
HON 499 Honors Thesis or Creative Project

Honors

Spring 2021

Dorothy Richardson's Pilgrimage: Text and Contexts

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Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*:

Text and Contexts

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May 21, 2021

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

University Honors Scholar Designation

Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, an experimental novel in thirteen episodes, is an enormous achievement in British literature. Richardson's revolutionary use of narration and psychological realism forever altered fiction. Published from 1915-1967, it anticipates the subjective playfulness and stylistic experimentation of Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* (1927), Joyce's *Ulysses* (1918-1920), and later intellectual shifts in how to reinterpret Victorian culture for the twentieth century.

This honors thesis emphasizes how *Pilgrimage* represents literary Modernism, a major artistic movement in the twentieth century, by pioneering representations of subjective temporality in fiction through the stream of consciousness technique. Modernist works are often provocative and experimental, as new forms of narration, philosophical introspection, and temporal playfulness were hallmarks of this artistic movement. For example, James Joyce's *Ulysses* features bizarre, subjective, and often scattered thoughts of Leopold Bloom with fragmented sentences meant to represent the character's chaotic consciousness. This stream of consciousness technique enabled a more democratized notion of fiction; essentially, the idea that fiction should not assume an omniscient view of itself but instead embrace the subjectivity of its characters. Like *Ulysses*, Richardson's *Pilgrimage* also explores an individual character's stream of consciousness in comparison with a complex cultural landscape; given *Pilgrimage*'s earlier publication compared, Richardson's text may be an important, if overlooked, precursor to prominent Modernist texts such as *Ulysses* and *To The Lighthouse*.

Pilgrimage's first episode, "Pointed Roofs," published in 1915, represented a massive shift in British literature. The text recreates protagonist Miriam Henderson's radical subjectivity of fluid, intimate thoughts through the stream of consciousness literary technique in which sentences are constructed to represent the immediate tactical experiences, thoughts, and temporal

experiences through an autodiegetic (first person) perspective. This honors thesis will explore how Richardson's novel represents the Modernist project of subjective experience by comparing its use of stream of consciousness technique with the *To The Lighthouse* (1925), a novel, and William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1890), a philosophy and neuroscience treatise that articulated how associative thought processes and a sense of "presentness" underlie all human subjectivity; it is an essential foundation for the stream of consciousness technique used by Modernist fiction writers in the twentieth century.

Prominent scholarship on *Pilgrimage* often notes that the text pioneered the representation of women's inner lives: Miriam's inner thoughts fluidly move between gender roles, art criticism, philosophy, religion, and sensory experience – in effect, a full representation of human consciousness. This rich internal life departs from the Victorian literary imagination, which largely elided radical subjectivity in its style, and often examined female characters through close third-person narration instead of the fluid representations of consciousness seen in Modernist texts such as *Pilgrimage*.^y The scholarly consensus also views Richardson's texts as an early example of revising dominant Victorian discourses on gender and sexuality. For example, Maren Linett observes that Miriam gradually rejects traditional gender ideals by the end of her journey:

Miriam has discarded the "inapplicable metaphors" of gender ... [as] she has ... progressed away from some of the 'insufficiencies of masculine thought.' She has, that is, come to see gender as more fluid than she had imagined it in *Deadlock* [*Pilgrimage*'s sixth episode]. While her initial rejection of femininity ... helps her move past much of her misogyny, her weakened misogyny and more flexible view of

gender have, in turn, allowed her to overcome the metaphorical proposition ... [of femininity]" (208).

Essentially, Miriam's worldview evolves to eventually transcend cultural metaphors of both masculinity and femininity. Though *Pilgrimage* holds enormous value as a text for feminist literary criticism, this honors thesis will explore *Pilgrimage* in the context of literary Modernism's innovative exploration of subjective temporality; this focus does not diminish previous scholarly efforts of feminist criticism, but instead places the novel within a twentieth century intellectual context, an effort intended to complement the work of prior Richardson scholars.

