

THE GISSING JOURNAL

“More than most men am I dependent on sympathy to bring out the best that is in me.”
– George Gissing’s *Commonplace Book*.

Volume XXXIV, Number 3

July, 1998

Contents

<i>Thyrza: Gissing, Darwin and the Destinies of Innocence, by Francesco Marroni</i>	1
Notes on the Net, <i>by Peter Morton</i>	30
“C’è novità: News from Calabria, <i>by Wulfhard Stahl</i>	32
Eduard Bertz, Dead and Alive: an Announcement	34
A Forgotten Review by Thomas Seccombe	35
Notes and News	37
Recent Publications	42

-- 1 --

Thyrza: Gissing, Darwin and the Destinies of Innocence

FRANCESCO MARRONI
University of Pescara

[This article, translated from the Italian by Michael Cronin, of the University of Calabria, first appeared in a special number of *Merope* devoted to Gissing in September 1993, pp. 93-128, and was reprinted in Francesco Marroni’s *Spettri senza nome: Modelli epistemici e narrativa vittoriana*, Pescara: Edizioni Campus, 1997, pp. 93-129.]

“The struggle for existence is so hard that we grow more and more material: the tendency is to regard it as the end of life to make money.” George Gissing¹

1. The struggle for existence as struggle for an aesthetic ideal? Among Gissing’s working-class novels, *Thyrza: A Tale* (1887) is the one which in the most evident manner presents a female character whose existential experience – in a fashion not dissimilar to many stories in Victorian fiction – offers the image of a heroine who, purely because of sexual discrimination, is condemned to play a part conditioned by the negation, in all circumstances, of any possibility of affirming her own personality. Compared to the other novels that Gissing

wrote in this period – *Demos* (1886) and *The Nether World* (1889) – *Thyrza* is in line with a code of gentleness² which, in a socio-historic context where the weakest and most gentle are destined to succumb, proves to be a completely inadequate value, above all since it appears to be essential to a role-making hinged upon immobility and silence.

In explicitly Darwinian terms, *Thyrza*'s psychological and moral itinerary dramatises resistance to change, and therefore the substantial immutability of a socioeconomic fabric which, analogous to the world of nature, does not admit of abrupt or sudden changes. Any attempt to force the laws of society, or to modify their natural course, results in the automatic expulsion and/or destruction of the “transgressor.”

-- 2 --

Indeed, together with many writers and intellectuals of the second half of the nineteenth century, Gissing is convinced that for the human species, the same laws are valid that Darwin had expounded in the *Origin of Species* (1859).³ For this reason, we find at the core of his work, in a more or less marked fashion, that the fictionalisation of the question of survival lays greater stress on adaptation *in loco* than on mobility, shifting or transformation. From Gissing's point of view, the illusion of flight from one's class of origin is the most ruinous thing possible for peaceable cohabitation among human beings – the worker is a slave to his condition, from which only cultural and spiritual growth will be able to redeem him, which, however, in no manner implies social ascent and, somehow, flight from the “prison” of class. At the base of society, there is the law of adaptation – only he who, in the struggle for life, proves able to resist and adapt will succeed in surviving and progressing. It is in this perspective that we should consider a declaration – cynical and paradoxical – like that made by the protagonist of *The Whirlpool* (1897), Harvey Rolfe, “Gissing's brooding alter ego”⁴:

‘People snivel over the deaths of babies; I see nothing to grieve about. If a child dies, why, the probabilities are it *ought* to die; if it lives, it lives, and you get survival of the fittest. We don't want to choke the world with people, most of them rickety and wheezing; let us be healthy, and have breathing space.’⁵

Behind Rolfe's post-Malthusian reflections lies a profoundly anti-reformist attitude that recalls, as David Grylls suggests, a “fashionable Spencerism,”⁶ which, above all among intellectuals, was very widespread in those years. For Gissing, it is not possible to advocate at the same time the pursuit of the highest aesthetic ideals and the realisation of reforming projects – one excludes the other.

The reason for the failure of his heroes lies precisely in their inability to reconcile beauty and reform, and, once he is convinced that it is not possible to reform those who do not desire to be reformed, the writer ends up subscribing to a vision of the world that is substantially pessimistic. Prevailing over everything is a battle which, though it never ends, presupposes the death of the weakest – “Darwin's theory required extinction. Death was extended from the individual organism to the whole species.”⁷

On the other hand, it is undeniable that on an epistemic level, Gissing attributes this type of negative modeling to every aspect of human activity and, as one can see in *Ryecroft* (1903), even the laws which govern the world of letters – the success or failure of a writer, the

-- 3 --

survival or consignment to oblivion of his works – respond to the Darwinian theory:

Hateful as is the struggle for life in every form, this rough-and-tumble of the literary arena seems to me sordid and degrading beyond all others. Oh, your prices per thousand words! Oh, your paragraphings and interviewings! And oh, the black despair that awaits those downtrodden in the fray.⁸

For a writer, the struggle for life signifies self-affirmation in literary and commercial terms. It is, therefore, a battle of books, which, being also presented in commercial terms, seems to carry to extremes that which is already evident in society. In any event, the image adopted by the narrator is highly significant and well represents Gissing's concept of life. It is no accident that in many parts of *Ryecroft* the narrative voice speaks of the present in tones clearly imitative of Matthew Arnold⁹ – a present seen as an era of barbarism in which the advent of science and the machine has only increased the existing distance between culture and the masses, together with an inevitable and increasing subjection of literature to the laws of trade:

I hate and fear 'science' [...] I see it destroying all simplicity and gentleness of life, all the beauty of the world; I see it restoring barbarism under a mask of civilization; I see it darkening men's minds and hardening their hearts; I see it bringing a time of vast conflicts.¹⁰

Simplicity and gentleness. In the words of Henry Ryecroft, characterised by a strong vein of nostalgia, the presence of a hopeless Darwinism is recognizable: the prophetic and apocalyptic mood of his final declarations – emphasized by the anaphoric refrain of the segment "I see it" – finds valid ideological support precisely in that Darwinian evolutionism which, after the re-reading given it by Spencer, came to sustain the idea of a society which was substantially elitist. Furthermore, this at the same time justified competition in biological terms and class struggle, conceived, however, more as a natural process than as a historical necessity.¹¹ In this perspective, the metropolis became the new arena for a triumphant barbarism in which, by degrees, the end of culture was being celebrated.

2. Simplicity and gentleness as a self-destructive impulse? Thanks to a narrative strategy designed to exploit the semantic-actantial possibilities and the diegetic itineraries offered by the encounter between two contrasting ways of life (namely, the working class and the upper industrial bourgeoisie), *Thyrza* is without doubt one of Gissing's most achieved

-- 4 --

works.¹² This is both because the novel has to its credit a semiotic-structural coherence which, compared to *Demos* and *The Nether World*, calls into play a richer and more articulate elaboration of private and public instances, and because of the different attitude adopted in the representation of the working-class world, here observed with its culture, with its values of solidarity and generosity and, not least, its attitude of openness towards the outside world.

On a simply narrative level, the compactness of the argument is guaranteed by the eponymous heroine, whose experience provides the ideological-cultural nucleus around which are constructed both the plot of the novel and its more complex thematic organization. In short, *Thyrza* is centred upon three characters whose relations can be explained schematically as follows:

THYRZA TRENT – deludes herself that she is in love with the working man Grail; plans to marry Grail; falls in love with the intellectual philanthropist Egremont; flees from the slums; a "prisoner" of her benefactress Mrs. Ormonde, awaits Egremont; dies.

GILBERT GRAIL – falls in love with Thyrsa; plans to marry her; meets Egremont; works with him on the constitution of a library; is abandoned by Thyrsa; sees the penitent Thyrsa again; remains alone.

WALTER EGREMONT – meets Grail; promises him a job as a librarian; meets Thyrsa; falls in love with her; abandons his philanthropic project; accepting Mrs. Ormonde’s plan, flees far away (Paris and Pennsylvania); marries the rich and sensitive Annabel Newthorpe.

The triangle delineated above does not take into account a sub-plot in which Lydia Trent achieves happiness as a sort of moral compensation for that which is denied to her sister, thanks to her marriage to Luke Ackroyd, a generous working man who is immune to the Arnoldian gospel preached by Egremont (“His manner was hearty, his look frank to a fault and full of sensibility,” p. 24).¹³ In any event, it should be noted immediately that, abandoning the sharp tones of naturalistic representation, Thyrsa has at its core a presentation of the irreconcilability of “beauty” and “reform,” adopting the perspective of a female character who, in order to survive in the metropolitan jungle, is armed solely with “weapons” that are totally ineffective – gentleness, innocence and idealism. These are the behavioural vectors which, in that particular socioeconomic context, condemn Thyrsa to a Darwinian “extinction.”

