' as they stop in front of a 'small drab villa' in Hampstead (156-7). Although Richardson's novel takes place at the turn of the century, before the Hampstead Garden Suburb was designed by Raymond Unwin (the work began in 1907), the area had a long cultural history and was known for housing numerous artists and prosperous middle-class citizens.²⁴ Well-known figures such as the Earl of Chatham, several Lord Chancellors, as well as writers and philosophers such as John Keats, Wilkie Collins, John Galsworthy, H. G. Wells, D. H. Lawrence, and Sigmund Freud, lived in this area at some point during their lives.²⁵ Nevertheless, Hampstead's special architectural, natural, and social character do

²⁴Hampstead was one 'the most original and enjoyable of [London's] suburbs' because of its pure air, magnificent views, and beautiful houses: Percy Fitzgerald, *Victoria's London* (London: Alderman, 1984), pp.94-5.

not prevent Miriam from grouping it with Banbury Park into the category of the dreaded 'north' London. Because a northern suburb was the site of her past drudgery, the emotional Miriam, who is still trying to elaborate her identity in relation to ways of life she has known and rejected in the past, characterises all suburbia lying in this general direction as a monolithic site of convention and complacency.

While North London seems especially repugnant to Miriam, she often expresses a dislike of all suburbia, including the western and southern suburbs where her sisters reside with their respective (and respectable) husbands. Leaving her London room, she senses a multitude of familiar voices hovering on the outskirts of the city:

They were all out there, away somewhere, the very thought and sight of them, disapproving and deploring her surroundings. She listened. There they were. There were their very voices, coming plaiting and reproachful with a held-in indignation, intonation that she knew inside and out coming on bells from somewhere beyond the squares – another church. (22)

Later, at her sister Harriet's house, she meets and attracts a suburban man, Mr Tremayne, whom she dislikes because 'he could not be really happy with a woman unless he could despise her' (27).

The young Miriam expresses her dislike of male dominance and her discomfort at being expected to fit the mould of traditional femininity by making generalisations about men and about suburbia, which to her is the most striking example of male dominance and the means by which patriarchy is enforced. After her dentist employer, Mr Hancock, makes her feel inferior because of her gender, her negative thoughts about him are inextricable from her antipathy towards his life in Hampstead, a suburb in which he 'built his life up complacently on home and family life

²⁵ Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert (eds), *The London Encyclopaedia* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1983), p.356.

while saying all those things about women, lived on them and their pain, on their food, enjoyed the comforts they made' (222-223).

It is shortly after her experience with Mr Hancock that Miriam makes her declaration that to be a Londoner is to escape gender, a statement linked to her recently-fanned resentment of patriarchal suburbia and her dismissal of her experience of harassment as a female pedestrian in London. Yet in creating a binary between London as freedom from gender versus suburbia as women's oppression, Miriam exposes her personal insecurities and the limitations of her point of view. She claims for example that clerks are also Londoners, 'unless they lived in the suburbs' (266). Despite her prejudice, she also experiences positive experiences in middle-class suburbs. During her visit to Alma Wilson, an old school-friend, and her husband Hypo, who live in one of London's outer suburbs, Miriam's dislike of Hypo's masculine preaching is overcome by her interest in the couple's artistic community and a sense that: 'These were her own people' (117).

When she perceives Hypo's sense of superiority towards his auditors, she feels that she should not encourage him with her attention. At the same time, however, she does not wish to leave: 'It was wrong to be here, it would be wrong to come again; but there was nothing like it anywhere else' (119). Miriam smokes one cigarette after another during her evening with the Wilsons, a habit she only practises in company in which she feels a degree of freedom. Later in the novel, she attends numerous artistic events and 'musical at-homes' in well-off 'flowery suburbs' and enjoys the 'cool rooms, gardens in the morning and evenings', even though her pleasure is somewhat spoiled by an observation that most artists are men who are followed around by various hostesses (163). By showing Miriam's contradictory responses to suburbia, Richardson highlights her inability to grasp the multidimensional nature of space. In Lefebvre's terms, the get-togethers at Alma and Hypo's suburban household or the artistic events in upper-middle-class suburbs feature a space of daily reality that is both subversive (artists, some of whom are women, expound new ideas and enjoy smoking) and traditional (the inequality between genders is still evident for the more privileged men dominate the conversation).

