‘Creating unnecessary difficulties’:
The Rise and Fall of Dorothy Richardson’s Critical Success

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Dorothy Richardson’s thirteen-volume Pilgrimage (1915-1967) novel sequence is the coming-of-age story of an aspiring writer, Miriam Henderson, whose narrative is based closely on Richardson’s own. The sequence is considered to be one of the very first literary examples of stream-of-consciousness, predating much of even James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, but is now little-read thanks to its extreme length, unusual punctuation, and innovative shifting narrative style. The defining features of Richardson’s work are the creative narrative style that it utilizes, shifting between first and third person seemingly at random and using punctuation irregularly, as well as her unorthodox use of ellipses. Another unusual formulation of punctuation that Richardson employs in her fifth volume, Interim, is to entirely abandon marking reported speech, deviating from tradition even further than James Joyce, who denoted speech with a dash. However, readers were turning away from Richardson’s already difficult narrative, and her publishers were refusing to finance Interim. The volume was eventually serialized in The Little Review magazine in 1919, and reviewers claimed that Richardson’s newly creative punctuation style confused her narrative even further.

This article explores the rise and fall of critical praise for Richardson’s work, which quickly moved from being described in a newspaper review as ‘startlingly original’ (The Observer 1915) to ‘destitute of incident’ (The Scotsman 1919) and ‘bewildering’ (The Scotsman 1923). This loss of interest in her work, both by critics and readers as well as by her publishers, is then discussed in tandem with the rise and fall of Richardson’s unusual narrative style, which comes and goes throughout the novel sequence, to find parallels between moments of literary innovation and times of critical dissatisfaction.

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Dorothy Richardson’s thirteen-volume Pilgrimage novel sequence, of which the first volume was published in 1915, is the coming-of-age story of an aspiring writer, Miriam Henderson, whose narrative is based closely on Richardson’s own experience. The final instalment was not published until 1967, a full decade after Richardson’s death. As can be expected of a piece of work with such a lengthy and fractured publication history, stylistic changes between volumes and editions are somewhat inevitable. Indeed, Richardson herself noted in a 1934 letter that her American publishers, Knopf, were right to refuse to publish Dawn’s Left Hand, her tenth instalment, as ‘the interval between it and the previous one was too long. Old readers have lost touch and new readers [...] would be at sea’ (1995, p.263). This article will explore the rise and fall of critical responses to Richardson’s work, which quickly moved from being initially complimentary of its innovation to ultimately being critical of its apparently unreadable style. This loss of interest in her work, both by critics and readers as well as by her publishers, will be discussed in tandem with the rise and fall of Richardson’s unusual narrative style, which comes and goes throughout the novel sequence, to find parallels between moments of literary innovation and times of critical dissatisfaction.

The novel sequence is considered to be one of the very first literary examples of stream-of-consciousness, predating much of even James Joyce and Virginia Woolf’s use of the technique, but is now little-read thanks to its extreme length, unusual punctuation, and
innovative shifting narrative style. One of the most striking differences between volumes and editions of *Pilgrimage* is that of punctuation, specifically in relation to the use of ellipses – which Richardson used liberally and extensively – and quotation marks. An unusual formulation of punctuation that Richardson employs in her fifth volume, *Interim*, is to entirely abandon marking reported speech, deviating from tradition even further than James Joyce, who denoted speech with a dash. Another defining feature of Richardson’s style is her narrative shifts from first to third person, seemingly at random, which are often facilitated by ellipses of far more than the common three or four dots. However, readers were turning away from Richardson’s already difficult narrative, and her publishers, Duckworth, initially chose not to put *Interim* out. The volume was eventually serialized in *The Little Review* magazine in 1919, and reviewers claimed that Richardson’s creative punctuation style confused her narrative even further, as I will go on to discuss.

The issue of punctuation, or lack thereof, followed Richardson throughout her writing career. In a 1924 article for *Adelphi* magazine entitled ‘About Punctuation’ she discussed the standardization of punctuation, claiming that ‘the rules of punctuation are neither sacred, nor execrable, nor quite absolute’ (1990, p.417) but that over time writers had begun to use punctuation in a more conventional manner. She asserts, however, that ‘so long as it conforms to rule punctuation is invisible’ (1990, p.417). Thus, by this logic, Richardson’s decision to stray from the conventions of punctuation must have the intention of making it visible. This is contradictory, however, as one of the ways in which Richardson subverted the rules of punctuation was to dismiss speech marks entirely. She addresses this in the foreword to a collected edition of *Pilgrimage*, dated 1938, in which she discusses herself and her work in the third person, stating:

> But when her work is danced upon for being unpunctuated and therefore unreadable, she is moved to cry aloud. For here is truth. Feminine prose [...] should properly be unpunctuated, moving from point to point without formal obstructions (1990, p.431).