-- 5 --

* * * * *

Second Announcement and Call for Papers
Gissing Conference
University of Amsterdam, 9-11 September 1999

Please return the enclosed
registration form, with the conference fee to:
Bouwe Postmus, Esdoornlaan 29
1521 EB Wormerveer, The Netherlands

* * * * *

In primis, therefore, simplicity and gentleness. It is well known, in fact, that the epistemologically accepted typology in Victorian society, that is to say, a woman who is “simple and gentle,” fulfils a social function which requires her to be totally dependent upon her man. The female role is that of mitigating, with her gentle smile and her spirituality, the harshness of the male world: “her function was spiritual, and the highest glory of womanhood was to preserve and quicken the moral idealism of her husband. The view finds classic expression in Tennyson’s *The Princess*, Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies*, and Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*.”¹⁴ Furthermore, it is significant that one of the opening scenes of *Thyrza* shows Annabel Newthorpe intent upon reading *Sesame and Lilies*: “She opened the book upon her lap and glanced down a page or two, but without interest” (p. 5). It is difficult to say to what extent such an absence of interest on the young woman’s part must be read as a sign of feminism. It is true, however, that this refusal of the Ruskinian vision belongs more to the character than to the author. It is no coincidence that the feminist motif, potentially present in the scene, quickly becomes a secondary consideration. Gissing’s purpose is not so much that of delineating a new type of heroine, capable, that is, of incarnating the emerging principles of socio-cultural emancipation, as to place emphasis on a female model which, consolidating the institutionalised vision, almost aggravates its most negative effects.¹⁵

Therefore, *Thyrza* can be defined “proletarian”¹⁶ only if one looks at the environmental context in which the story develops. On closer inspection, both on an axiological-cultural and a proairetic-actantial level, the novel stages the contrast between the desire for self-realisation and a vision of woman furthering the ideological consolidation of the Establishment, for which only

-- 6 --

docility and immobility can guarantee total female dependence upon the male universe.¹⁷

As is the case with so many other Gissing characters, *Thyrza*’s aspiration to get out of the environment in which she lives only serves to make her realize that she is condemned to live *in that determined space* forever. It is nevertheless legitimate to affirm that the mode in which the heroine is depicted reflects Gissing’s contradictory approach to the female world. Frequently, an extreme degree of idealization understood in the first place as external or internal beauty is set against sin, or better, the irruption of sin. Not seldom, with the idea of sin are equated the temptation of independence and the desire for freedom which, in the light of the more or less artificial construction of the female model accepted by the majority, take the form of perilous cracks and flaws in a society which presents itself rather as an entity axiologically stable and compact. It is in the desire to love and not only to be the passive object of love that the transgression and sin lie. It is just such rebellion which produces in the writer a reaction which touches upon contempt, often becoming actual misogyny. Regarding this, Grylls has observed:

The pedestal on which he wished to place women was not only fractured in itself, but attached to a vast and immovable rock of hard misogyny. It is not simply that his fiction contains vicious women, but that their vices are frequently indicted as specifically female ones. Vanity, greed and illogicality, jealousy, violence and hypochondria, spitefulness, cynicism and conventionality – the list is so long that any discussion must be greatly abbreviated.¹⁸

In the case of *Thyrza*, the oscillation is between the idealised portrait of the character and the emergence of blame and, as in all closed and repressive communities, the gravest blame regards sex. The simple recognition on the heroine’s part of an irresistible attraction for Egremont is sufficient motive to cry scandal: the fact that female desire conceals also an impulse of a sexual nature places *Thyrza* in a position of censure as far as the Victorian image of woman is concerned. For this character, it is not a question of acting, as Rhoda Nunn suggests in *The Odd Women*, adhering *toto corde* to a “widespread revolt against sexual instinct,”¹⁹ but on the contrary, of abandoning oneself to this unstoppable tumult of passion even if such a choice will be paid for with one’s life. After all, this decision is also consonant with the framework of an idealized “reading” of the heroine which, removed from the limiting cliché of the factory girl,²⁰ connotes her according to a paradigm of spirituality which refers to a sort of internal

-- 7 --

puritan torment. All this is furthermore correspondent to a socio-psychological and economic weakness which condemns her to being an object of desire (on the part of the young industrialist) without being able to desire. The only certainty that characterises her is just that impossibility of being able to choose according to the dictates of her spirit which, in Darwinian terms, places her in the category of a species destined for extinction.

3. Immobility, reverie and silence, or impossible transgression. *Thyrza* presents a threefold structure which delineates the existential journey of the protagonist as a passage from

innocence (conformity to social rules – acceptance of the squalor of Lambeth), to experience (transgression in flight from the slums), to the final expiation (death as the social price to pay for the gesture of transgression). Seen in the light of the nineteenth-century tradition, the figure of the heroine is by no means original, yet it acquires an artistic consistency – and in part a certain originality – thanks to Gissing's decision to endow his character with a culture, a sensitivity and a beauty which, typologically speaking, do not belong to the women of the working class. Thyrsa, from her first appearance, conveys to the reader the image of an ideal woman, luminous and very beautiful:

Thyrsa had laid the table for tea, and was sitting idly. It was not easy to recognise her as Lydia's sister; if you searched her features the sisterhood was there, but the type of countenance was so subtly modified, so refined, as to become beauty of rare suggestiveness. She was of pale complexion, and had golden hair; it was plaited in one braid, which fell to her waist. Like Lydia's, her eyes were large and full of light; every line of the face was delicate, harmonious, sweet; each thought that passed through her mind reflected itself in a change of expression produced one knew not how, one phase melting into another like flitting lights upon a stream in woodland. It was a subtly morbid physiognomy, and impressed one with a sense of vague trouble. There was none of the spontaneous pleasure in life which gave Lydia's face such wholesome brightness; no impulse of activity, no resolve; all tended to preoccupation, to emotional reverie. She had not yet completed her seventeenth year, and there was still something of childhood in her movements. Her form was slight, graceful, and of lower stature than her sister's. She wore a dress of small-patterned print, with a broad collar of cheap lace. (pp. 34-35)²¹

The first part, which constitutes a highly homogenous unit of reading, links the domestic environment with the existence of a heroine who, apart from minor daily matters, experiences a

-- 8 --

monotony which is interrupted solely by the journeys made through her imagination. The CLOSED SPACE is here given as an existential paradigm which, pertaining to the semic field of IMMOBILITY, postulates implicitly the state of dissatisfaction and impatience of the protagonist. At the same time, however, what is delineated – the small though welcoming domestic environment – presents itself as a protective space, a locus capable of protecting her against the aggressiveness of the outside world.

That the descriptive passage is marked by an extreme degree of functionalization is evident also in the comparison established between the two sisters: Thyrsa is different from Lydia sufficiently to transform a normal girl's face into a beauty of "rare suggestiveness." In the hyperbolic portrait of the heroine there is already revealed the trait which allows us proleptically to identify she who is destined to be a victim of her own difference – the beauty of a working-class girl becomes a value around which a dream is to be constructed, the illusion of flight from the narrow world of the London slums.

It can also be useful, on the basis of recurring syntagmatic sequences, to establish a sort of physical-psychological-behavioural diagram of the protagonist:

a) BEAUTY and LUMINOSITY: "refined," "beauty of rare suggestiveness," "golden hair," "full of light," "flitting lights," "graceful";

b) ONENESS and SOLITUDE: "It was not easy to recognise her as Lydia's sister," "none of

the spontaneous pleasures which gave Lydia's face such wholesome brightness";

c) DELICACY and HARMONY: "pale complexion," "delicate, harmonious, sweet," "lower stature";

d) IMMOBILITY, REVERIE and SILENCE: "sitting idly," "a sense of vague trouble," "no impulse of activity, no resolve," "preoccupation," "emotional reverie";

e) RESTLESSNESS: "a change of expression," "morbid physiognomy";

f) INNOCENCE: "something of childhood in her movements."

Besides the precise connotation of a young girl who instinctively projects her gaze beyond the limited horizon within which she is forced to live, we cannot, on a linguistic level, fail to notice how prevalent are both the litotes and the hyperbole. In this first presentation, the litotes expresses the immobility and passivity of the character while the hyperbole is used for her physical characteristics.

Put differently, the litotic argument refers to the INTERNAL dimension (beauty protected by the walls of home) and the hyperbolic to the EXTERNAL dimension in which life becomes the

-- 9 --

struggle for life. In short, a friction and a contradiction are created between the INTERNAL and the EXTERNAL, anticipating the laceration experienced by Thyrsa in her transition from innocence to experience.

Most significantly, in the scene that follows, she is presented as a woman at the window. Now if, on the one hand, this appears to confirm the picture of a character tending towards stasis and reverie – literature, and above all Victorian novels are full of such heroines "condemned" to observation²² –, on the other, it brings into play again the INTERNAL/EXTERNAL dialectic which characterises Thyrsa right from her first entrance:

The meal was quickly over, then Lydia took up some sewing. *Thyrza went to the window* and stood for a while looking at the people that passed, but presently she seated herself, and fell into the brooding which her sister's entrance had interrupted. (p. 36, my italics)

The evening drew on. *Thyrza took her chair to the window*, leaned upon the sill, and looked up at the reddening sky. The windows of the other houses were all open; here and there women talked from them with friends across the street. People were going backwards and forwards with bags and baskets, on the business of Saturday evening; in the distance sounded the noise of the market in Lambeth Walk. (p. 36, my italics)

The window where Thyrsa usually sits becomes a frontier where many tensions are exercised and, in part, unleashed. The girl's observation point is like a diaphragm that separates the internal from the external, the reassuring silence of the walls of home and the anonymous crowds in Lambeth Walk. In many ways it is precisely the window which sanctions the incompatibility between the internal and the external, according to a re-codification which transforms the topological antithesis into the ethical-behavioural INNOCENCE vs. EXPERIENCE. It is worth adding here that, in Darwinian terms, the external configures the stage upon which, day after day, the battle for survival is waged. Yet the metropolitan crowd does not only signify danger, it also appears as a sort of watery flux in which for Thyrsa, as for her sister and many other girls, it is attractive to immerse oneself in search of a moment's diversion or even of simple participation in the festive animation of the streets and alleys of the working-class

districts.²³ It remains true, however, that the frontier materialized by the window is also a dynamic place where contrasting sentiments meet and clash. To the desire to feel protected, to find recognition in domestic objects, is opposed the aspiration to flight, a tension which is

-- 10 --

antithetical to the monotony of the everyday, the overcoming of immobility with the conquest – very often more imaginary than real – of that which belongs to the universe of dreams, to the phenomenology of reverie.