Miriam's bicycle excursion, which is one of the climactic events in *The Tunnel* and which she experiences as highly pleasurable and empowering (a 'coming out into the light'), extends well beyond London's suburbs as far as the small town of Marlborough in Wiltshire:

She swung triumphantly up. The earth throbbed beneath her with throbbing of her heart ... the sky steadied and stood further off, clear peaceful, blue with light neat soft bunches of cloud drifting slowly across it. She closed her eyes upon the dazzling growing distance of blue and white, and felt the horizon folding down in a firm clear sweep round her green cradle [...] Trees clumped in masses round houses leading to villages that shut her into little corridors of hard hot light ... the little bright sienna form of the hen she had nearly run over; the land stretching serenely out again, rolling along, rolling along in the hot sunshine with the morning and evening freshness at either end ... sweeping it slowly in and out of the deeps of the country night ... (230-231).

Richardson's frequent use of ellipses in this section signifies a stretching of time: Miriam relishes every moment of liberating movement, while gazing at the 'golden and green and shadowy' trees along country roads (231). At Marlborough, however, she hears a man express his surprise that a woman is taking a bicycling trip alone: 'Good Lord – it's a woman'; and she retaliates with her ever-ready disparagements about social conventions outside London:

Marlborough thoughts rattling in all the heads; with Sunday coming. They had sick and dying relations. But it was all in Marlborough. Marlborough was all round them all the time, the daily look of it, the morning coming each day excitingly, all the people seeing each other again and the day going on. They did not know that that was it; or what they liked. Talking and thinking, with the secret hidden even from themselves. But it was that that made them talk and make such a to-do of everything. They had to hide it because, if they knew, they would *feel* fat and complacent and wicked.

They were fat and complacent because they did not know it'
(234).

Although Miriam's earlier encounter with an imposing male stranger on a London street was followed only by an irritation towards men, she reacts to the comments of a Marlborough man by generalising about an entire community. In other words, Miriam's experiences on London streets and at her workplace (where male dentists give orders to female assistants) reaffirm traditional gender norms in the same way as her encounters in suburbia and beyond London, but only in the latter cases does she correlate the patriarchal oppression of women with an actual mode of living.

Miriam's categorical rejection of suburbia as 'not London' in *The Tunnel* therefore reflects her need to find a concrete, visual symbol of gender inequity against which to define herself at a crucial stage in her quest for self-identity. Consequently, suburbia is represented in *The Tunnel* through a variety of physical settings, some of which feature or enable non-traditional practices, and as Miriam's metaphor for widespread gender conventionality. By dismissing the suburban style of living, and instead seeking a way of life that she believes can afford her personal privacy, Miriam is also affirming her class identity. Wendy Gan observes that most early twentieth-century working- and lower-middle-class women experienced a move to suburbia as liberating because it constituted an escape from cramped, urban-based living quarters and access to newer housing with better appliances. A quest for personal rather than familial privacy became a middle-class woman's mark of privilege.²⁶ Suburbia therefore operates as a multifaceted site that is central to the author's interrogation of middle-class women's complex experience of modernity. The title of Richardson's fourth novel might be read as a reference to Miriam's tunnel vision of suburbia, for she makes generalisations about suburban living that ignore the diversity and potential advantages that she herself witnesses – a view that will be altered significantly by the end of *Pilgrimage*.

²⁶ Gan, op. cit, p.13.

March Moonlight: *Miriam's Re-Imagining of Suburbia*

Richardson wrote *March Moonlight* in the last decade of her life, but this final *Pilgrimage* novel was only published ten years after her death, in 1967. Based on the author's testimony, she revised only the first three of its chapters; Kristin Bluemel observes that this text, consisting of approximately 40,000 words, is about 15,000 words shorter than any of its *Pilgrimage* predecessors, so that it was probably 'little more than two-thirds' finished by 1957.²⁷ Nevertheless, the inconclusive ending of *March Moonlight* proves effective. For Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, as its ever-expanding length proved, was meant to last as long as Miriam's consciousness did and therefore required an end as sudden and arbitrary as that of a person's life.²⁸