Richardson then ends her foreword with humour, noting that ‘the author desires here to express her gratitude and, further, to offer to all those readers who have persisted in spite of every obstacle, a heart-felt apology’ (1990, p.432). This apologetic attitude which contradicts her earlier assertion that the rules of punctuation are not fixed or absolute, continues towards the end of Richardson’s life and can be found again in an interview conducted by the writer Vincent Brome and published in *London Magazine* in 1959, two years after Richardson’s death. Brome writes:

> We spoke of the lack of punctuation in the early volumes of *Pilgrimage*. "A mistake," she said. "I felt later like apologizing to my readers. A reputation for creating unnecessary difficulties is very difficult to live down" (1959, p.30).

The ‘unnecessary difficulties’ to which Richardson is referring must include her dismissal of quotation marks for reported speech and her extensive use of ellipses, both of which can impact negatively on a new reader’s perception of the novel sequence, but while Richardson felt the need to apologize for this later in her career, a clear method and reasoning for these innovations can be found, particularly in her earlier writing. *Pointed Roofs*, the first volume in the *Pilgrimage* sequence, published in 1915, clearly illustrates the way in which Richardson used ellipses to shift between first and third person, thus creating an innovative way to allow the reader into the consciousness of her protagonist. She writes:
She felt she had a right to all the knowledge there was, without fuss . . . oh, without fuss – without fuss and – emotion. . . . I am unsociable, I suppose – she mused. She could not think of anyone who did not offend her. I don’t like men and I loathe women. I am a misanthrope. So’s pater. He despises women and can’t get on with men. We are different – it’s us, him and me. He’s failed us because he’s different and if he weren’t we should be like other people. Everything in the railway responded and agreed. Like other people... horrible.... She thought of the fathers of girls she knew—the Poole girls, for instance, they were to be "independent" trained and certificated—she envied that—but her envy vanished when she remembered how heartily she had agreed when Sarah called them "sharp" and "knowing" (Richardson 1915, p.31).

Here, the first-person personal pronoun is used to make clear how unsociable Miriam Henderson, Richardson’s protagonist and fictional representation of herself, believes herself to be, but with the addition of ‘she mused’ to make clear that this is occurring inside the mind of the protagonist. Only the addition of inverted commas would allow this small section of inner dialogue to be any closer to traditional narrative. However, this is closely preceded by the third person pronoun ‘she’ - clearly referring to Miriam - and a series of ellipses that seem to create a slide into first person narrative, where the third person narration slips out of grasp into part-sentences and glimpses of thoughts by way of Richardson’s use of ellipses. Similarly, Richardson returns to the mode of third person narration with a series of part-sentences and ellipses.

In the introduction to her 2015 monograph Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission, Anne Toner notes that ‘ellipsis marks have long served as a means of promoting access to emotional or psychological states’ (p.1). This then makes it easier to suggest that Richardson’s seeming innovation in narrative is not as unusual as it first appears, as she is allowing access to the first-person psychological state of her protagonist, apparently a long-standing use of ellipses. In her final chapter, dedicated to ellipses in Modernism, Toner notes that ‘ellipsis points can be seen as a symbol of the [twentieth] century as they articulate its ever-unravelling coherence’ (2015, p.151). Although Toner does not refer to Richardson’s work directly, her idea of the ever-unravelling coherence of Modernism could easily be used to describe Pilgrimage which, at least in its earlier volumes, becomes increasingly unusual in its narrative style. This rise in the frequency of Richardson’s narrative shifts, missing punctuation and unusual ellipses – often six or seven dots rather than the more usual three or four – can be seen as both Richardson herself trying out new ways of writing, as well as her protagonist, who is also an aspiring writer, doing the same. Although at times lacking coherency, this rise in creativity illustrates the growth of Richardson, and Miriam, as a writer.