In this attitude, Thyrsa is not Lydia, who, in contrast, is endowed with a realism which places her beyond the reach of any temptation to transgress. In fact, if her sister convinces herself that it is right to live in a working-class context the squalor and misery of which she only occasionally perceives, Thyrsa is moved by an exclusive awareness, namely, that that world, those dark and labyrinthine streets, that coarse and unbeautiful reality, is not what she expected from life. There is already present in her attitude the seed of that transgression which, implicitly, calls into play the crossing of the threshold – not to feel satisfied means that one desires to change one's state, and leave behind all that which has represented the negation of one's own aspirations.

Yet, and this is clear, the end of psycho-topological immobility presupposes also and above all the end of innocence:

Thyrza sat with her eyes fixed on vacancy; she was so miserable, her heart had sunk so low, that tears would have come had she not forced them back. More than once of late she had known this mood, in which life lay about her barren and weary. She was very young to suffer that oppression of the world-worn; it was the penalty she paid for her birthright of heart and mind.
(p. 49)

Here we have the thematic presentation of the heroine's condition in terms of a pain which expresses itself not in words, but in tears. In contrast to the girls of her age, Thyrsa is aware of the external squalor which marks destructively her internal world: the series of adjectives in this passage highlights the state of total uneasiness which tests the young woman. Moreover, the fact that Thyrsa, in this environment, is aware of the risks of a social and spiritual death, is an indication of her specialness, of the sensibility which is hers by birthright:

miserable	}	
low	}	
barren	}	vs. young
weary	}	
world-worn	}	

Parallel to a series of adjectives of a dysphoric kind (not to mention the lexical units “tears,” “suffer,” “oppression,” “penalty”) we can record a single positive term, “young,” which, pertinent to the semic field of innocence (in other words, NON EXPERIENCE) is connoted as a

-- 11 --

euphoric lexical unit only by virtue of the implicit antithesis YOUTH/AGE. It is worthwhile to note the position of the couple “eyes/heart” of which, at the end of the quotation, “heart/mind” is the counterpart. These are at the origin of Thyrsa's condition as sufferer: what she sees, what she hears and what she thinks are at the root of her suffering.

Thyrza was so beautiful, and, it seemed to her, so weak; always dreaming of something beyond and above the life which was her lot; so deficient in the practical qualities which that life demanded. At moments Lydia saw her responsibility in a light which alarmed her. (pp. 49-50)

For her sister, Thyrza betrays in an almost quintessential fashion a persistent lack of practical sense. Faced with such an incapacity for adaptation, Lydia cannot but be worried, also because she herself feels perfectly at ease in the very same environment. Being able to adapt is the first law of survival. Not only does Thyrza fail to manage to do so, but her lack of practicality is matched by a dreamer's spirit indicative of a dangerous propensity to make choices which pertain to the semantic field of self-destructiveness. It is true, on the other hand, that already in the early pages of the novel, the author proleptically announces the destiny of the heroine. Once again, beauty is set against positive and negative values:

	{	weak
beautiful vs.	{	
	{	deficient

Everything conspires against the beauty and youth of the young woman who, ignoring the fears of her sister, together with a compelling desire to abandon the slums manifests a wish for radical change: "I am discontented. There's never any change. How can you be so happy day after day? [...] I should like to see a new place. I've been reading there about the seaside, what it must be like! I want to know things" (p. 52). It is significant that Thyrza associates the idea of change with that of a new space: knowing more, for her, does not so much mean knowing other people as other places.²⁴ In the world in which the heroine finds herself, change is only a remote possibility — the principal activity is presented as a monotonous circularity in which variation and movement are not foreseen: "Thyrza sat in her usual place by the window, now reading for a few minutes, now dreaming" (p. 54). Reading and dreaming; imagination is her favourite territory. From this inevitably follows the discrepancy between quotidian reality and the

-- 12 --

imaginative dimension, which, postulating the character's marginality, makes her a being scarcely touched by the flux of life.

4. The fascination of culture or the pitfalls of culture? According to the typological portrait of the Victorian heroine, the transition from innocence to experience takes place when the young woman falls in love, and, together with love, she experiences the delusions and deceptions of a world which is by no means disposed to comply with her sentimentality. Thyrza's encounter with the working man Gilbert Grail does not imply any topological change, seeing that the Trent sisters and the Grail family live in the same house: Gilbert on the ground floor with his aged mother, Thyrza and Lydia on the first floor.

Therefore, the first movement is merely apparent. It points to a circularity illustrative of the intransitiveness of Thyrza's mind – and this also is part of the contradictory nature of her character – she leaves her world to remain in her world. There is something paradoxical in all this; yet it is evident that Gilbert, for whom "a printed page was as the fountain of life" (p. 67), in diegetic terms, stands as the only possibility offered to her sensibility, starved as it is of culture and new spaces, precisely because "he loved literature passionately [...] This distinguished him markedly from the not uncommon working man who zealously pursues some chosen branch of study" (p. 67).

From an ethical-behavioural point of view, the working man represents the mirror counterpart of Thyrsa. In fact, he differs substantially from his work companions and presents himself as a highly idealised portrait of a typology to which, in all probability, Gissing gives the stamp of his experience of the working-class world.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, therefore, the writer delineates with great precision the stages of Gilbert Grail's intellectual training:

a) "At twenty years he was a young fellow of seemingly rather sluggish character, without social tendencies" (p. 68);

b) "At five-and-twenty he had a grave illness" (p. 68);

c) "At thirty his bodily strength seemed to have consolidated itself [...] his knowledge grew, though he seemed to himself ever on the mere threshold of the promised land, hopeless of admission" (p. 69);

d) "Then came his sister's death, and the removal from Battersea back to Lambeth [...] Gilbert was nearing five and thirty" (p. 69);

e) "This was Gilbert Grail at the time with which we are now concerned" (p. 71).

-- 13 --

In section c (above) the image of Grail who, though finding himself on the threshold of the Promised Land, seems condemned to remain always outside it, appears significant. The image recalls Thyrsa who, at the window, watches the world of the comfortably-off classes, convinced that in seeing *social beauty*, she is seeing the real meaning of life. In both cases, the paradigm of immobility predominates, which, together with silence and solitude, links the destiny of Grail to that of Thyrsa: "By nature he was a lonely man [...] for days he kept silence" (p. 69). On an existential level, Grail does not offer a way out of that squalor, but for the young woman he at least represents a movement outside of the world in which she lives, being, as he is, a depository of cultural value which is entirely absent from that world "without light." Thyrsa is attracted and fascinated by this culture:

Thyrza always entered the sitting-room with a feeling of awe. The dim light, the old lady's low voice, above all, the books – in her eyes a remarkable library – impressed her strongly. If Grail himself were present, he was invariably reading. Thyrsa held him profoundly learned, a judgment confirmed by his mother's way of speaking of him. (p. 60)

In Chapter X, "Tempting Fortune," Grail's dream is crowned. He obtains an assent to his proposal of marriage: "Yes, I will marry you, Mr. Grail. I will try my best to be a good wife to you" (p. 121). In the double occurrence of the syntagm *I will* it is evident that Thyrsa's answer is rather the fruit of a choice without passion – almost a gesture of goodwill – than that of a woman in love. The prospect is one of a marriage without love, founded more on Thyrsa's desire to have at her side a protective figure and mentor, than upon the need for a partner in life. It is for this reason that the territory in which Thyrsa continues to live is still that of innocence – her world remains that of a young girl who looks at reality from the limited observatory of her room, and who, apart from sporadic excursions to Lambeth Walk, knows nothing other than the darkness of the slums. The antithetical relationship that establishes itself between the heroine and the context in which she lives is very well expressed by the frequent adjacent occurrence of two antonymic adjectives:

dark vs. golden

If the working-class districts evoke visions of darkness, Thyrsa herself is always

associated with the image of gold. Her golden hair is a leitmotiv in the novel; it sanctions her rejection of her environment. One recalls the “golden hair” (p. 34) in the first presentation of

-- 14 --

Thyrza in the novel – and all the references which somehow make her a “noble” personage, that is, removed from the inevitable vulgarity and “darkness” of the world in which she is obliged to live. Gilbert Grail seems to set himself up as defender of this purity and, therefore, without realising it, reinforces the girl’s condemnation to immobility. Consequently, after their engagement, though entered into in the spirit of one who hopes to find in marriage a means of escape, the protagonist continues to be a woman at the window.

For his part, Grail feels that, thanks to love, his fate is about to follow a new, radiant path: “Things were not ill with him, Gilbert Grail [...] It was joy of the purest and manliest. His life had sailed like some battered, dun-coloured vessel into a fair harbour of sunlight and blue, and hands were busy giving to it a brave new aspect” (p. 144). *Sunlight* significantly recalls the gold of Thyrza: the metaphor of the protective space which seems to gratify Gilbert is in reality a barrier placed before the girl’s life. On the other hand, the simile of the battered, dun-coloured vessel – though analeptic in nature – is an ambiguous prelude to a tragic epilogue, and at the same time is offered as a prospect of temporariness and negation. Here, the negative value also pertains to the protective “fair harbour,” the IMMOBILITY of which is opposed to the ship’s natural space, the open sea, refusal of which metaphorically postulates refusal of experience. To Thyrza’s desire for *opening* (movement) is opposed Grail’s desire for *closure* (immobility). Grail sees their marriage more as a berthing place in his life than as the beginning of a voyage far from the narrow perspective of Lambeth.