In the *Pilgrimage* novels that Richardson wrote after *The Tunnel* and before *March Moonlight*, suburbs continue to appear as a range of sites that Miriam visits and as a seemingly monolithic style of living that she rejects. Yet, towards the 'end' of *March Moonlight*, Miriam rents a room first in a St. John's Wood branch of the Young Women's Bible Association (YWBA) and then in a family house in the same suburb. One of the oldest of London suburbs, St. John's Wood started to develop in the early nineteenth century and was, even in the beginning of the twentieth century, renowned for its near-rural calm and the availability of relatively inexpensive housing.²⁹ It was popular among artists, politicians, scientists, and philosophers, as well as among the 'more prosaic members of the middle classes'.³⁰ Influential political figures such as Napoleon III

²⁷ Kristin Bluemel, *Experimenting on the Borders of Modernism: Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1997), p.15.

²⁸ In a letter to her friend and fellow writer Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman) in October 1940, Richardson indicates that she was planning to continue the *Pilgrimage* series beyond *March Moonlight*: 'The best I can do is to add to *March Moonlight* its successors'. See Gloria G. Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athen: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p.411.

²⁹ Kenneth Panton, *Historical Dictionary of London* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2001), p.378.

³⁰ Weinreb and Hibbert, op. cit, p.726.

bought villas for their mistresses in the secluded suburb.³¹ At one point it was home to the writer George Eliot and the naturalist Thomas Henry Huxley. St. John's Wood thus had an established reputation as both a fashionable and a bohemian setting. It was distinguished from newer suburbs by its longer history and relative wealth of greenery.

An aspiring artist, Miriam marvels at the beauty of its setting and revels in the privacy it affords her: '[T]his corner of St. John's Wood ... inexplicably begins to offer itself as my native heath. Yet every place I have stayed in, at home and abroad, has sooner or later so offered itself, but none with just this indefinable quality' (IV 656). In this distinctive middle-class suburb, Miriam discovers a balance of community *and* solitude that allows her finally to start writing a novel about her personal pilgrimage, a fact that is semantically loaded because suburbia – and especially northern suburbia, of which St. John's Wood is a part – was so consistently rejected by Miriam throughout the series. She comes to recognise the ways in which the 'perceived' space of everyday life can destabilise dominant spatial codes, and how an artist can create alternative spatial imagery. Miriam's drastic change of perspective occurs in *March Moonlight* and is at least partially linked to her new understanding of the relation between space and subjectivity.

Bronfen contends that Richardson's switch from third to first person narration, which occurs increasingly in the final novels of the *Pilgrimage* series and especially in *March Moonlight*, indicates a 'gradual transition from the experience of the materiality of the world to the recreation of recollected and imagined immaterial sites'.³² In the earlier texts, Miriam's sense of self is deeply influenced by the physical spaces she encounters, which she connects with non-spatial concepts such as freedom, complacency, or materialism; she fails to realise that spaces are 'subject to change' or that they can be 'partially accepted and partially rejected'.³³ Her development of a meaningful inner life and detachment from physical surroundings, Bronfen argues, is the

³¹ Panton, *op. cit.*, p.378.

³² Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson's Art of Memory*, p.69.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.28, 128.

reason that Miriam can finally exist (and even find charm) within middle-class suburbia, without feeling threatened by her environment.³⁴ While Bronfen's argument certainly helps to explain the links between Miriam's developing confidence, interest in creative contemplation, and acceptance of a suburban setting (albeit one that is well-known for its middle-class character and bohemian flavour), it does not fully account for the character's rather lengthy descriptions of and engagement with the materiality of St. John's Wood. Bronfen's implication that Miriam's ability to accept this environment is a result of a withdrawal into self ignores both the intense interest the character has in the interpersonal dynamics of the two St. John Wood households she inhabits and the significance that the adoption of this specific suburb plays in Miriam's formulation of her identity as a middle-class writer.

