

## DOROTHY RICHARDSON AND THE POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP

*Joanne Winning*

This paper will consider the politics of lesbian modernist friendship. In *The Politics of Modernism*, Raymond Williams has famously argued for the concept of 'community' as a structuring principle within modernism and the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century: 'the artists and writers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practice'.<sup>1</sup> Here, of course, Williams refers to aesthetic and artistic practice, but I want to suggest that, given the deep embedding of lesbian sexuality and identity within the modernist milieu, we might well augment Williams' meaning by talking in terms of sexual and emotional practice. Whilst the major urban centres of modernity are crucial physical and material sites in which the lesbian modernist group becomes possible and identifiable, I want to argue here that the lesbian modernist group functions most powerfully as a cultural site or space, which is created through the complex network of friendship and affective bonds and relationships. Out of the consideration of lesbian modernist friendship, I want to speculate on the importance of friendship to Richardson, both textually - and here my focus will be on *March Moonlight* - and in terms of her life and cultural production. Such a model of friendship requires redefinition against prevailing notions of friendship, incorporating intimate issues of affect and desire, as well requiring us to think more broadly about the terms of the sexual and cultural politics which might be embedded in friendship practice.

In *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida commits himself to proving that friendship has a politics, and to theorising those politics. Further, Derrida seeks to argue that aspects of the political - in broader socio-cultural terms - might well be elucidated by

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), p.45.

examining the seemingly intimate realm of friendship. In 1993, Derrida makes a seeming move towards political questions in the key text *Specters of Marx*; this is followed by another examination of politics in the following year, in *The Politics of Friendship*. In discussion with Derrida at the University of Sussex in 1997, Geoff Bennington asks why, if politics is the focus of his analysis, Derrida focuses on: 'the apparently marginal concept of friendship rather than more obvious concepts such as sovereignty, power, legitimacy, representation'.<sup>2</sup> Derrida agrees that the concept of friendship is 'usually left to ethics or psychology or morals' and that it is 'not considered a political concept as government or sovereignty or citizenship may be considered political'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Derrida argues, as soon as you read Aristotle or Plato 'you discover that friendship plays an organising role in the definition of justice, of democracy even'.<sup>4</sup>

Derrida recounts the three models of friendship proposed by Aristotle:

1. 'the higher friendship' which is 'based on virtue' and which has 'nothing to do with politics. It is a friendship between two virtuous men';
2. 'friendship grounded on utility and usefulness, and this is political friendship';
3. 'On the lower level, friendship grounded on pleasure'.<sup>5</sup>

These different concepts of friendship, Derrida argues, move across different registers. Some are political and some are not. Derrida notes, as he works through the Aristotelian models, that 'political friendship' is fundamentally inflected by gender. It is, to quote from him directly, 'a phallogocentric, or phallogocentric, concept'.<sup>6</sup> From an Aristotelean construction onwards, the parameters of friendship and friendship bonds exclude women and the notion of female friendship. Whilst Derrida himself

---

<sup>2</sup> [www.livingphilosophy.org/Derrida-politics-friendship.htm](http://www.livingphilosophy.org/Derrida-politics-friendship.htm). Accessed 09.09.09.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

doesn't cite the example of the sixteenth-century essayist Michel de Montaigne, we might well use him as an example. In his essay 'On Friendship', Montaigne argues: 'the normal capacity of women is, in fact, unequal to the demands of that communion and intercourse on which the sacred bond is fed; their souls do not seem firm enough to bear the strain of so hard and lasting a tie'.<sup>7</sup> Derrida argues that the canonical model of friendship - precisely the kind we see described in Montaigne's essay on his 'perfect friendship' with Étienne de la Boétie - is archetypally 'a friendship between two young men, mortals, who have a contract according to which one will survive the other, one will be the heir of the other, and they will agree politically'.<sup>8</sup> Such a canonical model, Derrida notes immediately, excludes several possible permutations: 'first of all friendship between a man and a woman, or between women, so women are totally excluded from this model of friendship: woman as the friend of a man or women as friends between themselves'.<sup>9</sup> Derrida identifies the guiding principle that underlies the model of canonical friendship as 'brotherhood' or 'fraternity'. Such a principle finds its roots in various dominant cultural discourses; Derrida identifies it in Greece, as well as Christian ideology in which 'Men are all brothers because they are sons of God'.<sup>10</sup>

The coordinates here are thus all patriarchal: men, brothers, sons. Female friendship, where it exists, must do so in the interstices of culture and politics. Derrida argues, however, for the possibility of its subcultural existence:

[it] doesn't of course mean to me that the hegemony of this concept was so powerful that what it excluded was effectively totally excluded. It doesn't mean that a woman couldn't have the experience of friendship with a man or with another woman. It means simply that within this culture, this society, by which this prevalent canon was considered legitimate,

---

<sup>7</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p.95.

<sup>8</sup> [www.livingphilosophy.org/Derrida-politics-friendship.htm](http://www.livingphilosophy.org/Derrida-politics-friendship.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

accredited, then there was no voice, no discourse, no possibility of acknowledging these excluded possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

There is then, we could say, a sexual politics of friendship, which is all about exclusion. If the political aspects of friendship depend upon participation in and through the public sphere, then what terms are available for a discussion of the politics of female friendship? Undoubtedly female friendship exists but how are we either to describe it or locate it? It is precisely the subcultural, interstitial space of female friendship that I want to examine in an attempt to pose questions about both Richardson's practice of friendship and its textual representation in the closing stages of *Pilgrimage*.

### *Lesbian Historiography*

Friendship, as a concept with political implications, has been dealt with somewhat differently by lesbian historians and within the realms of lesbian historiographic study. One of the first deployments of the concept of friendship is of course that of Lillian Faderman in her influential survey *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, published in 1981. Faderman argues:

By the eighteenth century, when Englishwomen in comparatively large numbers were writing voluminous letters and diaries as well as poetry and fiction, literary evidence of intense friendship (indistinguishable from romantic love) between women became abundant. Harriet Bowdler spoke for her female contemporaries when she characterized romantic friendship in terms that were current in the literature of male writers in the Renaissance and in the Greek and Roman eras: It was a 'union of souls, a marriage of hearts, a harmony of design and affection, which being entered into by mutual consent, groweth up into the purest kindness and most enduring love...'<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Faderman's early work presents the perennial knotty problem of definition and identity: who and what is 'the lesbian'? Faderman's historical project is to uncover and thus define this term of 'romantic friendship' as a way, partly, of circumventing the issue of sex; of whether or not intimate emotional bonds between women also included the practice of physical and sexual intimacy. The historical project of uncovering instances of sexual intimacy between women is a fraught one. We operate within our own frames of contemporary cultural reference and interpret cultural artefacts with our own contemporary, and thus anachronistic, vocabulary. Faderman's model of romantic friendship has been much criticised by other lesbian theorists for its denial of women's sexual history. In her recent article on the theorisation of Early Modern lesbianisms, Harriette Andreadis makes the important assertion that women themselves might knowingly and actively load the concept of 'friendship' with erotic meaning, not for lack of cultural vocabulary but rather as a way of giving themselves license to engage in erotic behaviours. Andreadis argues that the active refusal to use the 'name' of lesbian desire is a powerful cultural ploy:

without naming, there is no point at which to establish a series of boundaries between affection, eroticism, and sexuality. [...] An 'erotics of unnamings' could thus serve as a socially strategic evasion of what would certainly have been a devastating social opprobrium. [...] It has become increasingly clear that the primary social framework that provided both erotic opportunities and discursive camouflage for women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is that of 'female friendship' and that it was followed in the eighteenth century by the rhetorical constructs of female 'romantic', or 'passionate', friendship.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), p.68.

<sup>13</sup> Harriette Andreadis, 'Theorizing Early Modern Lesbianisms: Invisible Borders, Ambiguous Demarcations', in Mary Ann O'Farrell and Lynne Vallone (eds), *Virtual Gender: Fantasies of Subjectivity and Embodiment*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p.131.

Another historian, Martha Vicinus reinvigorates this kind of deployment of the concept of friendship. 'Intimate friendship', which she defines as 'an emotional, erotically charged relationship between two women', is a more mobile, flexible term which allows her to analyse difficult-to-define instances of affective bonds between women without getting bogged down in identity politics.<sup>14</sup> She argues that 'Identity history can be limiting: more interesting and difficult questions can be asked about friendship, intimacy, sexuality and spirituality than who had what kind of identity when'.<sup>15</sup> The concept of intimate friendship she argues is 'an enabling metaphor, capacious enough to embrace a very wide range of erotic behaviour and self-presentation ... it embodies the indeterminacy inherent in any study of sexual behaviours and beliefs'.<sup>16</sup> Vicinus looks at examples of female friendship which emulate husband-wife marriage or mother-daughter bonds, as well as the figure of the independent female rake; all of these serve as models for female love from the mid-Eighteenth century through to 1928, the year of the Obscenity trial and banning of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*.

In the early twentieth-century, she takes as one example, the 'intimate friendship' between Ethyl Smyth and Virginia Woolf. Such a relationship, she stresses, embodies all the contradictions, questions and issues that arise when the contemporary lesbian historian attempts to characterise a relationship between women in a previous historical period:

Passionate desire was a compelling foundation for their friendship. And yet questions inevitably remain about Smyth's relationship with Woolf. Was this a lesbian friendship between women who had loved men but preferred women? Or a friendship between two aging geniuses, meeting at the right time and place? Or both?<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.xxiii.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.xxiv.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.238.

Vicinus refuses to come down on one side or other of these definitions of the friendship between Woolf and Smyth. It is the multivalency of a capacious term such as ‘friendship’ that offers Vicinus interpretive possibilities here. Other critics might offer the rejoinder that in fact the undecidability here offers us nothing in the way of cultural analysis. My own problem with Vicinus’ model of intimate friendship is that there is a risk of taking both affect and desire out of the crucial socio-cultural context in which they are generated. What seems to me far more resonant and productive a strategy is to collate the socio-cultural, the political (here I mean to use this term to think in particular about economic power and cultural production) with both the affective and the sexual. This is to say to take the issues raised by Derrida about the *politics* of friendship – the ways in which it functions within a specific cultural and political, that is to say patriarchal, framework – and to put them alongside questions of intimacy, affect and sexuality.

### *Lesbian Modernist Friendship*

In particular, I see these factors all at work in the framework of the lesbian modernist group. For instance, in her account of meeting Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach, Gisèle Freund writes: ‘These two booksellers were great friends’.<sup>18</sup> Yet of course we know they were also lovers; here then ‘friend’ might be said to function euphemistically. The primary sexual and emotional bond between Monnier and Beach stands at the core of their public, cultural and commercial lives. Together they become key players in the production and dissemination of modernism, creating commercial and cultural space, which is crucial to modernist literature. Later in her account, Freund writes of her *own* defining friendship with Monnier and Beach: ‘The day in 1935 when I first met Adrienne Monnier and Sylvia Beach, I could hardly have known that my visits to their two bookstores would have a great influence on my destiny. It was thanks to them that a few years

---

<sup>18</sup> Gisèle Freund, *Gisèle Freund, Photographer*, trans. John Shepley (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc, 1985), p.66.

later I was able to photograph most of their friends, little known at that time but famous today'.<sup>19</sup> Lesbian modernist friendship between Monnier, Beach and Freund allows access to the larger, soon-to-be famous modernist grouping, most of whom were friends of Monnier and Beach and frequented their bookshops. Such 'friendship' offers Freund the opportunity to become the photographer of the group and to produce a crucial visual record of its writers and artists, in such a way as both to cement their cultural status and her own reputation as a cultural practitioner. This single example reveals the complex lines of affective and identificatory bonds as a way of entering into and participating within cultural production. In this sense the politics of lesbian modernist friendship are sexual, cultural and economic. Such a politics is most commonly hidden, both within theorisations of 'friendship' and also within the traditional critical histories of modernism.

We find another articulation of friendship in the cultural practice of the lesbian modernist patron and salonist Natalie Barney, who advances her Sapphic notion of 'l'amitié' in both her writing and her patronage. According to certain critics, Barney places the principle of friendship above allegiances based on sexual intimacy. Jennifer Vaughan Jones argues that 'Natalie believed in fidelity of friendship, which she saw as lifelong, rather than sexual fidelity, which she might well have summed up as folly and waste'.<sup>20</sup> Martha Vicinus writes that 'Barney had a genius for friendship, bringing together ex-lovers and exiles'.<sup>21</sup> The 'genius' of her mode of friendship, its success, according to Vicinus, is that it was based on 'emotional inaccessibility': 'She could not have welcomed so wide a range of writers, artists, composers, intellectuals, and politicians, had she not been a deft giver of cursory attention'.<sup>22</sup> Whatever the truths of these interpretations, it is clear that Barney utilises the concept of friendship as a kind of symbolic container for intellectual as well as emotional contents.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Vaughan Jones, *Anna Wickham: A Poet's Daring Life* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 2003), p.186.