William James' radical work in neuroscience and philosophy conducted at the turn of the twentieth century bears enormous influence on the stream of consciousness technique. James viewed the human mind as a state of constant flux where thoughts, sensations, memories, and reasoning moved in and out of focus. His influential theory of physiology and consciousness impacted the English-speaking world's view of the human mind and subjective experience. This change reveals itself in twentieth century fiction, which represented thoughts and individual perceptions of time in new ways unprecedented in the Victorian era. Though much scholarship on this literary change surrounds well-known authors such as Joseph Conrad and James Joyce, Richardson does not receive as much scholarly attention. This honors thesis explores the relationship between James' intellectual concepts and Richardson's novel in order to demonstrate *Pilgrimage*'s relevance to the twentieth century's artistic and intellectual changes.

Pilgrimage embodies Jamesian stream of consciousness through Miriam's narration, which closely follows the fluid, associative thought process described by James and other twentieth

century scientists. Miriam's inchoate stream of consciousness narration conveys the novel's interest in temporality. With Miriam as a focal point, Richardson's text constructs idiosyncratic, atemporal alternatives to sequential time that serve as the centerpiece of its literary experimentation. The novel also represents a specifically British Literary Modernism that intertwines temporal disruption with engagement and criticism of Victorian culture. Specifically, the novel challenges the Victorian era's industrialized notion of time through contrast with Miriam's narration, which flexibly engages with and stands apart from clearly delineated linear time. In addition to critiquing Victorian temporality, Miriam's narration also expands the intellectual horizons for female characters in British fiction beyond Victorian cultural restraints, and it brings Richardson's text into conversation with a similar (and more famous) work of Modernist fiction, Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, which also evolves literary representations of women's consciousness through Modernist techniques. *Pilgrimage* not only creates a model of a temporally fluid novel for the twentieth century, but also positions itself as a self-conscious departure from the previous century's Victorian culture. In effect, the novel flaunts its capacity to forge a new era for British literary fiction in which Miriam's intensely personal, idiosyncratic self becomes the primary means for the reader to experience a new form of British literature that represents twentieth century intellectual thought.

Pilgrimage, by virtue of its careful sentence structure, analyzes the Victorian past in concert with its interest in temporality and lived experience. For example, the text uses Miriam's payment of Mrs. Bailey's bills to examine the relationship between time and profit inherited from the Victorian era. Miriam develops a subjective experience of two different temporalities while paying rent, and the text suggests that her bodily gestures comprise an atemporal

experience separate from inherently avaricious flow of time. For example: when Miriam compares her experiences her previous landlord, Mrs. Bailey, and her current landlord, Sheffield:

The payment of Mrs. Bailey's bills, looked back to now, seemed to be all a single transaction: a chance meeting on the stairs, a hurried handling of money, eye to eye, smiling. A single guilty moment and then a resumption of a relationship not based on money. It had marked, not the passage of time, but its rest, at an unchanging centre. Paying rent to this man would be counting off time; and a weekly reminder of the payment for life going on all over the world. To be obliged at the best moment of each week to face Sheffield, acknowledging another week passed in the world as he saw it, would be to fight without weapons against the mocking reflection in the mirror he held up. Richardson 4: 447-448

The regular rent payments to her current landlord, Sheffield "would be counting off time," diction implying that time can be measured in monetary units. This pecuniary time measurement. Miriam anticipates that her experience of these payments will remind her of others making the same weekly rent payments, an observation that bridges Miriam's personal experience to the socioeconomic status of a larger whole, a dyad central to this passage. Before she acknowledges time's monetary nature, Miriam observes how her "single transaction ... a chance meeting ... eye to eye, smiling," removes her from the "passage of time"; instead, time itself rests for Miriam, who experiences its "unchanging centre" while paying Mrs. Bailey. The sentence emphasizes Miriam and Mrs. Bailey's bodily movements, noting the movements of hands, eyes, and smiles. The intimate physicality at time's placid centre suggests that the flow of

time (and presumably, the flow of money) exists apart from ambiguous, unstructured felt experience Miriam has when bumping into Mrs. Bailey, with immediate bodily experience supplanting the larger economic abstraction of rentiers and the progressing time that drives their payments to landlords. The contrast between felt experience and external temporal and economic issues reinforces the novel's interest between the intensely internal, idiosyncratic workings of Miriam's mind, and larger, even global issues, of economics, art, and politics, though in the instance of her relationship with Mrs. Bailey, Miriam's consciousness separates from temporality itself, an instance that grants enormous ontological importance to her individual consciousness.