At the beginning of *March Moonlight*, Miriam, is possessed of enough money to pursue writing her first novel, and plans on settling at Dimple Hill, the Quaker community featured in the preceding chapter volume, *Dimple Hill* (1938). Before embarking on this new adventure, however, she visits her friend Amabel, who resides in a suburban home she recently purchased with her husband, Miriam's former lover Michael Shatov. Although the move to suburbia has enabled the young couple to live in a more spacious and sanitary environment than the one they had inhabited in central London, Miriam's reaction to their domesticity is, as usual, largely negative and expressed through generalisations about suburban life. Gazing from a window at the 'small characterless square akin to millions of its fellows destined to grow smaller with the introduction of cheap, pretentious suites', she feels an 'oppressive sense, hanging so heavily over this sprawl of outer suburbia, of the shallows of life hurrying heedlessly along' (596). Amabel may have decorated her rooms with a 'riot of rich colour' that produces a striking beauty, but Miriam states that she will feel an 'unconfessable relief of escape from suburbia, from the raw, unfinished road and the crudity of the small, uniform houses, into the Roscorla's life-fashioned, richly girt homestead' (597) at Dimple Hill.

³⁴ Ibid, p.153.

Miriam's rejection of suburbia is in this case effected through its unfavourable comparison with a rural setting. 'Life-fashioned', a phrase Miriam uses to describe life at Dimple Hill, suggests that she rejects suburbia as a planned, *man*-made space and instead escapes into a nostalgic fantasy of a community that is structured by the rhythms of nature.³⁵ The presence of electricity in Amabel's residence is an exciting sign of new technology, but Miriam responds to the electric light by imagining a 'friendly glow' of evening in the countryside (598). Later in the text, when she notices the presence of a 'little kitchenette' in the guest room, she reads it as a symbol of Amabel's future entrapment within the domestic life: it shows her 'caught, for life, in a continuously revolving machinery, unable to give, to anything else, more than a permanently preoccupied attention' (602). Improvements in technology, which were frequently witnessed in the newly-built suburban homes and which, as Judy Giles observes, significantly improved women's daily lives,³⁶ are characterised by Miriam as ploys that lure women into heteronormative domesticity, so that they might forever rattle 'behind the bars' (602).

A soothing image of Dimple Hill is conjured up by Miriam to fend off the discomfort that the gadget-savvy room has aroused in her:

At this moment in the roomy Dimple Hall kitchen, quiet, and dark save where at its far end the practical harsh light of the unshaded oil lamp falls upon the serene figure of Rachel Mary bent over the shabby ancient range, the fire's rosy glow stands against the blackness of the great flue starting on its

³⁵ Richardson was very interested in Quakerism: she spent time living in a Quaker community, wrote a book called *The Quakers Past and Present* (1914), and put together an anthology of works by the founder of the Quaker sect, George Fox. See Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography*, p.73. Her letters reveal that what appealed to her about Quakers was their pacifism and more equal gender relations: in a letter to Bryher in 1941, she contends that the male need for dominance, which has 'held the Western world back for centuries', is absent only in Quaker communities and in Tibet. See *Windows on Modernism*, o. cit, p.439.

³⁶ Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (New York: Berg, 2004), p.48.

journey up through the house into the open whose fading twilight is the promise of dawn (602)

Apart from the oil lamp, all sources of light in Rachel Mary's kitchen are natural (fire and dawn); the long, flowing sentence hints at or evokes the simple, comforting rhythms of rural life. Unlike Amabel, the woman in the Dimple Hill kitchen is 'serene' rather than 'caught', 'preoccupied', and 'uncertain' (602). Miriam, however, seems oblivious to the irony of using an image of a woman who appears to be well-adjusted to domestic work to produce a critique of women's relegation to the private sphere in a modernised home. Her fantasy hardly unsettles normative gender roles and actually romanticises women's domestic labour in a rural setting.