<sup>21</sup> Vicinus, op. cit, p.187.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.188.





Fig. 1: Natalie Barney's sketch of the *Temple à l'Amitié*, used as the frontispiece for Natalie Clifford Barney, *Aventures de l'Esprit*, (Paris: Éditions Émile-Paul Frères, 1929).

In this sketch of her salon which she includes as the frontispiece of *Aventures de L'Esprit*, Barney physically records the 'Temple à l'Amitié' - the small Doric building in the garden of her rue Jacob apartment - where she held performances during her Friday salon meetings. The drawing of the 'Temple', which here functions as the final destination of the Amazon's meander through the mass of intellectuals she has collected and gathered together, is a spatial signifier. Sapphic friendship is not just about sex by any means, it is about cultural participation and production. Indeed here friendship collates the emotional, the sexual and the intellectual. In much the same way that Barney's *Académie des Femmes*, launched in 1927, poses a direct and explicit challenge to the patriarchal intellectual institutions of French culture, notably its *Académie Française*, her concept of *l'amitié* poses a direct challenge to precisely the kind of canonical male friendship of which Derrida talks in *The Politics of Friendship*.

Another lesbian modernist version of friendship brings together the aesthetic and affective through the figure of writing. The quest for Bryher's young heroine Nancy in her two autobiographical novels *Development* (1920) and *Two Selves* (1923) is to find a friend. At the end of *Two Selves*, as her desperation and loneliness mount and she contemplates suicide, Nancy considers the possibilities of the particular friendship she desires:

If she found a friend they might shut her up. Everyone, Eleanor, Doreen, Downwood. Because if she had a friend something would burst and she would shoot ahead, be the thing she wanted and disgrace them by her knowledge. Because she would care for no laws, only happiness. If she found a friend, an answer, the past years would vanish utterly from her mind.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Bryher, *Two Novels: Development and Two Selves*, Joanne Winning (ed.), (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p.288.

Yet this quest doubles as the journey towards writing: 'Write a book. And find she had a friend'.<sup>24</sup> Writing, of course, both in terms of Bryher's text and her life brings her to friendship to H.D., which however else we might characterise it, is undoubtedly textured by the erotic.

### *Dorothy Richardson and friendship*

Coming back to work on Richardson after some time away I am struck by something important about what we might call her isolation from the friendship networks of modernism - lesbian or otherwise. Richardson's isolation - or even exclusion - is both economic and geographic - she is removed from the centre of the modernist network. To what extent then are her friendships - particularly those maintained by epistolary means - crucial to her modernist production?

From our perspective as Richardson scholars, friendship is, in a sense, a necessary preoccupation. However much we might critically resist the biographical in our move to interpret text, we are nevertheless always drawn to try and make sense of writerly intention through other modes of intimate writing: letters, diaries, manuscripts. Biography is the form to which we are always forced to return in the case of *Pilgrimage* because of its structuring autobiographical model. Richardson's life returns to our analysis something like the Freudian repressed. George H. Thomson's important *Calendar of Letters* demonstrates the importance of Richardson's friendship network. Gloria Fromm titles her extensive selection of Richardson's letters to friends and correspondents *Windows on Modernism*, implying in that metaphor of the window that the epistolary form will allow us extra access into the form and production not just of Richardson's work, but modernism as a whole. And indeed Richardson's letters to her various correspondents reveal much about the cultural production of *Pilgrimage* and about her own engagement with other modernist discourses. Such letters also, as I hope to show in the remainder of

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.221.

this paper, reveal other more complex and conceptual lines of connection.

In *Pilgrimage*, 'friendship', we are told by Miriam Henderson, 'reaches its centre' in her relationship with the character 'Jean'. Previous work on *March Moonlight* in my book *The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Richardson* convinced me that perhaps more than any other of the novel-chapters in the series, the text represents unique possibilities for interpretation. It is the most porous text in the whole series, in the sense of ascertaining something of Richardson's autobiographical aims. Finding the excised fragments in the Richardson Papers at the Beinecke, with their evidence of revision and excision from the published text, seemed to me to allow a small but significant access into Richardson's complex dealing with sexual identity. It is a late text, the last text, written when Richardson is at the end of her life and striving most desperately - as Gloria Fromm attests - to bring both Miriam Henderson and the text of *Pilgrimage* to the point of her own beginning - her act of taking up the pen to write. Yet there is more freedom for writerly absorption in *March Moonlight*, the parameters of the whole enterprise of *Pilgrimage* seem to have shifted. Here the text becomes much more specifically about the writing of the past as an act of being and remembrance. In 1940, Richardson writes to Bryher: 'oddly, more than ever now, M. engrosses me'.<sup>25</sup> The porosity of *March Moonlight* - the flexibility of its structure and its move away from the tight, restraining biographical model is suggested in the following gesture Richardson makes in a 1938 letter to Bryher - as an act of love and friendship - in stretching the biographical truth to include a childhood Bryher in the text. This letter responds to Bryher, who has described her school-time experiences in Sussex:

Dear Bryher

You tempt me to introduce, in *March Moonlight* a little figure seen suddenly from the more than rickety seat of the vegetable cart. When in Chateau d'Oex in 1908, reading a stray copy of

---

<sup>25</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Bryher, 31 Oct 1940, in Gloria G. Fromm (ed.), *Windows on Modernism: Selected Letters of Dorothy Richardson* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp.410-411.

*The Saturday Review* & coming upon a mildly-Richard-Jeffriesian [*sic*] 'nature' middle, & feeling that everything essential had been left out, I wrote between eleven & midnight, in my blessedly warm & electric-lit and table-furnished Swiss bedroom, *A Sussex Auction* (& sent it in & forgot an address & did not until six months later discover they had used it & wanted more) you were still carrying, more or less demurely, & accompanied by the youthful edition of your so charming old governess, your little pigtail upon the Front & over the Downs. Were there when I came back to the Farm in the spring, to stay, off and on, until 1911. Recalling my many afternoon wanderings from the east end of the Front to Beachy Head, I now of course imagine that I sometimes did pass a crocodile & I do remember that Arthur Penrose [...] told me of a 'young ladies school' to which he sold both fruit and vegetables. If the school ran to grapes, as probably it did, I may have thinned some of those very bunches.<sup>26</sup>

Several things emerge from this letter. First, Richardson is not averse to bending the autobiographical truth. Second, and more importantly, memory is here rendered as deeply mutable and desire can change the course of it. The will to connect, to make something of fate, is strong for Richardson here. She wants Bryher in the text. The temptation of a symbolic inclusion - putting 'the little figure' into the text - would memorialise Bryher. In addition, I think undoubtedly, to representing some kind of textual repayment for the large financial debt, which Richardson feels she owes Bryher.