The depiction of a pecuniary temporality governing lives on mass scale harkens back to Victorian industrialization, in which an systematically organized workforce experienced time in a clockwork and pecuniary fashion as a result of their employment and commute, a temporal alteration that even impacted their experience of art. Mark Turner observes that "notions of periodical time ... [shifted] the understandings and representations of time in the development of modernity" (qtd. in Lund and Hughes 184). Victorian serial publication, for example, was experienced by readers in "periodic time," with texts published in weekly, biweekly and monthly installments. Indeed, Micheal Lund and Linda Hughs argue that serial novelization was a "literary analogue ... [to] confidence that an investment (whether of time or money in the present would reap greater rewards in the future)" in Victorian England's industrialized understanding of temporality (4).

The flow of "periodic time" presumably creates an increase in value; recurring serialized chapters, for example add plot developments, much as recurring financial concerns presumably represent return on investment; Victorian assumptions about the peculiarity flow of time suggest an experience of reality in which all value increases with predictable, scheduled progression

within a context of time's progression. "Periodic time," then, represents a mechanized notion of human experience, with linear time encapsulating efficient, stable organization. Though the scheduled rent payments that Miriam pays on Mrs. Bailey's behalf does not yield increased value, the weekly rent payments are scheduled, financial deposits that are "a weekly reminder of the payment for life" that defines one's relationship to "periodic time," with time's passage measured in regular financial transactions.

Miriam's experience of rent challenges "periodic time" by contextualizing its systemic progression of linear time within a more complicated temporal discourse. The text criticizes Victorian temporality when Miriam notes that paying rent is "acknowledging another week passed in the world as he saw it [in periodic time], would be to fight without weapons against the mocking reflection in the mirror he [Sheffield] held up." By engaging in "periodic time" by paying rent, Miriam validates the "mocking reflection [of herself] in the mirror" that she imagines. The use of "mocking" as a choice of diction suggests that Sheffield, and by extension "periodic time" itself, makes cruel amusement of those forced to participate in it.

The text's negative portrayal of pecuniary time goes hand in hand with its assertion that "periodic time" operates at a mass, abstracted capacity, with "weekly reminder of the payment for life going on all over the world." The text contrasts this abstraction with atemporality. By contrast, Miriam's lived experience of the world;, her thoughtless reflexive bodily movements ("eye to eye, smiling ") stands apart from the larger world of temporal progress and finance. When Miriam interacts directly with Mrs. Bailey, meeting her in chance encounters, in small gestures that comprise a stillness "at time's unchanging centre," the text suggests an atemporal alternative to the experience of temporality inherited from Victorian industrialization. The contrast exists not only between temporality and atemporality, but with how Miriam's human

interactions with Mrs. Bailey represent genuine human gestures while simultaneously representing a larger abstraction of financial predation that occurs at a mass scale; the “stillness” of Miriam’s lived experience complicates the Victorian temporal discourse.

The text notes that the lived experience of “periodic time” is minor when Miriam meets with Mrs. Bailey: “the payment of Mrs. Bailey’s bills ... a chance meeting on the stairs, a hurried handling of money, eye to eye, smiling. A single guilty moment and then a resumption of a relationship not based on money”; the “guilty moment” is a brief lapse into industrialized temporality. Otherwise, “time’s unchanging centre” prevails. Despite articulating manifestations of “periodic time” in some detail, the passage observes that though rent payment may be a mass experience, it does not comprise an absolute, consistent experience of time. Fascinatingly, Sheffield does not possess multiple experiences of time, but lives exclusively in the linear progression of capitalistic temporality with no disruption, as the routine system of rent payment reflects his worldview.