Although Miriam states at the beginning of *March Moonlight* that the Quaker 'way of handling life', the 'business of minute to minute living in the spirit which gives them their perspective and their pose and serenity', is the best she has ever witnessed, she cannot agree with some of the puritan, conservative aspects of their existence: a 'Quakerized world', she observes, would be 'intolerable' (603). Yet, she idealises the rural setting when faced with Amabel's suburban domesticity, so that the initial descriptions of Dimple Hill in *March Moonlight* constitute Miriam's attempt to oppose symbolically what she perceives to be a blatantly patriarchal organisation of space. When she finally arrives at her rural destination, Miriam revels naïvely in being 'free from space and time' (613, a comment that implies her experience in Amabel's suburban residence made her feel trapped. The word 'space', especially, operates as a shifting signifier in Miriam's life, sometimes oppressing an individual with its 'presence' and sometimes by the 'lack' thereof. In *Backwater*, Miriam yearns for more 'space' because 'space' is synonymous with opportunities for an unconventional life, while in *March Moonlight* she enjoys being free of it, because 'space' implies a society's organization of people into genders and behaviours. Richardson's portrayal of Miriam's changing understanding of space and dramatic responses to suburban milieus thus once again highlights the character's lack of

self-reflection and tendency to create callow, black-and-white visions of reality.

To claim, as Bronfen does, that Miriam is so withdrawn into contemplative life that material sites no longer have much effect on her moods is to ignore her vehement dislike of suburbia, which she expresses up until the last several chapters of *March Moonlight*. When she temporarily leaves Dimple Hill and seeks a room at the YWBA, she is disappointed that the organisation happens to be located in a suburb: 'Unattractive, chill, this vacancy they offer, far away in a suburban branch. St. John's Wood. That vague cricket-ground region on the way to Mr Hancock's place in Hampstead. Far from the sheltering depths of London proper.' (629). As soon as she observes the details of her new residence in St. John's Wood, however, Miriam begins to describe its atmosphere in positive terms, focusing on its elegance, 'spaciousness', and the 'pure, fresh air' that flows through an 'open window' (630).

What makes this setting different from and more attractive to Miriam than the other suburban homes she has visited are its non-traditional domestic arrangements, which are conducive to the inhabitants' freedom of movement and development of personal privacy:

But one is not a guest. A boarder, free, within whatever may turn out to be the rules and regulations, to come and go without palaver. High above the street with the sky for company and a large house available to wander in, but not encroaching. (630-631)

The YWBA in St. John's Wood is an example of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century organisations that offered individual rooms in combination with communal kitchens, drawing rooms, and laundry services to single, working women.³⁷ Surprised by the fact that this establishment, which caters to women's personal

³⁷ See Deborah Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.111-112. YWBA operates as a fictional equivalent of organisations such as Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

privacy and nourishes a non-hierarchical community among the tenants, can prosper within a setting she has so long associated with patriarchal organisation of people into two clearly differentiated and unequal genders, Miriam begins to realise that she can create a self-empowering domestic space for herself in St. John's Wood.

While Miriam's changing experience of suburbia can be read in terms of the character's growing self-assurance and inner life, it also suggest her developing awareness that spaces are not in themselves resistant or oppressive, but are ultimately made so by people, who activate or construct liberating or oppressive potentialities in their environments. Miriam's experience in the YWBA is thus characterised by a series of realisations about the possibilities for innovation – or rather, about the production of 'lived' spaces – that one can generate within one's physical and social environments. She exults in stimulating interactions with other women and the sense of freedom that the non-traditional domestic space affords her: 'The formal basis of our joy, like the social joy of schooldays, is togetherness on neutral territory, keeping us independent in unity' (634). The seclusion of a typical suburban household, which is far away from the cultural amenities of the male-dominated urban centre, Miriam realises, can be used to inspire and nurture independent women's unconventional types of privacy and creativity. Although she knows that she could never practise the 'routine life of enclosed suburban housewives' (645), Miriam is aware by the end of *March Moonlight* that living in a suburb does not equal being enclosed, especially if one chooses to use the privacy of a suburban abode to create a 'life-fashioned' existence within the structure of planned, artificial space. If it was not for the friendships she has formed at Dimple Hill, Miriam observes, she would 'stay on indefinitely' in St. John's Wood (635).