Had the 'little figure' of Bryher made it into *March Moonlight*, the symbolic inclusion would perhaps have mirrored that of one of text's central characters, the figure of Jean, whom Miriam meets in Vaud and who has such a significant emotional impact on her in the closing stages of *Pilgrimage*. *March Moonlight* opens with a letter. Miriam, convalescing from a severe flu at her sister Sally's house, receives a letter from Jean who is still in Vaud. Miriam is immediately disturbed by what she understands as a confession

---

<sup>26</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Bryher 28 Oct 1938, in Fromm op. cit, pp.353-354.

that Jean has become romantically involved with the Bishop who had been part of the group at Las Lauriers. Miriam berates herself with a kind of humiliated horror: 'Blind, I was, to the drama playing itself out under my nose' (IV 573). After pages of description of the movement of Miriam's consciousness - ricocheting between anxieties about the reality or otherwise of the emotional connection she thought she had with Jean - 'then all our deep happiness, never confessed, never even alluded to, was nothing more than a background' (IV 575) - and breathless eulogy and recollection of the many instances of their unique connection, Miriam returns to reading the letter from Jean. The model of the broken reading suggests what can be missed, or misinterpreted, if the textual whole is not comprehended. Jean has something important to tell Miriam:

Dick, I do not say much about our friendship. It is a very precious thing. I am silent before the wonder of it. And before your understanding of everything. Unconsciously now I find myself comparing everyone I meet with you. And they always fail. I hunt and hunt to find another you. I never shall. I share your happy optimism, but haven't learned how to convey it to others as you do by just being *there*.

Each time I hear from you I feel armed for the fray. You make me laugh. But when you threaten to go about labelled ginger-ale for ladies only, you use the wrong expression. For me you are like the most refreshing of sea-breezes. No, that won't do. There is nothing to compare with the effect you have on me. And it works however you are feeling. At this moment I am lonely. No I'm not. Looking at your letter, I hear your voice and am at once again under your influence. How I miss you - when I forget to love the fellow creatures around me. I am starving. You won't misunderstand. I am enjoying every moment.

The crocuses are coming out. I shall send you the first gentian. Maybe next week. (IV 577-78)

The 'tide rises within' Miriam at this profession of friendship. She has to hide her strong emotional response, her 'flaming cheeks', from Sally. My own previous readings of this relationship have tended to negate the power of the word 'friendship', seeing it, in

the light of the extant extracts from *March Moonlight* which talk explicitly of love, as at best a coded signifier and at worst a dilution of emotion and affect to cover the 'real' nature of this relationship. Here I would like to rehearse the differences between the excised material in the Beinecke fragment and the final published version. The Beinecke fragment reads:

Jean, Jean, Jean. Lovely you are & beloved. It was you who taught me the phrase 'worth loving'. We knew we should not meet again, you in your Scotland & I too poor to travel. We counted those last days, all but the final three, which found us too happy to count. *Without* [stet.] Our lamentations ceased. Without one word spoken, each of us knew that in parting we should not be parted & the knowledge brought into our voices the inflections of song, [greeting?] our certainty of treasure laid up, immortal and inexhaustible.  
With Jean, for me<sup>27</sup>

... What...? We shall never know, because undoubtedly Richardson's final version changes the meaning and the narrative trajectory. The published version becomes: 'Jean. Jean. Jean. My clue to the nature of reality. To know that you exist is enough' (IV 612). And Richardson completes that empty silence at the end of 'With Jean, for me...' in the following way: 'With Jean, for me, friendship reaches its centre. All future friendships will group themselves round that occupied place, drawing thence their sustenance' (IV 613). The signifier 'friendship' comes to fill in that unspeakable space.

Coming back to question of this substitution of 'friendship' for 'love' I want to put it into a different dialogue; I want to test out Richardson's use of this friendship as an act that has a politics. Though it may seem counterintuitive, given the explicit gendering of the model, one of the first comparisons with Richardson's evocation of this 'perfect' friendship that comes to mind is the formulation advanced by Montaigne, in 'On Friendship'. Montaigne places true friendship at the heart of social structures

---

<sup>27</sup> Dorothy Richardson, fragment manuscript of *March Moonlight*, held in Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

arguing: 'Of a perfect society friendship is the peak'.<sup>28</sup> In his essay, he uses the example of his own friendship with Étienne de la Boétie. This friendship is uncommon, unique in purity and intensity and in the degree of intellectual and spiritual sympathy between the two men. Montaigne is at pains to disassociate his love for de la Boétie from the Greek model – which of course includes sexual love between men - because 'our morality rightly abhors it'.<sup>29</sup> What is striking, for a comparative reading of the model of the friendship which 'crowns' *Pilgrimage*, is the idea of the union between Montaigne and de la Boétie:

What we commonly call friends and friendships are no more than acquaintanceships and familiarities, contracted either by chance or for advantage, which have brought our minds together. In the friendship I speak of they mix and blend one into the other in so perfect a union that the seam which has joined them is effaced and disappears. If I were pressed to say why I love him, I feel that my only reply could be: 'Because it was he, because it was I'.<sup>30</sup>

These terms are very similar to those Richardson constructs in *March Moonlight*. Miriam articulates herself in the same deeply emotional tone as Montaigne in her extensive descriptions of her friendship with Jean. There is much comparative, seemingly intertextual material; one example is: 'We had no premeditated discussions. [...] Separation from Amabel used to bring both regret and relief. [...] To return to Jean is to find oneself at an unchanging centre' (IV 566). This notion of centre is compelling. In this final novel-chapter it seems to provide a symbolic centre that makes sense of the emotional trajectory of the whole novel-series. The connection with Jean is epitomised by their silences: 'our intermittent silences, rather than tension-creating searches for fresh material, were fragments of a shared eternity...'<sup>31</sup> Like Montaigne and de la Boétie, Jean and Miriam are indivisible from each other. Miriam comes to describe this as 'Jean-in-me': 'If I

---

<sup>28</sup> Montaigne, op. cit, p.92.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.95.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.97.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.567.



could remain always in possession of my whole self, something of Jean-in-me would operate'.<sup>32</sup>

In contemplating his friendship with de la Boétie, Montaigne believes that they were brought together by some preordained method and reason; he imputes a divine influence in their meeting:

There is, beyond all my reasoning, and beyond all that I can specifically say, some inexplicable power of destiny that brought about our union. We were looking for each other before we met, by reason of the reports we had heard of each other, which made a greater impression on our emotions than mere reports reasonably should. I believe that this was brought about by some decree of Heaven. We embraced one another by name. And at our first meeting, which happened by chance at a great feast and gathering in the city, we found ourselves so captivated, so familiar, so bound to one another, that from that time nothing was closer *to* either, than each was to the other.<sup>33</sup>

In *March Moonlight*, Miriam and Jean meet amongst the group of guests at *Las Lauriers*; they are immediately strongly drawn to one another:

[I] perceived for the first time the strength controlling her sweetness, the power that had drawn me when as a stranger I had observed her at table and wondered why, for all her apparent absorption in making inane conversation for her neighbour, this inconspicuous girl seemed somehow to enliven the whole decorous group, and felt in equal measure a desire for close acquaintance and a fear lest the desire be realized. (IV 565)

Jean, in these closing moves of *Pilgrimage*, represents the epitome of an ideal for which Miriam has quested - a spiritual and emotional 'truth' that makes sense of all her previous experience. Miriam is enthralled by Jean's *being*, her presence in the world:

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.612.

<sup>33</sup> Montaigne 1983, p.97.

And now again, in this eternal moment, she was a stranger far removed, and I saw her gently making her way through life, upheld by this mature strength, unconsciously inspiring all those she would meet and draw to her side, to seek and find their own. (IV 565-566)

Montaigne and de la Boétie are separated by the latter's untimely death. Montaigne's grief is monumental. He berates himself for living on, while de la Boétie is dead. He can no longer take pleasure in life since every pleasure is a reminder of what he cannot share with his lost friend. By contrast, in the published versions of *March Moonlight* at least, Miriam's separation from Jean is inevitable but not catastrophic. Indeed Richardson is at pains to make this unique separation one of the defining features of the friendship. Miriam repeatedly asserts that 'in parting [they] should not be parted' (IV 613). She is assured of 'the certainty of Jean's immortal love' (IV 584). Indeed, to quote Miriam, 'the thought of leaving Jean was promise as well as pain, carrying me forward across a future that held no assurance of a fresh meeting and yet promised reunion' (IV 567).

The comparison with Montaigne's model of perfect friendship is a compelling one. Here we find a politics in Richardson's construction - an attempt to counter the canonical male model of friendship. Richardson's terms seem a female rejoinder - an assertion, in their closeness to the parameters of his 'perfect friendship' - that women, indeed, can achieve the heights of that ideal too. This would seem undoubtedly to remove the discussion of sexuality from the arena of this friendship - unless we seek to assess, via the use of some psychoanalytic tools, what we might argue is its sublimation.

In this sense, we might argue that Richardson uses 'friendship' as a multivalent term and one which on different levels encodes different political aspects: sexual, feminist or at least female, and spiritual. In this sense it has real modernist potential - its becomes an undecidable variable. It seems to function, to use Martha Vicinus' term, as 'an enabling metaphor'.

I would now like to make a turn to lived practice of friendship. I'd like to take some time to look at further epistolary material that sheds light on Richardson's practice as a friend. First, I'd like to take an historical leap back from the writing of *March Moonlight*, to an earlier point in the 1920s when the project of *Pilgrimage* was about ten years old. Looking at the following examples of Richardson's friendships I'd like to examine the complex texture of her behaviour as a friend.

In the summer of 1923, Richardson receives a letter from Sylvia Beach in Paris by way of an introduction to a young British writer called Bryher, who being very enamoured of *Pilgrimage* wants to meet Richardson. Here is a neat example of the network in action. Richardson writes this response to Bryher:

Dear 'Bryher'  
Your letter found me on holiday. I meet almost no novels and yours has not come my way. When you come to town in October you will probably find me here & ready to discuss with you over a cup of tea.  
Yours sincerely  
Dorothy Richardson<sup>34</sup>

An equivocal reply to say the least. The subtext perhaps 'Come if you must but do not expect me to encourage your young friendship'. Then, having read *Development*, Richardson sends another, slightly friendlier letter:

Dear Bryher  
I've read your book. It is a tremendous prelude. I mean to voyage through it again. I shall be here until the late Autumn. Choose a day to come to tea & let me know. This little street is almost opposite Marlborough Road station – 2 stations up from Baker Street (met).  
Yours sincerely  
Dorothy Richardson<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Bryher June 1923, in Fromm op. cit, p.69.

<sup>35</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Bryher, Summer 1923, in Fromm op. cit, p.73.

A more encouraging tone for sure, notably dropping the inverted commas. The directions and more substantial plans suggest Richardson's preparedness to meet. As well, there is the encouragement of having read the copy of *Development* that Bryher has sent her and indeed some praise for the text. There seems to be, in this letter, the articulation of the distinct possibility of a writerly friendship. But compare this tone with a letter Richardson sends to Percy Wadsworth - an established young friend - at the same time: "Bryher has written from Paris & sent 'Development.' One long Bashkirtseffian curse".<sup>36</sup> This refers to the *Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*, the introspective diary of the Russian artist and diarist Marie Bashkirtseff which was published posthumously in 1897 and which was, according to Gloria Fromm, 'very much in vogue in the early twentieth century'.<sup>37</sup> As Fromm also notes, Bashkirtseff's journal was considered tediously introspective and so the comparison here is not altogether favourable: the praise not altogether heartfelt.

At their eventual first meeting, Bryher suggests to Richardson and Alan Odle that they should consider travelling abroad. By September of 1923, Bryher has offered them - to use Richardson's own term - a 'beneficent loan' and is hard at work helping them plan their six-month trip to Switzerland. This financial and practical support is to set the tone of the many years of friendship and patronage that ensue.

By contrast, in April 1924, after having spent a month in Territet with Bryher and H.D., Richardson writes to H.D. to thank her for sending a copy of her collection *Heliadora and Other Poems*. What is most striking in this letter is the tone - and compare it with those early letters to Bryher:

Lady,  
You withdraw yourself into the gloom of night, set a sudden  
darkness about our little path & straightway make it rich with

---

<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to P. Beaumont Wadsworth, July 1923, in Fromm op. cit, pp.71-72.

