

## THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE WRITING LIFE

*Amy Shearn*

Is the compulsion to write a blessing or a curse? What makes someone a great novelist? Or perhaps the more important question is: how does one create a writing life?

Maybe I should start here: I first heard of Dorothy Richardson the same way many people do, as a footnote in an undergraduate Virginia Woolf seminar.<sup>1</sup> A mostly forgotten author, who was credited with inventing the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique I (an aspiring writer who loved playing with language) studied in all my Modernist Lit classes? I was fascinated, but her books were hard to come by, and the internet in its infancy.

Then the summer after that seminar I happened upon a copy of *Pointed Roofs* for cheap in an English-language used bookstore in Amsterdam. Amsterdam was the last stop on my own modest pilgrimage, a solo backpacking trip across Europe at age twenty. I was, like *Pilgrimage*'s Miriam, trying to figure out how I was going to live in the world. I wanted to be independent and I wanted to be a writer. And, like Miriam, I was not looking at an inheritance that would support me, *à la* Virginia Woolf. Miriam and I were going to have to figure out a way to live, support ourselves, and still write the boundary-pushing fiction we wanted to write.

Over the years I have acquired both a complete, original set of all the volumes of *Pilgrimage* (thank you, husband!) and my own writing life, having published two literary, genre-bending novels, a handful of short stories, and countless essays. Like Dorothy, I've balanced (or tried to, often failing) creating ambitious fiction with being my own patron. She worked in a dental office and wrote

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://electricliterature.com/rendering-the-texture-of-a-womans-consciousness-a-conversation-with-louisa-treger-author-of-the-aacb95881c10>. Accessed 4 January 2018.

freelance articles to make ends meet; I work in an editorial office and write freelance articles to make ends meet.

As life gets more and more complicated, the way it tends to – Dorothy had her ailing Alan Odle to care for and a high-maintenance household to run; I have two children to care for and, well, a small New York City apartment to order groceries for via apps. For me, for Dorothy, for Miriam, there is always the question: why keep writing? Why do we keep trying to make a great, or good, thing? Why isn't it enough for Miriam to marry or take domestic work like her sisters do? Why isn't it enough for me to be a wife and mother?

Miriam's gnawing discontent – that condition that so often goes hand-in-hand with inarticulate ambition – defines much of her story, and it's something I relate to as much now as I did on my mini-grand-voyage nearly twenty years ago. I remember walking the streets of Amsterdam, like Miriam in London, buoyed by an intangible energy, a certain weird nebulous joy in being alive, being young, being alone in an interesting city. I was going to have a big, extraordinary life! It was about to begin!

But was it, really? And what does that look like, a big, extraordinary life? In theory, I love the idea of finding meaning and significance in the mundane (in fact have written freelance articles about this very concept!).<sup>2</sup> My life would be so much easier if I could be content working my job, taking care of my kids, being a partner to my husband, eating stuff, buying stuff, just being an ordinary American human. In some moments, I am. And yet...

*Pilgrimage* has always held a magical quality for me. Even after all these years I will pick up a volume after some time away, read a page, and encounter an observation about life, some sentence about what it is to be a person in the world, and (significantly for me) a woman in a city, that makes me want to twirl with happiness.

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Shearn, 'When Swimming Felt Like a Prayer', <https://forward.com/culture/longform/332727/when-swimming-felt-like-prayer/>; Amy Shearn, 'What to do when you're feeling defeated', <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/what-to-do-when-youre-feeling-defeated>.

When Richardson writes, ‘No one who had never been alone in London was quite alive’, substitute New York City for London and I feel so understood!<sup>3</sup> Miriam has a rapturous time in London, communing with the city as she walks, thinking, ‘I am part of the dense smooth clean paving stone ...’ (I 416) and ‘Why am I so happy and free?’ (II 98). I often feel this way walking around New York, and the city is so much a part of my life, and my family’s life, that it often feels like another (delightful, difficult, generous, needy) family member.