5. Of the idle, the melancholy and the lonely with populist inclinations. The couple Thyrza-Grail represents the working-class pole of the story. Their world is the immobile world of the slums from which it is impossible to escape precisely because it is characterised socially by an extreme degree of poverty that generates such a condition of social imprisonment. Besides the significance of all this in Gissing’s novels set in working-class environments, it is beyond doubt that a dynamising factor can only come from the outside. In the present case the antithetical pole to that of the working class is constituted by the aristocracy or at least by the well-to-do classes. And it is from this particular group – numerically in the minority, but economically dominant – that Walter Egremont comes, the Gissing hero whose behaviour bears the stamp of a philanthropy which, in the first place, means desire for the emancipation of the

-- 15 --

less affluent classes.²⁶ In Chapter I, “Among the Hills,” in a manner which is almost diagrammatic, Gissing offers the reader a description of Egremont which outlines – and in part anticipates – the positive and negative features of the character:

- a) PESSIMISM-MELANCHOLY-SOLITUDE – “This Mr. Egremont had not the look of a man who finds his joy in the life of Society”; “a tendency to sadness” (p. 6);
- b) INDEPENDENCE-RESTLESSNESS-MOBILITY – “his eyes glanced quickly and searchingly”; “its lines expressed independence of character” (p. 6);
- c) ROMANTIC AND IMAGINATIVE TENSION – “an absent gazing which revealed the imaginative temperament” (p. 6);
- d) IDEALISM-ENTHUSIASM – “For all that, it was the visage of an idealist” (p. 6).

Loneliness is the psychological-behavioural element which the three characters have in

common. With Thyrza, Gilbert Grail and Egremont, Gissing portrays three figures of solitaries who, under the banner of culture, interweave their destinies in a diegetic-actantial system which presupposes, as ever, the victory of the strong and the eclipse of the weak. If Thyrza looks beyond the confines of the narrow street in which she lives, Egremont, on the contrary, yearns to bring “light” into that squalor, and for this reason turns his gaze to the slums, where he is convinced that he will succeed in putting into practice his plan in favour of the more forsaken social classes of London.

The hero presents himself as a credible alternative to professional politicians like Mr. Dalmaine, “a rising politician, whose acquaintance he had made on the voyage home from New York” (p. 9), whom he blames for an unscrupulous mentality that takes no interest in the spiritual betterment of the working class. It is, however, significant that his revelation to Annabel Newthorpe of his philanthropic projects takes place while he lazes in an idyllic country house romance atmosphere which, duly considered, creates an effect of discordant contrast, both with regard to the zeal of the philanthropist and the working-class world he intends to redeem:

There was silence for a few moments. The evening was profoundly calm. A spirit of solemn loveliness brooded upon the hills, glorious with sunset. The gnats hummed, rising and falling in myriad crowds about the motionless leaves. A spring which fell from a rock at the foot of the garden babbled poetry of the twilight. (p. 13)

-- 16 --

The world of country houses from which Egremont comes appears, right from the opening of the novel, one of idlers, people who do not work, and who in any case have a very vague, almost exotic idea of work in factories. At the most, under the influence of a motionless and poetically heady sunset, the condition of the workers can constitute an argument for idle reflection on the spiritual progress of the individuals who suffer the brutalization of industry. At any rate, his social programme is illustrated to his listeners in a highly eloquent manner by an excited Egremont:

With the mud at the bottom of society we can practically do nothing; only the vast changes to be wrought by time will cleanse that foulness, by destroying the monstrous wrong which produces it. What I should like to attempt would be the spiritual education of the upper artisan and mechanical class. At present they are all but wholly in the hands of men who can do them nothing but harm – journalists, socialists, vulgar propagators of what is called freethought. These all work against culture, yet here is the field really waiting for the right tillage. I often have in mind one or two of the men at our factory in Lambeth [...] I believe such men as these have a great part to play in social development – that, in fact, *they* may become the great social reformers, working on those above them – the froth of society – no less than on those below. (author’s italics, p. 14)²⁷

“The mud/the froth”: the words of the philanthropist, in his exalted description of the enterprise, permit us to glimpse a totalizing design – everyone will glean spiritual advantage from his mission. Moreover, even though the “mud” is not part of the project, the argument contemplates its presence: the linguistic vector goes from high towards low; from the “monstrous wrong” to the radiant space of the reformers. It is worth noting how “nothing,” occurring twice, is here first associated with “the mud” and then with journalists, socialists, vulgar propagators, that is, those who would work against cultural growth: the emerging

synthesis is NOTHING/CULTURE, between anarchy and order. The salient aspect in Egremont's project is precisely the fact that he aims in Arnoldian fashion at "spiritual advancement" (p. 15), and for this reason he declares to his friends: "My project is to begin with lectures [...] I have no intention of standing forth as an apostle" (p. 15), but rather to combat decisively "the vulgar influence of half-taught revolutionists" (p. 15), teaching a small chosen group to appreciate English literature.²⁸ Here, it is apropos to add that, concealed behind the cultural mission that inspires the young Egremont, there is a sense of repulsion, which is never fully overcome, towards the majority of the inhabitants of the slums. Slums which, in his words, are the "mud"

--17--

of society, which only a radical and long-term "cleansing" will be able to uproot and remove. Corresponding to this negative pole at the bottom of the social scale, there are those who stand at its summit – "the cream of society" – who, Egremont thinks, in terms of conscience and experience, will draw benefit from philanthropic action no less than those for whom it is intended. In this last hypothesis, Egremont reveals the paradoxical nature of the thought which inspires him – philanthropy as the spiritual progress not so much of those to whom the good is directed as to the benefactors themselves.

If "vulgar" is the exponential mark of anarchy and moral barrenness, "spiritual" is the adjective which most fascinates the reformer, who, in this way – completely ignoring pressing problems like the hygienic conditions of dwellings, forms of institutionalised instruction, better wages, and, in general, better working conditions in factories – seems to save his conscience, managing at the same time also to save his credibility in the eyes of the dominant classes.²⁹

"Spiritual" recalls a vision of culture founded on Arnoldian "sweetness and light." In this sense it is by no means a coincidence that in Chapter XV, "A Second Visit to Walnut Tree Walk," having noted the negative reaction of the working man Bunce after he has heard Egremont's lecture "on the beauty there was in the Christian legend, on its profound *spiritual* significance" (p. 171, my italics), Gissing comments on Bunce's behaviour in these terms: "recitals of old savagery had poisoned his blood [...] Academic sweetness and light was a feeble antidote to offer him" (p. 171).³⁰

From a merely diegetic perspective, the philanthropic design is essential for bringing into play the pair EGREMONT/GRAIL, which, moreover, is already indirectly brought together by the phonic figure [gr], present in the names of the philanthropist and the working man. On a proairetic level, given the socially static pair GRAIL/THYRZA, it is by means of the relation EGREMONT/GRAIL that one arrives at the socially dynamizing EGREMONT/THYRZA. In fact, the cultural paradigm ends up as a unifying element among the characters, who, all three of them solitary and unsatisfied, open up the dynamizing phase of the novel in the very moment in which they meet. Significantly, the antithesis CULTURE/NON CULTURE finds a topological configuration in the project for the creation of a library for the spiritual progress of the workers in an environment devoid of "sweetness and light." It is with this idea in mind that, in Chapter IX, Egremont goes to visit Grail a few days before Christmas. (Incidentally, it should be noted that as though there had been a desire to include Thyrza indirectly in the project, the chapter is

-- 18 --

entitled "A Golden Prospect" where "golden" recalls the recurrent connotation of the heroine.) Between Grail and the benefactor, a sort of alliance is created which culminates in Egremont's decision to appoint the working man librarian for the cultural institution about to be founded.

To bring culture where the negation of culture reigns means to seek to make gentleness emerge where barbarism prevails. Although the experiment is set up inside the working-class world, for Thyrza, who perceives in the young industrialist the possibility of escape from

squalor, it means an opening, a way out. Significantly, their first meeting takes place in the house destined to be used for the library. Or to be more precise, Egremont at first hears someone who sings a tune – the voice seems to him to be the expression of that “sweetness and light” which he wishes to bring to the working classes of Lambeth. When, in the end, the young woman appears unconsciously before him, it is revealed to him that, corresponding to that exceptionally beautiful voice, there is a face that is equally sweet and luminous:

In one of the two rooms above, Egremont happened to be taking certain measurements [...] Curious as he was to see the woman whom Grail was about to marry – as yet he knew nothing more of her than her casually learnt name – delicacy prevented him from using the opportunity this afternoon would give; the two were to arrive at three o’clock, and long before that time he would have finished his measuring and be gone. And now he was making his last notes, when the sound of as sweet a voice as he had ever heard made him pause and listen. The singer was approaching; her voice grew a little louder, though still in the undertone of one who sings but half consciously. He caught a light footstep, then the door was pushed open. (pp. 152-153)

The unexpected arrival of Thyrza is the mark of transgression. Instead of waiting for Grail, the girl goes alone to visit the building that will house the library. If the “official” reason for the gesture of transgression resides in the fact that she wants “to see how her future home looked under the bright sun,” the more or less unconscious motive lies in the choice of movement which signifies the possibility of feeling free from the ties with and supervision of her sister and Grail himself. Deciding not to direct her steps towards Walnut Tree Walk – the narrow street where she lives – the heroine lets herself be guided by a sort of instinctive call, almost an unconscious impulse towards Egremont, who until that moment has existed for Thyrza only through the words of Grail. The impact is extremely strong – all of a sudden Thyrza and Egremont find themselves actuated by a mutual physical attraction that neither of them wishes

-- 19 --

to admit to. After this gesture, marked by spontaneity and innocence, the phase of experience begins for the girl, a transition towards a new awareness, a movement towards a new space.