Richardson’s writing has long been considered confusing, incoherent, even unreadable, and contemporary reviewers of her work often picked up on the difficulties readers have faced. In 1915 The Scotsman newspaper described Pointed Roofs as ‘abrupt, ecstatic, almost hysterical [...] and the punctuation is arranged to match’ (1915, p.2). However, at this time, critics still found the level of unusual punctuation and the shifts between first and third person which Richardson was employing to be interesting and innovative, rather than distracting or difficult to follow. Indeed, the reviewer from The Scotsman went on to note that ‘for all its breathlessness, in part because of it, [Pointed Roofs] gives a really excellent idea of the German point of view, sometimes sympathetically, sometimes satirically’ (1915, p.2). This critic saw the ‘breathlessness’ of Richardson’s writing as a method of telling her narrative, rather than obscuring it. Similarly, a critic writing for The Observer calls Pointed Roofs ‘startlingly
original’ (1915, p.5) and claims that it ‘is a novel that no sensitive reader will forget’ (1915, p.5).

As Richardson’s writing of Pilgrimage continued, however, so did the instances of narrative shifts and unusual usage of punctuation, and indeed Richardson began to play with narrative and punctuation even more frequently than in her first volumes. As previously mentioned, the fifth volume, Interim, almost entirely abandons the use of inverted commas to mark reported speech, which has of course made it difficult to decipher what is a section of first-person dialogue between two or more people and what is a first-person internal monologue of the protagonist’s, within the more standard third-person narrative. Again, this exemplifies both Richardson’s attempts to develop her own writing style as well as her protagonist’s, who at this point in the novel sequence is beginning to take up writing. It may be due to this element of quite drastic variation from the norms of punctuation that Interim was not initially published by Duckworth, who had put out the first four chapter-volumes, and instead was serialized in the literary journal The Little Review between June 1919 and May 1920, the same time as Joyce’s Ulysses was also featured. It is not entirely clear who made the decision to publish Interim in The Little Review and not with Duckworth – publisher or author – particularly as much of Duckworth’s archive, including author correspondence, was destroyed during two fires, one in 1929 and one in 1953, as well as by enemy action during the Second World War in 1942 (‘Gerald Duckworth and Co Ltd’ Senate House Library University of London).

Richardson herself, however, does refer to the decision in her private letters, a selection of which have been published as Windows on Modernism, edited by Gloria G. Fromm, but Richardson gives no clear indication as to why the decision was made. She wrote to Curtis Brown, a literary agent, in June 1919 requesting advice on publishing in The Little Review and noting that she wishes to ‘secure better terms’ (1995, p.27) for Interim than she had received for the previous four volumes. Money is again on Richardson’s mind when she writes to Curtis Brown once more in July 1919 listing her financial woes and requesting that Brown ‘rescue [her] from this difficulty’ (1995, p.29). It is possible then that the reason for Richardson’s initial publication of Interim being serialized in a magazine rather than through traditional publishing routes was due to a disagreement with Duckworth over pay, which she claimed to Brown was only 10% royalties, instead of having anything to do with the unusual, and thus not especially readable, punctuation and narrative style of the volume, although of course they may be linked in that the style of Interim may have prevented it from being commercially viable for the publishers.

John Mepham discusses the publication history of Interim in relation to the volume’s narrative style in his article on what he calls Richardson’s ‘unreadability’ (2000, p.449). He discusses this ‘unreadability’ of Pilgrimage, claiming that what he describes as the ‘radical innovations in narrative and graphic style’ (2000, p.449), specifically of Richardson’s fourth and fifth volumes, The Tunnel and Interim, are to blame for the novel sequence gaining this reputation. He claims that ‘Richardson went too far in her experiments [...] further than even some sympathetic readers were prepared to follow’ (2000, p.449) which makes clear that this volume in particular can be singled out as particularly innovative, and as such has become potentially unreadable. Mepham cites the aforementioned decision of Richardson’s publishers Duckworth not to publish Interim, meaning that the fifth instalment of Pilgrimage ended up being serialized, as proof that readers were turning away from Pilgrimage as a work-in-progress novel sequence around 1919. Most relevant, however, is Mepham’s investigation into the differences in punctuation between the edition of Interim which was eventually published
in novel form, most recently by Virago, and that which appears in *The Little Review*. Mepham notes that in *Interim*, as it appeared in *The Little Review*, Richardson ‘went a crucial step further and tried the experiment of leaving out the quotation marks,’ (2000, p.457) creating ‘a new dimension of difficulty for the reader’ (2000, p.457). Ultimately, this new dimension of difficulty must have proven too great as Richardson’s text changed in style when republished. For example, the original 1919 publication of *Interim* in *The Little Review* begins with Richardson’s protagonist, Miriam Henderson speaking: ‘You’ve just been out, said Miriam listening to Grace’s soothing reproaches for her lateness’ (Richardson 1919, p.1). This is very obviously dialogue, with the use of ‘said’ as well as the introduction of a character, Grace, but this is not marked by any punctuation. By contrast, the 1992 Virago reprint of *Interim*, which is the version that is most readily available to new readers, although it is now out of print, re-introduces quotation marks, signifying this as a moment of dialogue between Miriam and Grace. Although this specific example of editorial intervention has no real bearing on the meaning of the exchange, it does illustrate that Richardson’s experimentation has been erased over time.