Sheffield, the only male character in this scene, seems incompatible with Miriam’s unique temporal experiences. Despite the text’s interest in Miriam’s specifically female interiority, the text does not deny Sheffield atemporality due to his manhood, as throughout *Pilgrimage*, only Miriam has atemporal experiences; the text does not give any characters external to Miriam a similar depth of consciousness, regardless of gender. Sheffield merely embodies the dominant, mechanized view of time that Miriam’s subjectivity subverts.

Unlike Sheffield, Miriam experiences a bifurcated form of time in which her minute lived experiences carve out a distinct, subjective space specific to her that challenges linear time. Miriam’s radical subjectivity brings *Pilgrimage* into a larger conversation in literary modernism:

female characters with idiosyncratic, inner selves, articulated through stream-of-consciousness style, that form individual experiences of time.

Pilgrimage engages with the Victorian era through the literary sensibilities of high modernism by framing “periodic time” through the lens of idiosyncratic, bodily gesture rooted in the felt experience of Miriam’s senses. The text grapples with Victorian temporality by having Miriam engage with it as a matter of ordinary lived experience – its pecuniary flow occurs only for a sustained, “guilty” moment that stands apart from ordinary experience. Miriam’s ordinary gestures towards Mrs. Bailey comprise a distinct atemporality, with Miriam ensconced in “stillness” apart from the progression of the external world. The alteration of time in relation to idiosyncratic, individual experience brings *Pilgrimage* into conversation with the texts and intellectual worldview of Modernism, an artistic movement premised on the intersection of subjective, stream-of-consciousness realizations and larger abstractions of culture and politics; the minute details of an individual mind are emphasized, and this intimate understanding of characters felt experience of narrative progression – rather than the reader grasping the overall narrative progression itself – forms the core of the Modern novel.

Literary Modernism encouraged prose fiction to radically depart from its Victorian predecessors, embracing new world-views regarding science and the human mind and breaking away from clockwork plotting in favor of experimental structures and stream of consciousness narration. For example, some twentieth century texts, such as *To The Lighthouse*, present time in jarring, idiosyncratic ways that make for a sharp contrast with the linear representation of time in Victorian fiction. Modernist fiction’s reinvention of temporal representation pushed back against the strictly linear temporality of Victorian prose. The ordinary Victorian, experienced “modern capitalism’s conversion of units of time into units of profit, labor, and loss” (Vasington 612) in a

rapidly industrializing culture, which resulted in a depersonalized, yet universal experience of time both in the life of the ordinary worker and in orderly fictional plots – often consumed in serial format – in which time progressed linearly and independently of the individual consciousness of literary characters.

A particular sequence in Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* illustrates how Modernist texts render time subjective for both her characters and her implied reader. Mrs. Ramsay chides James for fidgeting (“stand still”) (26) in “The Window”, and after her command the text devotes a page to her thought process as she leaps from one loosely connected thought to another until the text abruptly presents the reader with “ ‘Stand still, don’t be so tiresome, so that he knew instantly that her severity was real’ ” (28). Through Mrs. Ramsay’s perspective, the reader does not experience objective time (a perpetually unfolding present) but individual, subjective time via her train of thought. The present – James’s fidgets, Mrs. Ramsay’s reprimands – seems to freeze so that the text can relay every thought that flits through her mind between the first reprimand and the second. The focalization forces the reader to experience time as Mrs. Ramsay does.

The sequence provides an intimate experience of human consciousness at the expense of linear plot progression. Non-linear moments such as this passage of Woolf’s approximate human thought, which is often circulatory and moves between memory and imagination through association by similarity. This intimacy obscures a logical, ordered sequence of events from the reader, providing assorted subjective perspectives that brush against – but never reveal with perfect clarity, the objective world of linear time progression.

Pilgrimage represents an early instance of the atemporal discourse that the slippery temporality of Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* would later inhabit and develop further. Miriam’s

consciousness stands apart from time during her brief gestures with Mrs. Bailey; Richardson explicitly states that Miriam stands “at time’s unchanging centre,” a concept novel at the time for both its temporality and for the potential of women’s consciousness. *To The Lighthouse* further develops the notion of time’s “unchanging centre” and realizes Richardson’s described concept of atemporal consciousness through Mrs. Ramsay’s diffuse thoughts as they unfurl independently of time’s linear progression.