For Egremont, whose fervid imagination is turned topsy-turvy by the epiphany of a beauty that he would never have imagined to find in that haunt of barbarism made for hard hearts and insensitive working men like Bunce, Thyrza becomes the hyperbolic incarnation of perfection: “At the turning to the lower flight, he caught a glimpse of her profile, and felt that he would not readily forget its perfectness” (p. 154). At this point, although nothing has yet happened between Egremont and Thyrza, from a psycho-behavioural perspective we can conclude that everything has already happened. The library project has to reckon with Egremont’s falling in love and, precisely because he cannot and does not want to admit to himself what has happened, he has to suffer the tortures and uncertainties of an unstable psychological condition. For her part, Thyrza cannot help recognising in Egremont an alternative to the monotonous and valueless world in which she lives, and it is during one of Egremont’s visits to Grail that Thyrza becomes definitively fascinated by the young lecturer:

Egremont was drawn into stories of East and West [...] Thyrza listened. He – he before her – had trodden lands whereof the names were to her like echoes from fairy tales; he had passed days and nights on the bosom of the great sea, which she looked forward to beholding almost with fear; he had seen it in tempest, and the laughing descriptions he gave of vast green rolling

mountains made to her inward sight an awful reality. (p. 176)

In the girl's fancy, Egremont is the archetype of the romantic and melancholic hero. Thanks to his capacity to enchant, the young philanthropist succeeds in kindling a process of fantasising in Thyrsa's mind, which, excluding Walnut Tree Walk, postulates antithetical territories. At the same time, the storms described by Egremont almost for amusement become the mirror of an entirely internal storm experienced by the girl – a storm which also brings into play the convulsed motions of a sexuality the discovery of which occurs just after the meeting with Egremont. He fascinates her all the more as, in her eyes, he incarnates the type of cosmopolitan hero who, like Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, avails himself of an experience based upon direct knowledge of the world. It is no accident that the first thing Thyrsa tells her sister has to do with this: "He told us about foreign countries. He's been everywhere" (p. 179). Again, Thyrsa always characterises her approach to reality in typological

-- 20 --

terms: Egremont is, for her, above all a man who has seen the world. This is sufficient to make of him a heroic figure, a personage who, a repository of fables from far-off lands, implicitly appears to indicate the way of escape from the misery and degradation of Lambeth.³¹

6. Discovering nature: a sea that saves and that kills? For the heroine, the phase of experience coincides with the meeting with Egremont. To this coincidence, which takes place beyond the range of indiscreet eyes, and above all away from the presence of Grail, there corresponds a further amplification of perspective. In Chapter XVI, "Sea Music," Egremont is informed that Thyrsa is to accompany Bunce's sick little daughter Bessie to Eastbourne, where a philanthropist friend of Egremont's, Mrs. Ormonde, will take care of the child. In short, for the girl, this is an event which marks an important moment in her growth and her independence: the journey by train to the little coastal town enlarges her view of the world in a remarkable manner, stimulating in her an even stronger desire for other surroundings than the slums.

After the narrow, anonymous streets of poorer London, the vision of and contact with the sea are for Thyrsa an out and out revelation, an indescribable joy which, however, makes the poverty of Lambeth stand out even more:

Thyrsa would not forget this vision of the illimitable sea, live how long she might. She had scarcely heretofore been beyond the streets of Lambeth. At a burst her consciousness expanded in a way we cannot conceive. (p. 182)

So now the keen breath of the sea folded her about and made warmth through her whole body; it sang in her ears, the eternal sea music which to infinite generations of mortals has been an inspiring joy. (p. 184)

Here the breeze was so strong that with difficulty she stood against it, but its rude caresses were a joy to her. Each breaker seemed a living thing; now she approached timidly, now ran back with a delicious fear. She filled her hands with the smooth sea-pebbles; a trail of weed with the foam fresh on it was a great discovery. (p. 189)

The watery element here has a function, which, from a structural point of view, is opposed to the stasis, the immobility that Thyrsa has always suffered. The sea reveals to her not only the value of freedom and the untamed force of nature which she had never before known, but also an overflowing joy which pertains to the semic field of self-affirmation, of the discovery of her

own personality and desires. At Eastbourne, the girl not only questions herself about the history of England (filled with the desire to learn, she asks Mrs. Ormonde where Hastings is), but she also begins to ask herself what sense a marriage can have with a man that she does not love, with a being who, on a sexual level, kindles no response in her at all.

Thyrza's crisis begins with the sea. At Eastbourne, so to speak, she discovers movement. No longer disposed to live in immobility, which does, however, guarantee her "survival," the heroine throws herself in the fray to affirm her right to the conquest of a space which corresponds to her sensibility. So that, upon her return from the coastal centre, first her sister Lyddy, then Gilbert note that Thyrza is no longer the same. In particular, Lyddy voices, in no uncertain terms, her inability to understand: "'What has come to you, Thyrza?' she asked, looking in her sister's face. 'You're not the same [...]' Thyrza seemed to have grown older in those two days" (p. 207). It is not a question of an external ageing, but on the contrary an internal intolerance towards the environment in which she is obliged to live. So when Gilbert proposes to her a date for the wedding, all the coldness that she has inside her transfers itself to her face and hands:

No flush, but an extreme pallor came upon her face.

He felt a coldness in her hand.

'Then we shall go for a week to the seaside again [...] and be back in time to get our house in order before the 7th of May.'

'Yes, Gilbert.' (p. 208)

By this time, an unbridgeable gap has been created between Thyrza and Gilbert. Eastbourne and Egremont have brought her to a crisis, and the girl has no other choice but to manifest to her future husband all her uncertainties and doubts. Between the two young people, there no longer exists any dialogue: Thyrza, whose passivity signifies the loss of all enthusiasm for matrimony, replies in brief monosyllables to Gilbert's proposals: "Yes, I will [...] Yes, Gilbert, I will [...] Yes, Gilbert [...] I hope so [...] I will!" (pp. 208-209). The girl tries to cling to these monosyllables almost as if she wanted to disregard the evidence of facts. Yet it is clear that she is distancing herself in a definitive fashion from the working man and his dreams of cultural growth together with her. To Gilbert's request, Thyrza responds "I love you, Gilbert," adding "Gilbert, I will try with all my strength to be a good wife to you! I will" (p. 209). This is more an extreme and painful attempt at self-persuasion than a really felt sentiment. Nothing is as it was before.

Events quickly contradict the declarations of faith. Thyrza cannot resist the temptation to meet Egremont again. Although her reason warns her against this, passion and her heart triumph. Thyrza cannot repress her impulse to go to the library – a battle takes place within her which eventually sanctions the victory of feeling, which, in the present case, also means the victory of transgression:

Desire was in her feet; she could no longer check them; she must hasten on whithersoever they led [...]

He was all kindness. He had done, was doing, things such as no other man in his position ever thought of. She would like to tell him the immeasurable worship with which his nobleness inspired her. (p. 232)

Besides the growing spread of gossip which above all strikes at the girl – and in this Dalmaine, the M. P., contributes in a determining manner –, Egremont realises that he really is in love with Thyrza. Hence a profound crisis which forces him to lay aside his role as benefactor and member of the more enlightened industrial class:

[I]n the present *Thyrza* seemed to him all *gold*. Had there existed no Gilbert Grail, he would have been in love with *Thyrza* [...] That *golden-haired* girl had a power over him which, if ever so slightly and thoughtlessly exercised, might drive him into acts of insanity. (p. 246, my italics)

Notwithstanding his evident infatuation and although the mere mental pronouncement of her name becomes for him a cause for pleasure, Egremont strenuously tries to resist the on-rush of the feeling of love. Yet in the end he is obliged to admit to himself that which in every way he had sought to remove from his mind:

Bah! The worst had come about; the miserable fate had declared itself; he was in love with Thyrza Trent! [...] What can I answer you my golden one? Only, in voice low as your own, breathe that the world is barren but for you, that to the last drop of my heart's blood I love and worship you! (pp. 246-247)

At this point begins that which, socially, is the third phase of Thyrza's experience. After innocence and transgression, the phase of ostracism and social condemnation begins. In fact, to resist his "lovesickness," Egremont plans to depart for New Zealand, leaving Thyrza to face the responsibility for her decision to transgress. The girl's courage invites comparison with the cowardliness of the philanthropist, who, realising that he loves the daughter of the slums, tries to save face by fleeing to Paris, from where he returns after a fortnight to learn from Grail that

-- 23 --

Thyrza has disappeared. As Gillian Tindall has noted, Egremont finds himself experiencing "the sort of philanthropy-confused-by-sex muddle"³² which for him is impossible to bring an end to positively, precisely because, on a social level, it brings into play people belonging to classes which, according to the reigning ethos, cannot have any kind of relationship other than that represented by hierarchical and paternalistic philanthropic intervention.

7. "Sweetness and Light" and the masks of Victorian indifference and cruelty. The final part of the novel dramatises what we could define as the *mise-en-scène* of failure. The library project fails together with Egremont's greater philanthropic project. The marriage between Thyrza and Grail fails together with the chance of the working man's improving himself socially by becoming a librarian. Thyrza, having been traced by Mrs. Ormonde, is brought to Eastbourne. Here, the benefactress meets Egremont separately and asks him to undertake to leave Thyrza alone for two years, at the end of which he will be able to decide on his own destiny and that of the girl.³³

Egremont moves to America while Thyrza is settled in London with a friend of Mrs. Ormonde's, far from her sister and from Grail. Yet it is by now clear that her fate is sealed – that which was latent in her own environment is laid bare by the outside world. The pallor which had characterised her in the author's first portrait of her, transforms itself into sickness – the struggle for self-affirmation is transformed into one for survival, the epilogue of which is already evident. At the end of the story, after her silent rebellion, after she has broken social rules, gravely ill,

Thyrza becomes a woman at the window again and can do nothing other than submit passively to what others decide for her:

She pretended to breakfast, then sat down *by the window*. She was fearful now, not for the event, but of her own courage when the time came. Could she stand before him? [...]