Sometimes that’s enough. I read a page or two and I am happy. Other times I get hooked and carry on for another hundred pages or so. Sometimes I put the book down for months or years at a time, and inevitably as soon as I pick it up again, Richardson will throw out a line to sustain me.

She writes in *The Tunnel*, ‘perhaps only those who had moved from one experience to another could get that curious feeling of a real self that stayed the same through thing after thing’ (II 101). Here too she seems to be speaking directly to me. Like Miriam, I spent my early twenties bouncing from thing to thing. I tried working in a school, like Miriam does, and realized I lacked the patience; I worked at a magazine and at several websites and I taught. Everything felt either not demanding enough or way too demanding. Did I feel, each time I quit one thing and started another, that I was getting closer to discovering who I truly am as a person, to understanding my consciousness? Um, I guess so?

Or another sustaining line – when my kids were quite small I was reading *Honeycomb*, in which Miriam thinks, ‘So there was nothing for women in marriage and children. Because they had no thoughts. Their husbands grew to hate them because they had no thoughts’ (I 439). I’d been struggling with moments when I feared I was becoming a human-and-home-caring-for-automaton, separated from the thinking, working, creative person I’d always wanted to be, that I had been before becoming a mother. My husband and I started dating right after I returned from that solo

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<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* Vol.2 (London: Virago, 1979), p.76. From here on references in parenthesis by volume and page number.

European trek, so had I created an independent life? We had been drawn to each other's creative energy, but if I spent a lot more time changing diapers than I did writing, was I still that same thoughtful, engaged, ambitious writer he'd fallen in love with?

By the 1920s, Richardson was often mentioned in the same breath as Woolf, Joyce, and Proust, but there was always a key difference – a difference that becomes clear when considering both Miriam's life story and Dorothy's writing patterns – for all of her adult life, Richardson was poor. (Then as now, good reviews didn't exactly guarantee cash flow.) Her writing examines the daily life of not just any woman, but a working woman; a woman who lives off the coffee and rolls she can afford at London's A.B.C. teashops, a woman for whom the meal and tea included in her office job pay are crucial, a woman who seeks to figure out not just how to be creative, how to play with formal structure and most expressively use punctuation – though these are significant concerns of hers – but who also has to figure out how to support herself, how to make each month's rent. People sometimes describe modernism (or literature in general, these days) as being elitist, but there are a lot more Miriam Hendersons in the world than Clarissa Dalloways or Leopold Blooms.

This affects the texture of the book, and I can't help but think it affected Richardson's writing life, too. Ridiculously, I have a bit of this complex myself. I say 'ridiculously' because I've never teetered as close to the brink of destitution as Dorothy did. I have the benefit of a spouse who is gainfully employed, thank goodness, with all due respect to the Odles of the world. But I am a working mother, with a full-time job; my writing gets fit in wherever I can find the time. I feel the pressure of bringing in income as well as the seemingly diametrically opposed pressure of wanting to create art for art's sake. (I relate way too much to moments like when Miriam realizes she's just not cut out for her current job and laments, 'Then nothing matters. Just one little short life' (I 170).) While most writers I know operate in the same way, it's the three or four I know who don't, who seem to have secret sources of funding that allow their days to be focused on creative work, that I think of grouchily when I spend a Saturday away from my family

trying to remember what it was I'd been working on a month earlier when last I found the time to write. I can only imagine how Dorothy must have thought of, say, Virginia Woolf, who considered herself poor when she could only afford one house servant (Dorothy had none), who worked at her printing press but, admittedly, on her own terms and in a literary way, while Dorothy put in hours in a dental office.

Whether it's work or relationships or the ways women shape their lives, Miriam is always interrogating the meanings of things; indeed, she can't get through a social event or walk down the street without pondering the point of it all. Maybe because of this (or vice versa?) she often feels a bit apart, outside the flow of life, separated from her fellow humans. 'What was life?' Miriam thinks, 'Either playing a part all the time in order to be amongst people in the warm, or standing alone with the strange true real feeling – alone with a sort of edge of reality on everything; even on quite ugly common things – cheap boarding-houses, face-towels and blistered window frames' (I 320).