Not incidentally, *To The Lighthouse* also centers a female protagonist (several, in fact, as the text progresses) and uses a distinctly female consciousness to interpret Victorian femininity for the twentieth century; *Pilgrimage* does the same. As with its literary discourse on temporality, *Pilgrimage* also radically expands on what a woman’s mind could encompass. For example, Miriam entertains thoughts on the validity of Christianity and women’s roles. She observes that conviviality and the joy of good conversation exists in profane materialism, yet also finds that while these pleasures are insufficient, divine worship does not fully satisfy either: “the love of God was like a mother always ... waiting for you to be good ... the things one wanted one could not have if were just tame and good. It is morbid to think about being good; better the fair mask – anything. But it did not make people happy. These people were not happy. They were not real” (Richardson 3: 391). Given Victorian England’s insistence upon women being the moral center of families, Miriam’s thoughts that morals might diminish in appeal by virtue of being prescriptive are certainly groundbreaking. Curiously, Miriam compares God to “a mother ... waiting for you to be good,” which associates God’s moral authority with the maternal authority a mother exert over a child. The maternal role of morality – if not dismissed – simply becomes another option rather than a mandate, which makes this a quietly revolutionary thought from Miriam. In effect, *Pilgrimage* represents a burgeoning discourse in which Victorian moral

maternity does not represent the only valid expression of the female mind in British literary fiction.

As with the discourse on atemporality, *To The Lighthouse* expands upon *Pilgrimage*'s quiet feminism and suggests further possibilities for intellectual women. Shannon Forbes observes that *To The Lighthouse* critiques conventional maternity through the character of Mrs. Ramsay, on whom maternal duties take a psychological toll, one contrasted unfavorably with the feminism of her daughter, Cam, who "wants to escape to a world where she may educate herself, think, and become a historian and a philosopher" (475) in contrast with her mother's Victorian life habits. Therefore, *To The Lighthouse* critiques a notable aspect of Victorian culture (traditional gender roles) and offers a contemporary alternative (through Cam) presumed to be superior, and does so boldly.

This thesis contends that Richardson's text encapsulates a budding intellectual discourse on temporality and femininity within British Modernism, and serves as an early and essential example of literary experimentation to be refined by later novelists in the British Modernist tradition. *Pilgrimage* responds to the Victorian era and reimagines its discourses of both temporality and femininity; textual details from *To The Lighthouse* suggest that Woolf's text represents a later refinement of the same discursive literary inquiry into women's consciousness and temporal slipperiness. Though there is not a direct causal relationship between *Pilgrimage* and *To The Lighthouse*, the former serves as an early breakthrough in articulating twentieth century intellectualism through literary experimentation, and acknowledging Richardson's under-recognized achievement does not diminish Woolf's text, but instead positions it as a sister text that accomplishes similar goals with modest evolution and different authorial voice.

Apart from its interpretations of Victorian cultural inheritance, *Pilgrimage* also reflects William James' contemporary neurological advancements in embodied consciousness through its use of stream of consciousness as a literary technique. Miriam's passing gestures towards Mrs. Bailey represent Richardson's engagement with this new understanding of the mind as a constant state of flux. The passage captures Miriam's "specious present", a phenomena explained by James in *The Principles of Psychology*. He explains that "The only fact of our immediate experience is what Mr. E. R. Clay has well called 'the *specious present*'" (694), which James frames as a false sense of presentness created by one's stream-of-consciousness. As soon as one articulates a *now*, that *now* has already ceased to be the *now* the speaker had in mind as the word formed on her lips. James divides time into "duration-blocks" (694), individual perceived units of time which flow continuously from futureness to pastness; at no point do the duration-blocks become the present. Caught in the perpetual flow between futureness and pastness, "We do not first feel one end and then feel the other after it, and from the perception of the succession infer an interval of time between, but we seem to feel the interval of time as a whole, with its two ends embedded in it" (James 610); this "whole" forms the human mind's sense of presentness, which in actuality is an illusion formed by the consciousness's vantage point of oncoming duration-blocks transitioning from futureness to pastness. Every person's stream of consciousness manufactures this specious present at all times