Her dinner was brought up, and was sent down again untouched. She sat still *at the window*. (p. 436, my italics)

The social ritual presupposes clausturation. The space around Thyrza appears to contract ever more as she awaits a return which, though impossible, she feels can happen at any moment. Fleeing from London, she joins Mrs. Ormonde at Eastbourne in the hope of learning where Egremont is – and it is of Mrs. Ormonde that the heroine asks for the truth:

‘Your kindness to me hasn’t been kindness at all. It was all to separate me from him. What have you told him about me? You have said I don’t think of

-- 24 --

him any more. You made him believe I wasn’t fit for him. And now you will refuse to tell me where he is.’ (p. 449)

After the clash with Mrs. Ormonde, the heroine goes through a new crisis, revealing in this way her vocation for a passivity which signifies in the first place an incapacity for deciding independently. In this way, at Eastbourne, she becomes a prisoner again, even though of a different dwelling-place. Again, therefore, a woman at the window: “In the morning Thyrza declared that she did not suffer. She rose and sat by the open window. She fancied she could hear the sea” (p. 453). The sea appears to her as a friendly presence to which she can cling in a world of enemies, in her moments of greatest desperation. Yet, little by little, as she realises that there is no future in store for her, the image of the sea and the waves that one after the other break upon the beach becomes a real torture:

She kept her place by the window through the whole day, as she had sat in her own room in London. She could not have borne to see the waves white on the beach and the blue horizon; the sea that she had loved so, that she had called her friend, would break her heart with its song of memories. (p. 455)

Though continuing to be the epitome of a passivity which implies the surrender of one who by now feels herself the Darwinian victim of an unrestrainable mechanism, she laments what she has lost along the road of experience. Accordingly, her greatest aspiration is to return to that world, from which, with her whole being, she had desired to flee, almost as if she wished in this way to recover her lost innocence: “I want to come and see you in the old room, as I said I should, and at the same time I want to see Gilbert” (p. 460). Thyrza’s movement towards Gilbert is aimed not only, and not so much, at the reestablishment of the relationship that had been interrupted, but also – in one last instinctive attempt at survival – to recover that protective ground which is the only space in which her unchanged innocence will be able to exist. Yet it is evident at this point that only death will free her from a condition of psychological imprisonment from which she is unable to deliver herself. Thyrza’s final repentance and Grail’s renewed demonstration of love do not change the essential social condemnation of the girl.

Condemnation to “extinction” becomes the punishment that Thyrza must undergo for

having abandoned her *natural* space; which, put simply, means that she has committed the grave error of abandoning herself to feeling – and to its distracting romantic paths – without taking

-- 25 --

social barriers into account.³⁴ The immobility of the innocent girl who watches the outside world from the window, at the end of the story, transforms itself into the total paralysis of death. To the extinction of the weaker species can be compared the development and strengthening of the strongest. In the final scene of *Thyrza*, significantly, we observe that Egremont enjoys his recovered social and moral freedom. Right in the middle of a bright English landscape, in an environment bathed in romantic sensibility, the young industrialist meets Annabel Newthorpe, who represents the only companion compatible with his future as a progressive entrepreneur. Far from Lambeth and from the squalid working-class landscapes, far from *Thyrza* and her overwhelming passion, the story closes with a scene of cheering social tranquillity. To Egremont, apart from Annabel's words designed to "beatify" the dead girl ("Her love would have made of you what mine never could," p. 490), remains the illusion that "sweetness and light" are conquests still within his reach, though they be in a world which has nothing to do with the working class.

¹*Thyrza*, ed. Jacob Korg, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984, p. 92. All further references are to this edition.

²See P. J. Keating, *The working classes in Victorian fiction*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971. Commenting on *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*, Keating observes that they are "respectively the gentlest and the most virulent of the working-class novels. Throughout the eighties Gissing alternates between feelings of pity and loathing for the working classes and this personal confusion is apparent in his novels" (p. 55). The same critic in his *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875-1914*, London: Fontana/Collins, 1991, confirms his judgement, avoiding description of the two novels in an antithetical sense and defining them "the best of his novels of working-class life" (p. 312). Stress is also laid on the idea of gentleness by Mabel Donnelly, who writes: "*Thyrza* is the only one of Gissing's three fine proletarian novels which is gentle in tone" (*George Gissing: Grave Comedian*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954, p. 114), and by Gillian Tindall, who defines *Thyrza* "the most romantic and gentle of his low-life novels" (*The Born Exile: George Gissing*, London: Temple Smith, 1974, p. 89).

³With regard to this, there are interesting references to the Darwinian theory in Gissing's letters (*The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, ed. P. F. Mattheisen, A. C. Young and Pierre Coustillas, Athens: Ohio University Press, 9 vols., 1990-1997).

⁴John Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 239.

⁵*The Whirlpool*, London: Hogarth Press, 1984, p. 13 (author's italics). As everyone knows, the phrase "the survival of the fittest" was coined by Herbert Spencer, who, in 1884, published *The Man versus the State*, in which it is argued that every act of state intervention designed to

-- 26 --

modify the process of natural selection – whether it be physiological or economic – would not be other than a serious interference with the "law" of the survival of the fittest. This book has been justly defined by John Goode as "his most lucid rationalisation of a free capitalist ethic" (*George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction*, London: Vision, 1978, p. 185).

⁶*The Paradox of Gissing*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1986, p. 64. From Spencer Gissing also derives a substantial and deeply-rooted scepticism towards politics. It is no coincidence that

the author noted an aphorism of the philosopher in his *Commonplace Book*: “There is no political alchemy by which you can get golden conduct out of leaden instincts.” No less significant is Gissing’s comment: “The whole answer to Socialism is: that if Society were ready for pure Socialism, it would not be such as it now is” (*George Gissing’s Commonplace Book*, ed. Jacob Korg, New York: The New York Public Library, 1962, p. 26).

⁷Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 111. From this necessity of death comes a tragic vision, which, as Darwin writes in the chapter “Struggle for Existence” in *Origin*, regards all of nature: “What a struggle between the several kinds of trees must here have gone on during long centuries [...] what war between insect and insect – between insects, snails, and other animals with birds and beasts of prey – all striving to increase” (*The Origin of Species*, ed. J. W. Burrow, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, p. 126).

⁸*The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 39. It would be perhaps useful here to remember Jasper Milvain’s declaration in *New Grub Street* (1891): “The struggle for existence among books is nowadays as severe as among men” (*New Grub Street*, ed. B. Bergonzi, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, p. 493). On the relationship between consumer literature and late Victorian intellectuals, see *La nuova battaglia dei libri* (The New Battle of Books) by Carlo Pagetti, Bari: Adriatica, 1977, particularly the chapter: “George Gissing: le contraddizioni del romanziere impegnato” (pp. 217-41).

⁹Regarding the debate on the teaching of Arnold and its influence on Gissing, see Maria Teresa Chialant’s precise observations in her article “‘Cultura’ e ‘Anarchia’ nei romanzi proletari di George Gissing,” *Annali: Anglistica*, XVII, 2 (1975), pp. 7-56, which appeared in English under the title “George Gissing’s Proletarian Novels,” *Gissing Newsletter*, XII, 2 (April 1976), pp. 1-15. Also highly interesting are Jacob Korg’s comments in *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980, pp. 92-94 and passim. Among other things, he observes: “Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) is perhaps the most precisely focused statement of the theory that disinterested self-cultivation was the best path to social reform. Arnold said that spiritual growth was a necessary preliminary to any real social advance” (p. 93).

¹⁰*Ryecroft*, p. 163.

-- 27 --

¹¹On the idea of progress in Darwin and Spencer, see Raymond Williams’s sound observations, “Il Darwinismo sociale,” *Materialismo e cultura*, Naples: Pironti, 1983, pp. 121-42.

¹²Frank Swinnerton criticizes Gissing’s choice of a hero like Egremont: “To introduce an alien element is certainly to add to the variety of the material; but it surely detracts from the substantial accuracy of a social picture” (*George Gissing: A Critical Study*, London: Secker, 1924, pp. 76-77). It is difficult to agree with this analysis. In fact, if it is true, as Swinnerton asserts, that “the personal tragedy of Thyrsa lies in her lack of accord with her environment” (*ibid.*, p. 75) – and here, among other things, one can recognise the Darwinian modelling of the novel –, it is just as true that without the appearance of Egremont, such a contrast between the heroine and her natural space, from a narrative point of view, would not have been developed.

¹³On an actantial level, Ackroyd’s extreme realism performs a function which is antithetical to the idealism of Grail, who appears to be a figure more tormented and less direct in his relations with people: “A working man, one Gilbert Grail, was spending an hour of his Saturday afternoon in Westminster Abbey [...] a physiognomy impressive rather than pleasing. The cast of thought was upon it; of thought eager and self-tormenting; the mark of a spirit ever straining after something unattainable” (p. 23).

¹⁴Barbara Dennis and David Skilton (eds.), Introduction, *Reform and Intellectual Debate*

in *Victorian England*, London: Croomhelm, 1987, p. 15. Incidentally, Walter E. Houghton, in *The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), writes that the recurrent model of woman was that of the “submissive wife whose sole excuse for being was to love, honour, obey – and amuse – her lord and master, and to manage his household and bring up his children” (p. 34).

¹⁵Apropos of *Sesame and Lilies* and the influence of this book on Gissing, it is perhaps useful to recall Grylls’ comment: “The question of what girls ought to learn was linked with the question of their mental capacity. The common, but no longer universal, view was that women were less intelligent than men, less rigorous and less original. Biological evidence was sometimes deployed in support of this traditional contention. In an article on which George Gissing made notes, George Romanes, the friend and follower of Darwin, provided evolutionary explanation of woman’s inferiority” (*op. cit.*, p. 161).

¹⁶See J. W. Blench, who, referring to *Demos*, *Thyrza* and *The Nether World*, adopts this definition, though stressing that *Thyrza* is to be considered “the finest of the group” (“George Gissing’s *Thyrza*” in *George Gissing: Antologia Critica* ed. Francesco Badolato, Roma: Herder, 1984, p. 145; this article had previously appeared in the *Durham University Journal*, n.s. XXXIII, 2, 1972, pp. 85-114).

¹⁷From this point of view, *Thyrza* seems to mark a regression when compared with Mrs. Gaskell’s fiction and its type of heroine.