<sup>37</sup> Fromm, op. cit, p.72n5.

the browns & golds of those adorable pictures, & set your poems gleaming & flashing all about them; lightning, summer lightning seen by daylight on bright. Lightning that flowers before the eyes of a puffin bewitched. They move me, all of them, to my last fervour. We read them last night & again this morning. And we thank you ever so much for all these blessings.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, throughout all her correspondence with H.D., it is hard not to interpret the tone as flirtatious, awestruck, at times almost besotted. Most commonly, in later letters, she addresses H.D. as 'Bella Donna' and attempts to effect that same poetic register. The letters have none of the detail of drudgery and difficulty that she catalogues to Bryher nor, it has to be said, the affectionate, bantering honesty that comes through years of friendship with Bryher either. Letters to Bryher, dealing as they do so often with what Richardson describes as the 'petty, spirit-wasting economics' which dog both the production of *Pilgrimage* and her life in general, are at times playful but never flirtatious. With Bryher, friendship is deeply imbricated in the processes of cultural production and the complexities of financial patronage.

The stark contrast between modes of address when reading across Richardson's letters to Bryher and H.D. makes me think of a psychoanalytic term: 'splitting'.<sup>39</sup> And I am struck by the fact that such splitting takes place as a way of dealing with a same-sex couple - I use this term advisedly, it's not a term that they would have used of themselves - but undoubtedly Richardson registers their intimacy. The division here is not, in a strictly Kleinian sense, between 'good' and 'bad' objects, their introjection and their projection - so much as between the utilitarian or functional and the erotic.

---

<sup>38</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to H.D, 28 April 1924, in Fromm op. cit, p.91.

<sup>39</sup> Here I am alluding in particular to the concept articulated by Melanie Klein in her theorisation of early infantile development, in which the infant 'splits' its parental 'objects' - principally the breast - into 'good' and 'bad'. That which is 'good' can be taken in, introjected; that which is bad must be 'projected' out, and away from the self. See Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude, and Other Works, 1946-1963* (London: Vintage, 1997).

I want to take this concept of splitting into the context of one of Richardson's much lesser-known, peripheral friendships. This friendship develops in the mid- to late-1930s, through the years in which Richardson is writing *March Moonlight* and thus is synchronous with her development of the textual signifier of 'friendship'. This friendship, with the white Creole writer Eliot Bliss, inflects Richardson's use of the term 'friendship' in even more complicated ways. Eileen Bliss was born in Jamaica in 1903, to a military father and Irish mother. Her writerly aspirations were established early and she took the pseudonym of Eliot Bliss, an androgynous amalgamation, in *homage* to two of her literary heroes T.S. Eliot and George Eliot. Like Bryher, Bliss was profoundly affected by her reading of *Pilgrimage* as a young woman. At 17, then living with her grandmother in Twickenham, Bliss discovered the early novels in Richmond Public Library. Interviewed by the Virago editor Alexandra Pringle in 1983, as Virago were bringing out her long-forgotten second novel *Luminous Isle*, Bliss says of Richardson: 'She was the first great modern author I'd read, and I thought "My God, this is the only person who's writing a real book."' Pringle argues that Richardson's modernist style - her 'feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism' - 'enabled Bliss to find her own literary voice'.<sup>40</sup> Bliss published her first novel, *Saraband*, in 1931. Paul Bailey, introducing the novel, makes the comparison to Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, describing Bliss' writing as 'weighted, considered, and - at its best - properly lyrical' by comparison with what he calls Hall's 'earnest sludge'.<sup>41</sup> Certainly both *Saraband* and *Luminous Isle* deal innovatively and determinedly with same-sex desire and the subjectivity of sexual dissidence. Following *Pilgrimage*, they deploy stream-of-consciousness technique and focus, in typical modernist fashion, on the internal architecture of subjectivity and identity. Following Richardson's own style, at times it is the transgressive use of punctuation that gets to carry textual meaning. Like *Pilgrimage* too, they rework autobiographical material into fictional form, working to flesh out the coming to identity of a young woman constrained by her

---

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Introduction, in Eliot Bliss, *Luminous Isle* (London: Virago, 1984), p.xii.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Bailey, Introduction, in Eliot Bliss, *Saraband* (London: Virago, 1987), p.viii.

socio-cultural milieu. Like Miriam Henderson, the heroines of both texts - Louie in *Saraband* and Em in *Luminous Isle* - come to writing as an act of autonomous self-definition. Bliss, then, seems to represent the generation influenced by Richardson and her modernist project.

Bliss sought an introduction to Richardson through the English-Australian modernist poet Anna Wickham during the mid-1930s. Her 'friendship' with Richardson - these scare quotes seek to represent Richardson's deep ambivalence about this relationship - continued through the late 1930s and foundered during the early 1940s - precisely during the period when Richardson was writing *March Moonlight* and thus attempting to inscribe the terms of 'friendship' between Miriam Henderson and Jean.

Whilst the bulk of Bliss' letters to Richardson have not survived, Richardson's responses do. Though it is difficult to pinpoint the exact date when Bliss and Richardson met, they had certainly done so by March 1935 because Richardson writes to Bliss from Constantine Bay:

Dear Miss Eliot Bliss

I am glad to have your letters. Your silence neither surprised nor put me off. I put it down to the shock of disillusionment so often awaiting those who, liking an author's work, seek him out. If you were shy, I was shy; a shocking fancy in an elderly person. I am truly sorry to hear that things have been & still are, so difficult for you. You must come to see us if we are in town this summer. At present, since I have been ill all the winter, everything is a little uncertain. But I hope we shall have a short time at Queen's Terrace, probably towards the end of June. We are on the telephone.

Yours sincerely,

Dorothy M. Richardson<sup>42</sup>

Bliss and Richardson do indeed meet in August 1935, in London. The strange intensity of the meeting is evident in the letter

---

<sup>42</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Eliot Bliss, 22 March 1935, held in Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

Richardson writes Bliss a week later. The tone now is warm, if somewhat defensive, and she has notably dropped the 'Miss' - though continues to use Bliss' full name:

Dear Eliot Bliss

This is to tell you that a 'studio flat', apparently, as far as I could see from outside, the first floor of an ancient small villa, is to let at No. 51, Ordnance Rd, the first turning on the right in going along Queen's Road from Malboro Road Station (or the second if our terrace is counted). The agents are Pemberton & Clark, of 12 Finchley Road, of whom, had it not been Saturday afternoon, I would have made a few enquiries. You may like to ring them up. If, after consulting them, you wish to pursue the matter, I will obtain the key, look around & report to you. If, however, instead of myself, it should be *your friend* who looks round (I am not good, either, at apprehending or remembering names uttered in introductions) she will, I hope, look in on us also.<sup>43</sup> We have put off Kent for about ten days. Dent's literary adviser is back in town & I must sustain a decisive interview. Until last Wednesday, I had not been out to afternoon tea for something like a quarter of a century & upon this fact & upon the shoulders of you & your friend, I lay the responsibility for my unconscionably long stay.