Why can't people like Miriam, like Dorothy, like me, 'be amongst people in the warm'? What is this compulsion to analyze, to dig deep, to stand 'alone with the strange true real feeling'? I guess it's part of what makes a person a writer (or an artist, or a musician, or a scientist ... any of the searching fields). I too have stood at the edge of a party in a daze, thinking, *Everything is made of language*, a modern-day Miriam in a cheap H&M dress. All of which is to say: I never feel quite so understood as when I'm reading Richardson.

Richardson didn't love the famous 'stream of consciousness' metaphor. It seemed, like a traditional plot, too linear. She protested:

It's not a stream, it's a pool, a sea, an ocean. It has depth and greater depth and when you think you have reached the bottom there is nothing there, and when you give yourself up to one current you are suddenly possessed by another.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent Brome, 'A Last Meeting with Dorothy Richardson', *London Magazine*, 6 (June 1959): 29.

But oh, that giving oneself up!

In lieu of narrative or plot, Richardson, like Miriam, works to discern whether life is about *being* or about *becoming*. The book concerns itself with the often-invisible process of ‘eternal becoming’ – what life, after all, really is. Miriam’s story is about living, rather than achieving – which is not how most people I know in New York City think, not even how most plot-based, conclusion-bound novels are shaped.

I suppose that in the end, *Pilgrimage* is about patience – the writing of it was, the reading of it is. Significantly, the book does not borrow the language of a journey or a quest – these are movements towards a finite end, and you know when they have been completed. A pilgrimage, on the other hand, contains inklings of the religious. There is a destination, but the real journeying often happens within or on a spiritual plane.

If she weren’t a seeker, Miriam would be comfortable in an ordinary life – like her sisters who choose jobs such as being a governess, or a teacher, or the domestic life of marriage – and she would fit into an ordinary kind of book. But she doesn’t. Miriam has too much quiet wildness in her.

Dorothy must have had this quiet wildness, too, this restless spirit. What else could have possessed her to take on such an enormously ambitious writing project, never knowing if it would all see the light of day? And which, when it was published in its (near) completion, on the eve of World War II, sold abysmally, and disappeared. How did she deal with the frustration? What kills me is the thought that she, as her biographer Gloria Fromm wrote, lost heart. ‘[*Pilgrimage*] was finished in her own heart most of all. The life of her novel had run its course, but the course had ended too soon, and she was left, it seemed, with a pathless pilgrimage.’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Gloria G. Fromm, *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 1994), p.321.

We all need our ballast. Dorothy lost hers, it seems, when after all her years of work *Pilgrimage* didn't take off, and no one seemed to care to read her concluding pages. I suspect that it was the project she really mourned, rather than the commercial success it might have been. I've talked to a lot of people who have taken on hugely long-term projects – a quilter who worked on a blanket for nearly fifty years, a rock climber who trained for a decade to scale an impossible climb – and they always say the same thing: they feel relieved but also intensely sad when the thing is over, awash in a kind of existential post-partum depression. They all agree that the best part was never the accomplishment itself, but rather having this way to structure their lives, this thing to work towards, this singular sense of purpose.

It breaks my heart to think that Richardson lost this. Especially when reading and thinking about *Pilgrimage* has been something I've come back to again and again, has formed the backbone of my own writing life, a way to bolster myself when I'm feeling lost, or alone, or hopeless.

Let me here admit something: while I have been reading this book for twenty years, I haven't gotten through the entire thing. This used to bother me. I used to feel like I couldn't talk or write about my obsession with *Pilgrimage*; I didn't have the authority to say anything, did I, if I hadn't even finished reading it! But it occurs to me now that maybe this is okay. Maybe this is just the counterintuitive, anti-establishment subtext Richardson was working with. Perhaps it's exactly what the book wants to teach us—that you don't have to finish. That the goal is not to achieve anything, to reach some ultimate epiphany. That sometimes the ongoingness of a project – reading, writing, whatever it is – is the entire point. That the process, the journey, the pilgrimage if you will, is the entire point. Miriam lives in a constant state of becoming, and so should we.