Specious present

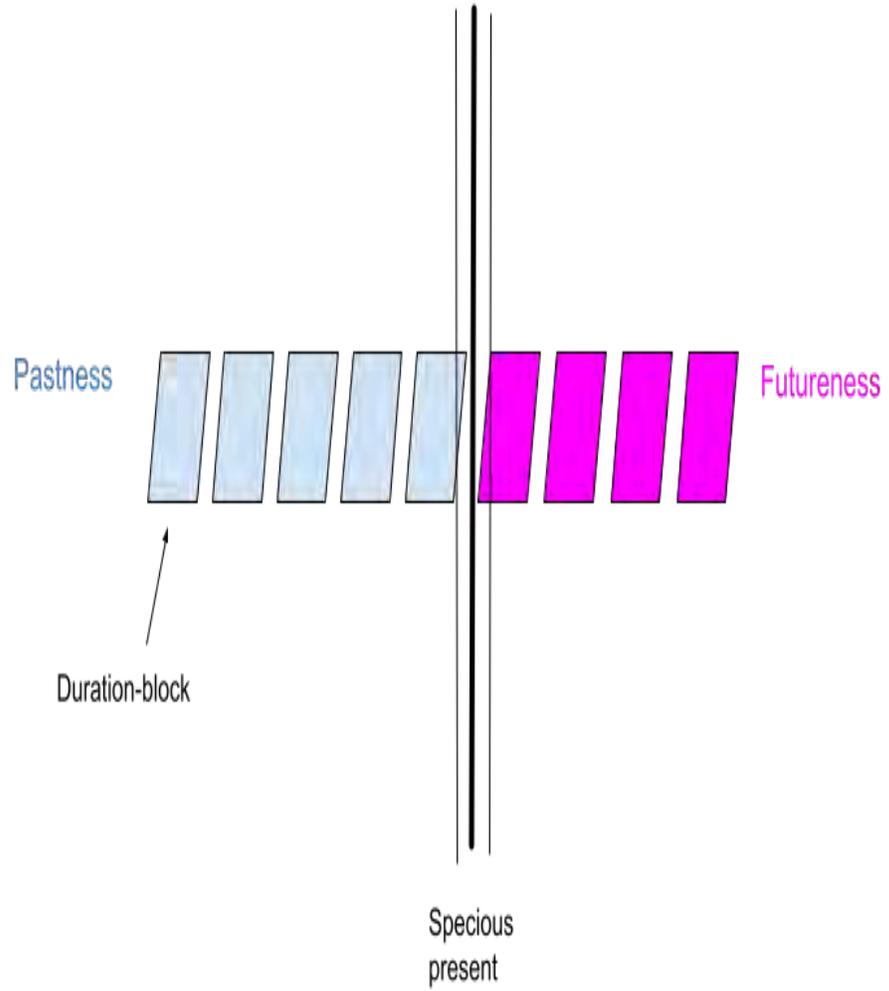


Figure 1.

Illustration by Nathan McIvor

Miriam's specious present manifests itself when she pays rent to Mrs. Bailey: the "chance meeting on the stairs, a hurried handling of money, eye to eye, smiling" each of these fleeting moments comprises a distinct duration-block of Miriam's consciousness in which a single moment of thought and sensory input defines Miriam's sense of presentness. These fleeting duration-blocks comprise Miriam's atemporal experience, and form a scene in which she moves beyond Sheffield's embodiment of linear time and inhabits James' specious present in striking contrast. In effect, Miriam's unique individual consciousness embodies twentieth century developments in understanding the human mind; Miriam's atemporal state offers an alternate view of time than that of the Victorian era in which the slippery, fragmented experience of presentness defines time's perception instead of clear, sequential progress.