Yours sincerely,

Dorothy M. Richardson<sup>44</sup>

The affect of this letter is all over the place. On the one hand, despite the nascency of this friendship, Richardson makes the generous and indeed intimate offer of helping Bliss and Allen-Burns find accommodation, close to Richardson and Odle's summer residence. Yet she confesses to being bad with names and unable to recall the name of Bliss' 'friend' - Allen-Burns - whom nevertheless she would like call round if viewing the flat. This is a back-handed invitation to the woman whose name she allegedly can't remember. Lastly, she defensively blames both her long exclusion from social engagement - a quarter of a century without any afternoon tea engagements - and the disturbingly compelling

---

<sup>43</sup> This 'friend' is Patricia Allen-Burns, Bliss' long-term partner.

<sup>44</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Eliot Bliss, 10 August 1935, held in Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. Emphasis mine.



experience of meeting Bliss and Allen-Burns - 'upon the shoulders of you & your friend, I lay the responsibility' – for her 'unconscionably long stay'.

Despite the apparent intensity of these first moves in the friendship, Richardson's tone in her later letters to Bliss becomes cold and resisting. Throughout the remaining correspondence, Richardson continues to address Bliss as 'Eliot Bliss' and sign herself with her full name. The letters seem to endlessly list complications and reasons why they cannot meet. Two years later in the July of 1939, Richardson blames their itinerant lifestyle:

Dear Eliot Bliss

Your letter, via three different addresses, reaches me here where we arrived a few days ago. I am sorry for the poor account you give of your health & hope better things lie ahead. We have lost, after thirty years, our old quarters & our furniture is warehoused. With things as they are, we did not feel like acquiring fresh 'permanent' quarters, so have taken a furnished quarter for a short period. We are promised to my sister for the week-end & then successively for brief stays to friends in Surrey, Essex & Kent, landing up here again towards the middle of August, when we'll be able, I hope, to arrange a meeting. You won't, I fancy, care for *Dimple Hill*. When last I heard, the book had not sold up to my small advance of £30. So the finishing of *Pilgrimage* is only a remote possibility. I'll write again when we return. Good wishes, meanwhile, to you both.

Dorothy M Richardson<sup>45</sup>

Richardson does write on their return to London, on 24 August 1939, but only to put off meeting Bliss again, seemingly putting it off forever in the immediate and alarming context of the beginning of the Second World War. She writes the following short note:

---

<sup>45</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Eliot Bliss, 6 July 1939, held in Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

We are provisionally cancelling all appointments, as it is probable we shall be on the way to Cornwall early next week, if not before. However things turn out, we have no desire to be marooned here, or rather, to take the chance of being marooned during weeks of evacuation & mobilisation. I am sorry we have not succeeded in meeting this year. As to next, who can venture to prognosticate?

DMR<sup>46</sup>

After this correspondence in 1939, Bliss contacts Richardson in October 1940. Bliss and Allen-Burns have been caught up in bombing raids in London and decamped to Bishops Stortford in Essex to escape. In the letter she asks Richardson for some introductions to any people she might know in Essex. One of Richardson's closest friends in Essex is, of course, Peggy Kirkaldy. The letter Richardson writes to Kirkaldy in 1940 reveals that Bliss' request for Essex contacts is met with no small amount of scorn:

Dear Peggy

My first thought was to evade by saying that my East A. friends (meaning the Badcocks) had gone to Jamaica. E.B. who is a great friend of Anna Wickham, has been, so to speak, *running after me for years*. This, for me, is a mystery, for I cannot like her. I fail, however I may try. Lately, for some years, she has been in one difficulty after another. I have done from time to time what little I could & have sponsored appeals to the R.L. Fund. Her *little friend*, a scholarship artist, now in commercial art, I do like. I leave it to you. If you so instruct me, (just a card) I'll do as proposed above. She has quality, & a sheer fundamental integrity I can't quite name or fathom. 'Too good for me perhaps. But there is something that always 'puts me off'. She appears to make friends [where?] she goes & to escape, at the eleventh hour from her difficulties. You have, I believe, one of her books.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Eliot Bliss, 24 August 1939, held in Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.

<sup>47</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Peggy Kirkaldy, 30 October 1940, in Fromm, op. cit, pp.409-410. Emphasis mine.

Richardson considers 'evading' Bliss' request by explaining that her ex-employer Harry Badcock - the model for *Pilgrimage's* Mr Hancock - no longer lives in Essex. Here then, in a somewhat brutal fashion - writing to Kirkaldy on the back of the typewritten letter from Bliss - Richardson conveys Bliss' request for access to a friendship network. To put it in the terms which Bliss herself uses: 'If one could see someone of one's own kind occasionally it would be a great help'.<sup>48</sup> Cursory, off-hand, Richardson's written tone to Kirkaldy is dismissive and irritated by Bliss whom she 'cannot like'. Bliss is reduced to initials (E.B), not granted her full status or identity. Richardson leaves it to Kirkaldy to make the generous gesture and contact Bliss; she repudiates her role as conduit of friendship. This 'double' letter - one side the letter from Bliss to Richardson, the other the letter from Richardson to her close friend Kirkaldy - makes a strange palimpsest of the different modalities of Richardson's friendship practice.

And too, the letter provides another fascinating inflection of Richardson's use of the term 'friend'. Firstly, that reference to Anna Wickham: 'she is a great friend' of Anna Wickham. Wickham is of course linked so tangibly to Natalie Barney, with whom since the late 1920s she has been embroiled, first in briefly sexual and then in an unrequited love-relationship. Indeed we might note that Wickham's friendship with Richardson provides a direct line of intellectual access to the notion of friendship expressed in Barney's *Temple à l'Amitié*. Bliss' version of friendship is constructed, by Richardson, as parasitic, something deployed in order to survive. The fragility of her economic situation, her dependence on others to sustain her financially and emotionally, grates on Richardson, who criticises it without any sense of self-reflexivity. She is irritated at being placed in the role of beneficent friend; or as conduit to other connections.