However, a further example, from the third chapter of *Interim*, does show how these small editorial changes to punctuation can entirely modify how the reader perceives what is happening. The chapter opens with Miriam exploring the family home in which she rents a room, fantasizing about the freedom of owning a home, and describing it as such: ‘She imagined herself in the doorway... *hullo! Fancy you here...* The dining-room door had opened and Mrs Bailey was standing in the hall’ (Richardson 1919, p.82). In contrast, the Virago edition portrays this scene as ‘She imagined herself in the doorway. "*Hullo! Fancy you here.*" The dining-room door had opened and Mrs Bailey was standing in the hall’ (1992, p.337). Not only does the more recent publication discard Richardson’s unusual use of ellipses but, furthermore, the introduction of quotation marks to report the speech of Mrs Bailey completely alters the scene. In the 1919 edition, which was of course a publication in an artists’ magazine and therefore far less commercial, the ‘fancy you here,’ can be read as part of Miriam’s fantasy, with the italics representing the protagonist putting on a voice of imitation in her own mind and then being caught by her landlady as she is lost in thought. That Richardson speaks of Miriam imagining herself in the doorway, through which she eventually does see her landlady, reinforces the contention that Miriam is imagining herself in the place of Mrs Bailey. The more recent edition of *Interim* removes this option, rendering the scene a formulaic exchange between renter and homeowner that leaves the thread of Miriam’s imagining hanging without explanation. By removing this key element in the peak of Richardson’s experimentation as a writer the more recent publications of *Pilgrimage* also hide from the reader the idea of Miriam as a developing writer herself, playing with identities to find her voice as a writer.

When compared side by side as above, it becomes evident that Richardson’s increasing disregard for the rules of punctuation had a distinct goal of portraying the life and interactions of her protagonist in a more nuanced way than is allowed for by standardized punctuation and narrative. However, newspaper critics were beginning to find flaws in Richardson’s writing that could not be ignored, with a reviewer from *The Scotsman* calling *Interim* ‘destitute of incident’ (1919, p.2) and another from *The Times* finding a similar criticism: ‘like its predecessors it is empty of incident and devoid of "movement" in the ordinary sense of the term’ (1919, p.15). The problem that these critics seem to have with *Interim* is not explicitly its unusual, and at times confusing narrative style, but rather that there is not much of a story
to the volume. However, perhaps it could be said that Richardson neglects storytelling in her fifth volume, even more so than in previous volumes, to instead focus on developing and furthering her narrative style. Thus, this rise in literary innovation appears to coincide with a dramatic fall in critical appreciation.

Virginia Woolf, Richardson’s more well-known contemporary with whom she is often compared, wrote on Richardson’s work twice, first in 1919 when she reviewed the fourth volume of Richardson’s novel sequence, *The Tunnel*, and again in 1923 when she critiqued the seventh volume, *Revolving Lights*. The latter is well-known for Woolf’s assertion that Richardson had created the ‘psychological sentence of the feminine gender’ (1979, p.191), a phrase which has followed Richardson’s writing into the present day and is often how readers come to find her work initially. Woolf has stilted praise for *Revolving Lights*, noting that ‘the trophies that Miss Richardson brings to the surface, however we may dispute their size, are undoubtedly genuine’ (1979, p.191). Another newspaper critic, writing for *The Scotsman*, found the writing style of *Revolving Lights*, which reverts back to the slightly closer to standard punctuation of Richardson’s earlier volumes after the rise of creativity in *Interim*, to be ‘rather bewildering’ but sees ‘remarkable suggestion of life and movement’ (1923, p.2). Thus, as Richardson returns to a more standard writing style after her experimentations with punctuation, critics appear to find renewed appreciation for the *Pilgrimage* sequence, which was at this point in its eighth year of publication and still with several more volumes to come.