Apart from its discourse on temporality, the text also articulates the Jamesian stream of consciousness in textual form through unusual sentence structures that convey the flux of sensory experience, thought, and memory that comprises Miriam's radical subjectivity throughout the novel. For example, Miriam's thoughts often move in a fragmented and associative fashion represented by em dashes and ellipses that represent how she experiences the specious present. Instead of ending sentences with periods, Richardson terminates them with ellipses to represent how one fragment of thought flows directly into another:

Flags of pavement flowing along—smooth clean grey squares and oblongs,
faintly polished, shaping and drawing away—sliding into each other....

I am part of the dense smooth clean paving stone ... sunlit; gleaming
under dark winter rain; shining under warm sunlit rain, sending up a

fresh stony smell ... always there ... dark and light ... dawn,
stealing.... Richardson 1: 416

First, the passage illustrates James' view that humans think through association, in which "every impression ... entering the mind must awaken an image ... in the light of which it is ...understood" (592). When Miriam sees the "flags of pavement," the text leaps from her sight impression of the pavement to her immediate association, in which she interprets the pavement as "smooth clean grey squares and oblongs, faintly polished, shaping and drawing away." This moment illustrates Jamesian associative thought through its careful use of punctuation. Miriam's association of shapes arises after an em dash, which couches this digression in a succession of dependent clauses, signifying a brief departure from her sensory perceptions of the pavement. The dependent clause after the em dash ("smooth clean grey squares and oblongs") begets two more separated by commas ("faintly polished") and ("shaping and drawing away"), and another established by another em dash ("sliding into each other"). The punctuation reflects the fluid nature of her stream of consciousness, which requires Miriam to constantly weave between sensory input and thought while maintaining her focus on one specific area. Because her association of shapes arises in a stream of dependent clauses, it sits on the periphery of Miriam's consciousness. In contrast, her area of focus and the sentence's subject ("flags of pavement flowing along") appears as an independent clause that the subsequent dependent clauses depend upon for structure and context. Richardson's sentence structure mirrors the structure of Jamesian associative thought, with dominant subjects containing small, secondary digressions within themselves. In this moment, the text articulates the fluid and chaotic specious present through

literary means by carefully crafting semiotic echoes of James' view of mental processes; by doing so, it converts the stream of consciousness from scientific exercise to literary form.

The text's close recreation of James' neurological phenomena makes it a direct extension of twentieth century culture, and therefore *Pilgrimage* represents an instance of literature imitating science. Miriam's fluid stream of consciousness owes itself not to prior literary texts, but to contemporaries in the larger Modernist project (James is considered a key figure in Modernism's scientific and cultural loci concerning the human mind.) *Pilgrimage's* investment in broader Modernist intellectualism beyond literature makes it a significant text of the movement, a cross-disciplinary exercise in stream of consciousness, feminine subjectivity, and temporal slipperiness that revisits its Victorian cultural inheritance while conversing with scientific advancement. Though *Pilgrimage* is innovative, it did not create these concepts in a vacuum. Rather, it serves as a waypoint for the early twentieth century's Victorian inheritance and contemporary innovations to commingle and produce a radically new vision of women's minds, intellect, and experiences of time that would heavily influence discourses for successive literary Modernists.

Glossary of Terms

Modernism

An intellectual and cultural movement in the twentieth century that emphasized a cosmopolitan perspective through art and science. It often traced relationships between the intensely personal, chaotic nature of human consciousness and larger abstractions of politics, ideas, and global community.

Literary Modernism

An artistic movement in the twentieth century known for experiments in narration, structure, and language in literary texts. This movement partially repudiated or reinterpreted Victorian artistic or cultural norms in light of the early twentieth century's cultural and scientific innovations.

British Literary Modernism

A cosmopolitan movement of writers across the global British Empire who used Literary Modernism's experimental techniques to (a) interpret British culture prior to the twentieth century – especially Victorianism and (b) explore the legacy of British colonialism.

Temporality

That which relates to time and the experience of time.

Stream of consciousness

A technique by which a literary text attempts to represent subjective experiences and thoughts. For example, Joyce's representation of a single day in Leopold Bloom's life in *Ulysses*.

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