¹⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 147.

¹⁹London: Virago Press, 1987, p. 61.

-- 28 --

²⁰One returns to the words of Pierre Coustillas’, who, writing on this novel, comments: “[Gissing] gives us his most highly idealised female character of working-class origin, a *belle fleur* grown in dingy surroundings” (“Gissing’s Feminine Portraiture,” in *George Gissing: Critical Essays*, ed. J. P. Michaux, London and Totowa, N. J.: Vision/Barnes and Noble, 1981, p. 97). With regard to this, it is interesting to note that, in an anonymous review in *The Times* (21 May 1887), Gissing was criticised for his idealisation of the heroine, with the conclusion: “it would have been better to make *Thyrza* a more natural and fleshly plebeian” (quoted in the Introduction to *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, ed P. Coustillas and C. Partridge, London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 17).

²¹The fact that, in any case, the portrait of *Thyrza* brings into play a series of contradictions particular to the character seems very evident when one compares the pallor of her face with her shining hair (physical characteristics), the lack of spontaneity and the extreme degree of purity (behavioural characteristics), the tendency to reverie and ingenuousness (psychological characteristics).

²²In this respect, see Barbara Arnett Melchiori, “La vita dalla finestra,” *Rinascita* XI (17 March 1978), who, among other things, observes “the highly frequent references to windows in Victorian female novels demonstrate how women’s lives were extremely limited and closed” (p. 22).

²³Keating, *op. cit.*, shrewdly observes: “[...] by *Thyrza*, Gissing’s method of creating a slum portrait had completely changed. Here the activity of the streets is no longer a public exhibition of a sub-human race, but the genuine expression of a way of life [...] *Thyrza* possesses an exactness of locality and sympathy of presentation unique in Gissing’s working-class novels” (p. 61).

²⁴In this connection, it is interesting to read Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cousin Phillis*, in which change is associated with change of space: “her wish for change of thought and scene” (*Cousin Phillis and Other Tales*, ed. Angus Easson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 354). See also my article, “Le tentazioni del cambiamento” as introduction to *Mia cugina Phillis*, Venice:

Marsilia, 1993, pp. 9-32.

²⁵Apropos of Grail, see John Halperin, *op. cit.*, who discerns in this character an alter ego of the writer himself: “Reserved, silent, lonely, intensely subjective, self-absorbed and yet secretly craving companionship, a great reader, and a lover of books, Grail obviously has much of Gissing in him” (p. 92).

²⁶Concerning this character, see John Goode: “[*Thyrza*] is set in Lambeth, or more precisely the area bordered by the river, Westminster Bridge Road, Kennington Road and Broad Street, and is the story of Walter Egremont, guilt-ridden heir of his father’s oilcloth works who tries to start evening classes for his workmen, but instead falls in love with the betrothed of his best pupil and librarian, Gilbert Grail. He decides to break off the romance which more or less destroys both heroine and lover” (*op. cit.*, p. 100).

²⁷On the contradictions of the hero, Goode, *op. cit.*, acutely observes: “the double role of Egremont, agent of knowledge, agent of reform, is up to a certain point fictionally very fruitful,

-- 29 --

because it precisely reflects the problematic of the class relationship in a zoned city. The contradictory desire in Egremont, to emancipate the working-class world, and to possess it through love, builds up an intolerable tension in the first twenty-four chapters of the novel” (p. 102).

²⁸Commenting on Egremont’s programme, Chialant, *op. cit.*, has noted: “Two observations strike one in Egremont’s argument, on account of their substantial affinity with what Arnold had expressed in *Culture and Anarchy*: the lower levels of society are irretrievable and it is only by eliminating the causes of inequality and injustice that they can be saved; socialists, journalists and freethinkers do nothing other than damage the ‘respectable’ working class of which they play the part of defender, drawing material advantage from their profession of faith” (p. 26).

²⁹The decision to intervene among the workers with lectures aimed at their cultural growth was by no means a rare phenomenon – this type of missionary zeal animated many intellectuals in the Victorian period, from its very beginning in the late 1830s. One remarkable example of such activity is that of William Gaskell, husband of Elizabeth Gaskell, who, as a Unitarian minister, gave a series of lectures on the English poets. On this, Barbara Brill writes: “William realised that through poetry lay one way in which he could communicate with the people he was eager to help. He began to prepare a course of lectures for working men on the subject ‘Poetry and Poets of Humble Life’” (*William Gaskell 1805-1884*, Manchester: Manchester Literary and Philosophical Publications, 1984, p. 46). On the part played by Elizabeth Gaskell in this initiative, see also Winifred Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, p. 57; and Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories*, London: Faber, 1993, pp. 99-101.

³⁰Cf. Pierre Coustillas and Patrick Bridgwater, eds., *George Gissing at Work: A Study of his Notebook ‘Extracts from My Reading’*, Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 1988, pp. 37-38. It may be useful here to note a significant quotation from Arnold recorded by Gissing: “The thing, call it what name we will, is simply the enabling ourselves whether by reading, observing, or thinking, to come as near as we can to the firm, intelligible law of things, and thus get a basis for a less confused action and a more complete perfection than we have at present” (pp. 37-38).

³¹As regards the significance that Lambeth acquired for Gissing in the preparatory phase of *Thyrza*, it may be appropriate to note what he wrote in a letter of 31 July 1886 to his sister Margaret: “I am living at present in Lambeth, doing my best to get at the meaning of that strange world, so remote from our civilization. My book is practically still to begin, but I believe it will be my best yet. I have the strangest people & scenes floating in my mind. To-morrow, a Bank Holiday, I must spend in the streets; there is always much matter to be picked up on such days” (*Collected Letters*, vol. 3, 1992, p. 47).

³²*Op. cit.*, p. 93.

³³Very justly, Blench, *op. cit.*, observes: "Mrs. Ormonde is [...] limited by the outlook of her class [...]; her scheme to separate Egremont and Thyrsa for two years is undertaken because

-- 30 --

she believes that no lasting happiness can come from a marriage of two people from such different backgrounds" (p. 173).

³⁴Appropos of the epilogue, Tindall, *op. cit.*, remarks: "In the long literary tradition of tragic virgins, it is death, not marriage, which claims her, her hair still plaited like a child's" (p. 96).

* * *

Notes on the Net

PETER MORTON

The Flinders University of South Australia

In the year or so since the last survey of Gissing's presence on the Internet appeared in this *Journal*, the two sites devoted entirely to him have expanded their range considerably, now – and this is surely a pointer to the future – offering facilities available nowhere in print form. Mitsuharu Matsuoka's *Gissing in cyberspace*¹ must be the first port of call for the primary texts: at the time of writing, seventeen of Gissing's works were available in on-line versions (e-texts) which can be searched for words or phrases. They include the two Dickens books, *Ryecroft*, *By the Ionian Sea*, and the most important novels. *The Unclassed* and *The Emancipated* are in progress. Also available are 48 of the short stories, including all those from the collection *Human Odds and Ends*. The texts are fairly reliable, but inevitably the scanning process has introduced errors; Professor Matsuoka has appealed for help in proofing them. This address² will take you directly to a list of what is available. Elsewhere on this site you will find photos, a bibliography of secondary studies, a chronology of Gissing's life, and a mass of links to other Gissing resources, including library holdings of primary documents, materials, reviews and the archives of the VICTORIA discussion group.³ These archives now give access to the accumulated 254 postings which have mentioned Gissing since February 1993.

The present writer's *George Gissing Website*⁴ has also expanded a good deal recently, thanks in part to the generosity of scholars in allowing me to republish their articles: Paul Delany, John Halperin and Constance Harsh. Prof. Halperin has provided two sections from *Gissing: A Life in Books*. One is his useful chronology, showing when the works were written as well as published, which is particularly valuable in the case of the short stories. (The latter

-- 31 --

information was drawn in turn from an article by Pierre Coustillas.) The other item was originally titled "The State of Gissing Studies since 1961" and is a lively, occasionally acerbic critical/bibliographical account of the growth in Gissing's reputation as measured by the number and quality of books about him and new editions of his works. The essay's terminal point is about 1979; I am trying to bring it up to date in the same style.

Elsewhere on the site is an e-text of Roberts' *Henry Maitland* with most of the real names restored, a page of scholarly queries and one intended to serve as a clearing-house for work in progress, a short biography, external links and finally an ever-growing appreciative essay on Gissing's work, which takes full advantage of hypertext by offering many links to illustrative and critical extracts.

Both of the websites above have links to James Haydock's *Portraits in Charcoal: George Gissing's image of woman*⁵. Intended one day perhaps to be a book, at present it is a set of six small essays, a mixture of biography and criticism.

For the more advanced student, undoubtedly the most useful research tool to arrive recently on the Web is a Beta (test) version of the *LITIR Database on Victorian Studies*, whose home is the University of Alberta.⁶ It is interdisciplinary in scope and covers the "long" Victorian age, 1830-1914. It lists editions, books, dissertations, and articles published in more than 500 journals since 1970. It is very easy to use, permitting searches by author, title and keyword, and has excellent printing options.

It is also fast. Half an hour on-line allowed me quickly to review the relative productivity of the academic "Gissing industry" over the last 27 years. A search on the keyword "Gissing" produces 370 distinct items, of which 141 were published in the decade 1987-97. Although this is dwarfed by the results for "Hardy" (1258) it compares favourably with "Thackeray" (447), "Meredith" (241), "Butler" (68) and "George Moore" (94). It has to be said, however, that the relative positions would be different if this *Journal* did not exist; furthermore, no fewer than 68 of the records have the name "Coustillas" included in them! Readers are invited to test its inclusiveness; the editor is eager to hear of omissions. (It is certainly weak in items published outside the English-speaking world.) The only fault of commission that I have uncovered is that a few items are duplicated. The editor, Brahma Chaudhuri, tells me that 5000 new items will be added in April, and that the database will remain on-line indefinitely; there are also plans to extend the coverage back to 1945. Have a look at this superb resource.