Richardson’s next volume after *Revolving Lights*, *The Trap*, first published in 1925, does still have some elements of unusual and experimental narrative style, including a very short, one page long, chapter which describes Miriam’s remembering of her late mother. In *The Trap* Richardson uses this short chapter to portray the passing of time:

> Another spring vanished.  
> A sheet of crocuses singing along the grass alley. White, under trees still bare.  
> Crocuses dotting the open grass with June gold. . . .  
> Suddenly a mist of green on the trees, as quiet as thought. . . . Small leaves in broad daylight, magic reality, silent at midday amidst the noise of traffic. . . .  
> Then full spring for three days. Holding life still, when the dawn mists drew off the sea and garden and revealed their colour.  
> Everyone had loved it, independent of other lovers. Become for a while single.  
> Wanting and trying and failing to utter its beauty. Everyone had those moments of reality in forgetfulness. Quickly passing. Growing afterwards longer than other moments, spreading out over the whole season; representing it in memory. . . .  
> (1925, p.214).

This very short chapter is very visual and almost cinematic in its representation of the passing of spring into summer, and it appears to be an opportunity for Richardson and Miriam to experiment with a different way of writing time. Even though this passage does feature three instances of ellipses, they are all standard four dot examples, and this volume as a whole includes far fewer ellipses than the more experimentally written *Interim*. Thus, *The Trap* presents a more mature Miriam and Richardson who have perhaps chosen their narrative style and can now move on to experimenting with content, rather than style.

This volume, which is largely written in a standard realist style, had mixed reviews, with *The Guardian*, then called *The Manchester Guardian*, claiming that ‘nothing happens’ (1925, p.9), which contradicts the idea that Richardson has made a decision to shift her focus to storytelling rather than stylistic literary experimentation. However, *The Scotsman* found the
same volume to be readable and well-written, suggesting that ‘it is all rather suggestive of a still-life, painted with a marvellous patience and an infinitude of touches’ (1925, p.2). By emphasizing the artistry of Richardson’s writing, this review then seems to suggest that she has managed to develop a narrative style and method for using punctuation that is both innovative and uniquely hers, but which remains readable by conforming to more important matters of punctuation such as the use of quotation marks to denote speech. Once more, as Richardson’s creative innovations are reduced, so too does critical appreciation for her work rise.

This parallel between moments of literary innovation and times of critical dissatisfaction, and vice versa, is particularly noticeable when consulting reviews of the collected edition of all thirteen *Pilgrimage* volumes, which was first published in four parts in 1967 by J.M. Dent and later republished in a similar format by Virago. In a review for *The Observer*, Angus Wilson makes clear that he does not enjoy the more stylistically creative volumes of Richardson’s work, calling *The Tunnel*, the fourth volume first published in 1919, ‘Dorothy Richardson at her worst’ and ‘undisciplined’ (1967, p.27). He goes even further, claiming that ‘her poetry is intermittent; she lacks discipline; her longueurs are disturbingly lifeless; she is too obsessive a writer to fulfil the demands of artistic greatness’ (1967, p.27). However, in the prose of her posthumously published thirteenth volume, *March Moonlight*, of which this collected edition was the first publication, he believes that Richardson can ‘cut in and out with memory and consciousness and dream with an entirely exciting dexterity’ (1967, p.27). *March Moonlight* is, like all of Richardson’s later volumes, the product of a more mature writer who has found her personal style and thus does not feel the need to experiment in quite as a dramatic way as she did in her earlier work. Wilson’s review shows, in miniature, how the critical reception of Richardson’s work has risen and fallen over time, with reviewers seeing promise in her early writing, losing faith in her unusual and experimental middle period, before finally rediscovering the artistry of her work when she had settled on a more regular style. But while the rise in frequency and extremity of Richardson’s narrative and punctuation experiments can be used to chart a fall in her positive critical reception, Dorothy Richardson does not appear to have given in to criticism of her writing and lessened her creativity. Instead, the charting of her innovation portrays a writer who plays with narrative and punctuation before finally maturing into a writing style which is uniquely hers.

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