This realisation of her agency to practise space differently is experienced by Miriam as the beginning of an adventure:

Playing accompaniments, I felt all about me an awareness,
conscious in the few, shared, like an infection, to some extent

by all, of the strangeness of the adventure of *being*, of the fact of the existence, anywhere, of anything at all. (638)

When Miriam's life at Dimple Hill becomes complicated because of a romantic entanglement and the Quakers' disapproval of her conduct – an experience that shatters her recent idealisation of rural life – it is unsurprising that she again seeks refuge in St. John's Wood. The rented room in an ordinary middle-class household, Miriam observes, begins to offer itself as her 'native heath'. Miriam's comments suggest an intense engagement with, rather an escape from, her material environment: 'Here, the very sunlight, compared with the sunlight along the main roads, seems more mellow and leisurely. In the brief local roadways and odd passages people go about as if at home, at ease' (656). Her habitation in St. John's Wood is possible not only because her complex inner life and a more formulated self-identity enable her mentally to create 'a gathering of events which are temporally and spatially different',³⁸ but also because her experience at the YWBA has made her aware of her ability to transform mere habitats into her 'native heath'.

Richardson's use of the word 'heath' recalls Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in which the moors symbolise wild nature and the equally wild (anti)hero Heathcliff. In Richardson's novel, however, Miriam uses the word 'heath' to describe not an actual rural setting, but any space that she can experience as untamed, liberating, and adventurous. Although she was initially hesitant to leave 'the sheltering depths of London' (629), Miriam now relishes her long 'ramble[s] from suburb to centre' (657). It is thus only when she realises her own 'spatial agency', that she can sit in her room in St. John's Wood and contemplate, embarking on an imaginative 'adventure into discovery' and flying off into 'the furthest reaches of one's being' (657); she thus begins to create what Lefebvre would term as imaginative, *lived* spaces that break down dominant spatial codes.

While Miriam's acceptance of St. John's Wood as a suitable home reflects her realisation that she can create liberating spaces within

³⁸ Bronfen, op. cit, p.83.

various settings, it does not mean that the character begins to approve of what she views to be a conventional suburban lifestyle: as mentioned above, Miriam still maintains that she could never be a 'suburban housewife' (658). Furthermore, it is implied by her comments concerning the specific qualities of St. John's Wood that she would not be as confident in constructing innovative domestic arrangements in any other suburb:

All the gardens, every side road I passed, held trees. Large. Old. St. John's *Wood*. Remainders, they must be, distinguishing it from other suburbs. Making it perhaps unique. (631)

It is not surprising that Miriam's first, brief habitation in St. John's Wood is the one suburban experience which finally makes her realise that not all suburban lives have to be, or are, the same. Her tenancy in this specific suburb emphasises her middle-class standing and complements her emerging identity as an aspiring artist.

Conclusion

Representations of suburbia in *Pilgrimage* clearly play a central role in Miriam's elaboration of individual privacy and meanings and types of 'space', as well as Richardson's interrogation of the developing consciousness of a working middle-class woman. Although Miriam's response to lower-middle-class Banbury Park and, later, all suburbs, involves some rather typical disparagements about this style of habitation, the discrepancies between the protagonist's exciting experiences in diverse suburbs and her persistent generalisations about suburban life identify her responses as deeply subjective and suggest that suburbia is repeatedly *misread* as monolithic and one-dimensional. Richardson's focus on Miriam's responses to various suburban settings also highlights the key role that external spaces play in the development of women's consciousness; she thus subverts the notion of a sealed female interiority based on which early-nineteenth-century planners planned their ideal of suburban,

familial, private sphere. In this sense, Richardson's portrayals of suburbia in the *Pilgrimage* texts 'offer an endorsement or contestation of official representation of space' and testify to the experimental nature of her work.³⁹

Deborah Parsons observes that a writer is not simply a figure in, but a producer of the city, who adds 'maps to the city atlas' that incorporate 'myth, memory, fantasy, and desire'.⁴⁰ Unlike the majority of *fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth-century literary authors and journalists, who portrayed suburbia (and 'things suburban') one-dimensionally to indicate a general feminisation of British culture, Richardson creates a (hetero)trope of suburbia that inspires artistic projects and discourses on gender, class, and space. By offering her response to recent geographic, demographic, and discursive phenomena, Richardson grounds a very elusive and contested signifier at the intersection of gender politics, modernity, and modernism. In this sense, *Pilgrimage* shows the productive and innovative energies that suburban development occasioned in fiction, revealing new and unexpected semantic potential.

³⁹ Thacker, *op. cit.*, p.41. Thacker does not discuss Richardson's works.

⁴⁰ Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p.1.