More striking, is Richardson description of Patricia Allen-Burns, Bliss' partner: 'Her *little friend*, a scholarship artist, now in commercial art, I do like'. Bliss herself, in her letter, consistently refrains from using Patricia Allen-Burns' name, instead referring to

---

<sup>48</sup> Eliot Bliss, Letter to Dorothy Richardson, 20 October 1940, held in Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

her as 'my friend'. Her handwritten addendum to an otherwise typewritten letter is: 'My friend wishes to be remembered to you'. Richardson is undoubtedly fascinated by the 'little friend'. She discusses Allen-Burns in far more detail in her next letter to Peggy Kirkaldy, written after she has generously met Bliss and Allen-Burns and reported back to Richardson on the meeting:

That was truly a noble deed, Peggy dear, of yours & Bobs. E.B., we feel, you depict with amazing exactitude. *The little girl*, met as a hovering scout when, years ago on first going to see E.B., (introduced by Anna Wickham) who was laid up with a damaged leg (she seems subject to leg accidents) I was wandering in search of their warren amongst tall irregularly numbered grey old Maida Vale houses-turned-tenements, *charmed me at once slinking shyly up & putting a small hand on my arm, looking herself more lost than I.* But throughout that meeting I felt her not liking me for not adoring E.B. I can't, as they say, make her out. Alan revolts utterly, & yet we both feel aware of a certain engaging strength & quiet confidence, even in the worst of her vicissitudes. Their present plight is distressing & I'm wondering whether their holding back from your lovely plan for them is not simply a matter of clo'[thes]!<sup>49</sup>

Here then - as we have seen in Richardson's own early letters to Bliss - Richardson is drawn to Allen-Burns. The terms she uses here are seemingly almost sexual, or at least flirtatious. Richardson feels Allen-Burns appealing to her. Here again, though in a much stronger and less ambiguous way, Richardson seems to 'split' the friends: Bliss distinctly 'unlikable'; Allen-Burns 'a little girl' with undeniable charm. It seems to me that Richardson's multivalent use of the word 'friend' in these letters is distinctly contemporary, perhaps even euphemistic, making 'friend' do the covert work of articulating sexuality and identity. It is a meaning profoundly different from the model of friendship we have in the eulogistic published passages which seem to crown the closing moves of *March Moonlight*.

---

<sup>49</sup> Dorothy Richardson, Letter to Peggy Kirkaldy, dated 8 December 1940. Repr. in Fromm, 1995, pp.409-410.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely what Richardson made of Bliss's texts but it is clear that she read them. The first, *Saraband* (published in 1931), is a text about inversion and the taking up of the mantle of friendship between women. The second, *Luminous Isle* (published in 1934), is a narrative in which race, sexuality and Otherness are articulated through same-sex, interracial friendship. What challenge might these novels have presented to Richardson? So close, in fundamental ways, to her own project in *Pilgrimage*, they deploy some of the techniques which she herself pioneered, and struggle too with one of the central debates that occupies the heart of *Pilgrimage*: how to represent sexually dissident desire and identity. I will only quote one indicative extract to give a fuller sense of the textual means which Bliss employs to inscribe her heroine's desire. After a twelve-year separation, the central character Em again meets Ida Davenport, the older woman with whom she was infatuated as a young girl. Davenport is married to one of the other Captains in Em's father's regiment. Ida and Em, now a woman and aware of the contours of longing and desire, are immediately drawn to each other:

'You're a true soldier's daughter', said Ida, 'but you believe that we should try to do everything in our power to abolish war, don't you?'

'Absolutely - between nations'. But as she said it, looking into Ida's eyes, it seemed to mean something else, and had nothing to do with nations. They were speaking to each other in a sort of cipher language - Your people shall be my people, and your God my God - For a moment she was aware of the crickets singing in the garden, of the smell of a flowering bush, and the damp moisture from freshly-watered plants near the house. The others were talking now.... Children, Ida's children.<sup>50</sup>

The intertextual reference to the Old Testament's Book of Ruth, inserted there between hyphens and enunciated as part of Em's thought process, gets to carry the deeper meaning of this connection between the two women. It is a friendship that is described as a 'falling in love' and its erotic potential is inscribed through this kind of subtextual trace. For Richardson, Bliss' books,

---

<sup>50</sup> Eliot Bliss, *Luminous Isle* (London: Virago, 1984), p.169.

her partnership with Patricia Allen-Burns, her courtship of her as a mentor and friend all seem to require rejection, or more strongly repudiation. The politics of friendship here seem to turn on that repudiation. Such a repudiation, if fully excavated, might throw up important psychic and political elements which in contemporary terms we might describe as: internalised homophobia; the abhorrence of female economic penury or a horror at the tenuousness of female partnerships within patriarchal culture ('We knew we should not meet again, she in her Scotland and I too poor to travel').

### *To return to March Moonlight*

If such repudiation and splitting are a way of dealing with the female couple, with intimate friendship between women, we might say most importantly that it seems to be reproduced in the excised and published versions of the Jean passages in *March Moonlight*. Between draft and final version, love and desire become split off from friendship. To reiterate Jean's written profession of friendship: 'Dick, I do not say much about our friendship. It is a very precious thing. I am silent before the wonder of it. And before your understanding of everything'. Jean's 'do not say' is ambiguous: *do not* or *cannot*. Is the 'not saying much' an act of choice, or the result of insufficient vocabulary and the fear of social censure? As Harriette Andreadis has persuasively argued, perhaps the time has now come to confer agency upon our historical lesbian subjects, acknowledging that 'not naming' - or not saying much - is not so much about the inability to name so much as the refusal to do so within a dominant cultural climate that pathologises and proscribes lesbian sexuality.

This paper has attempted to open up certain areas of discussion about Richardson and the politics of friendship. Now, at the point of her half-centenary, it has never been more important to ask how we interpret each of the terms in Richardson's vocabulary, and how we do that across the large cultural and historical gap that separates us from her. Within this vocabulary, what does 'friendship' mean for Richardson? There are multiple dissonances

between its textual meaning and its lived equivalence. If it represents the end of *Pilgrimage*, precisely how do we define that end? Across the different materials before us here: published text, excised drafts, letters and personal communications, it would appear that some of its possible contents must be repudiated whilst others can be retained and acknowledged. Read alongside each other they speak of Richardson's friendship practices, and the ways in which these must be read in intimate, cultural and political terms. It is crucial to situate these different articulations of friendship in the contexts of her socio-cultural milieu and her literary and identificatory networks. Friendship, in Richardson's practice, but also in the practice of the other lesbian modernists, has multiple meanings; such meanings broaden out, and indeed at times contradict, canonical models of male friendship. Like the good modernist she is, Richardson demonstrates the fluidity and undecidability of the term. She offers it up at the end of *Pilgrimage* as a dense symbol, full of different valences and possibilities, for us her readers - her donors of meaning - to undertake the difficult and undeniably political job of interpretation.