-- 32 --

¹<http://lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/Gissing.html>

²<http://lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/GG-Etexts.html>

³<http://listserv.indiana.edu./scripts/wa.exe?S1=victoria>

⁴http://www.flinders.edu.au/topics/Morton/Gissing/Gissing_HomePage.htm

⁵<http://www.expage.com/page/georgegissing>

⁶<http://www.atl.ualberta.ca:8080/>

* * *

"C'è novità!": News from Calabria

WULFHARD STAHL
Bern

A recent research trip on Gissing in Calabria where, at Bovalino Marina, I very much enjoyed the warm hospitality of Francesco Badolato, turned out to be quite fruitful in terms of the number of recent publications or of items which had escaped our attention – publications, that is, worthy of notice by all those who are particularly interested in Gissing's travel narrative and everything historically or literarily connected to it. The following books I found may complete readers' and collectors' lists:

Agazio Trombetta, *La Calabria del 700 nel giudizio dell'Europa* [18th-century Calabria in the judgement of Europe], Naples: Fratelli Conte Editori, 1976, 338 pp., illustrated: on Gissing's predecessors both Italian and foreign.

Agazio Trombetta, *Reggio: Immagini dalla storia*, Reggio Calabria: Edizioni F.A.S.A.M., 1980, 107 pp., illustrated: contains introductions to and short excerpts from texts written by

foreign travellers to Reggio, ranging from Bario (1571) to de Fouchier (1911); pp. 95-98 are devoted to Gissing.

Agazio Trombetta, *Reggio Calabria e gli antichi caffè del Corso*, Reggio Calabria: Laruffa editore, 1992: contains an historic street-map and texts on and photographs of Reggio's old coffee-houses along the Corso Garibaldi before the earthquake of 1908. A chapter is devoted to the "Caffè Ristorante Albergo Vittoria" (see Gissing's *Diary*, p. 471) and another to the "Caffè-Chantant del Genio" (see *ibid.*); whether Gissing mixed them up, is a point that needs clarifying.

Agazio Trombetta, *Saluti di Reggio Calabria. Radici e immagini*, Reggio Calabria: Corpododici Edizioni, 1993, 177 pp.: a fine collection of postcards showing Reggio, with very few

-- 33 --

exceptions, before the earthquake of 1908.

An important book on Reggio Calabria was on display at its Biblioteca Comunale: *Messina e Reggio prima e dopo il terremoto del 28 dicembre 1908*. A cura di Società Fotografica Italiana, Florence [n. d.]: contains texts in four languages and a great number of photographs of both cities before and after the 1908 earthquake plus a remarkably detailed account of the catastrophe which affected the whole of Magna Graecia and destroyed a great part of it.

On 12 December 1897 Gissing described in his *Diary* (pp. 471-72) a memorial stone to a young soldier who died in the fight against the Bourbons. This soldier can now, in all probability, be identified as Emilio Cuzzocrea, after whom a street in modern Reggio is named.

The publishing company of Rubbettino Editore, known for its established series of critical editions of travel narratives on Calabria ("Il Viaggio. Esperienza Racconto Utopia;" Collana diretta da Franco Ottaviano), has over the past few years printed a new series called "Le Città della Calabria. Storia, Cultura, Economia." Presentazione di Fulvio Antonio Lucifero. Of special interest to Gissingites will be the books on Cosenza (1991), Crotona (1992), Reggio Calabria (1993) and Catanzaro (1994). All titles are in hardcover, with dustjacket; many illustrations make these large-sized books, which cost between Lire 68,000 and 85,000, both attractive and useful.

Easy to miss was a very short review of *By the Ionian Sea*, i. e., its Italian edition under the title *Sulle rive dello Ionio. Un vittoriano al sud* (Turin: EDT, 1993). It appeared in a mass periodical about touring areas called *Meridiani* (July-August 1996, p. 194), Rozzano (MI): Editoriale Domus.

All readers with particular interest in Squillace and Cassiodorus ought to pay attention to a book: *Flavio Magno Aurelio Cassiodoro. Atti della settimana di studi Cosenza-Squillace 19-24 settembre 1983*. A cura di Sandro Leanza. Soveria Mannelli (CZ): Rubbettino Editore, 1986, 480 pp., Lire 50,000, and to a periodical: *Vivarium Squillacense. Bollettino dell'Istituto di Studi su Cassiodoro e sul Medioevo in Calabria*. Via Santi Apostoli, 4, I-88069 Squillace, Lire 30,000 a copy for foreign orders. The number for December 1996 contains a long illustrated article on the cathedral of Squillace (pp. 43-204).

Last but not least *re* Cassiodorus, there is a piece of good news for all who want to use their knowledge of Latin: his *Variae* can be bought, for DM 120.-, in a reprint of the 1894

-- 34 --

edition (ISBN 3-921575-26-5) from Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Postfach 340223,

D-80099 Munich.

Whoever wants to acquaint himself or herself with Magna Graecia without wanting to buy and/or carry the voluminous exhibition catalogue of 1996, *The Western Greeks*, is invited to study Valerio M. Manfredi's *I Greci d'Occidente*, Milan: Oscar Saggi Mondari 541, 1997, 281 pp., illustrated, Lire 13,000 – but let all who are afraid neither of spending money nor carrying weight, treat themselves to a copy of Francesco [sic!] Lenormant's *La Magna Grecia. Paesaggi e storia*. Versione dal francese con note di Armando Lucifero. Catanzaro: Vincenzo Ursini Editore, 1995, 429 + 445 + 349 pp., illustrated, Lire 150,000 (a reprint of the 1976 edition of Frama Sud). Gissing said all about this text that is necessary!

* * *

Eduard Bertz, Dead and Alive: an Announcement

In early March, at Potsdam, Wulfhard Stahl signed a deed of donation establishing the Sammlung [Collection] Eduard Bertz. Its aim is to gather in one place and make accessible to the reading public as well as to researchers not only the writer's published works (books, articles, reviews), but also published and unpublished letters to and from him, and private documents and literary criticism dealing in detail with his *oeuvre* and his age. The Collection will be located at the Theodor-Fontane-Archiv, a well-known state-run institution in Potsdam.

In order to give the newly founded Collection a good start, Wulfhard Stahl made a substantial initial gift of Bertziana, including *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz 1887-1903*; *Philosophie des Fahrrads* (new edition, 1997); *Spemanns Goldenes Buch der Weltliteratur* (1904 edition); *Montesquieu's Persische Briefe* (Bertz's translation and edition of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*); *Aus fremden Zungen*, 1891, containing Bertz's translation of Gissing's short story "Phoebe"; *Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen 7* (1905), with its 1983 reprint, containing Bertz's "character portrait" of Walt Whitman; Arno Holz's *Briefe. Eine Auswahl* (1948), containing two letters from the famous naturalistic writer to Bertz on the Whitman-Schlaf controversy; three separate copies of the *Gissing Journal* containing letters from and to Bertz; a set of xeroxes, the most important of which are those of Bertz's two wills.

-- 35 --

At least another five of Bertz's original books (one of them a presentation copy bearing Bertz's autograph) will be given by Wulfhard Stahl in 2003 on the occasion of a small exhibition publicly celebrating Bertz's 150th birthday.

Readers of the present announcement who are willing to contribute to the Collection by donating books by Bertz or of direct interest to studies on him, are invited to do so. Both the Theodor-Fontane-Archiv and Wulfhard Stahl himself will be most grateful to them.

* * *

A Forgotten Review by Thomas Seccombe

[The following is a review of Morley Roberts's fictionalized biography of Gissing, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* (1912), in a little known weekly, *The New Witness*, which had been founded as *The Eye-Witness* by Hilaire Belloc in 1911. Swinnerton's critical study came out about the same time as Roberts's book. Readers of Gissing need not be reminded that Thomas Seccombe (1866-1923) wrote an introduction to *The House of Cobwebs* as well as the entry on him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Both contributions have been proved to contain so many factual errors as to be unsuitable reading for beginners. Entitled "Henry Maitland,"

Seccombe's review appeared in the number for 19 December 1912, pp. 213-14. We should be surprised if many of our readers knew of it. We offer no comment. (Ed.)]

Mr. Morley Roberts has long been credited with the design of a full-length, outspoken portrait of the friend he calls "Henry Maitland." Gissing had two literary friends only of anything like such ancient standing, Mr. Hudson and Edward [*sic*] Bertz, both of whom are introduced into the book under transparent disguises, while the younger friend to whom Gissing owed so much is portrayed as Rivers. But Morley Roberts, by consent, knew Gissing longest and best. His attachment had been lifelong. It is rare enough in reality that authors have to repent of their literary friendships; and there is certainly nothing to reproach Mr. Roberts with in this case. He has told the truth, but not those bitter morsels of it which are hard and bad for human digestion. He has been urged by a motive with which the most cordially sympathise – namely, rage at the sawdust biographies put together by amateurs and relatives, and having just about as much relation to facts as the angels' wings on tombstones in an early Victorian cemetery. Here was a writing man whose sad and pitiful career was well worth setting down as a warning to adventurous authors, that a hungry Bohemia still exists where an author may starve quite as effectually as in the days of Oliver Goldsmith and Kit Smart. Mr. Roberts sets down the story plainly and straightforwardly with comparatively little preoccupation with questions of criticism or style. He is anxious to give us his impressions of a most exceptional man, and to give us them unwarped by prejudice, sentiment, or melodrama. He succeeds. He shows

-- 36 --

admirably how the similarity and dissimilarity of their literary ambitions drew himself and Gissing together. Both used each other as lay figure and model when necessity overtook them. Gissing disapproved frankly of his friend's dogged determination to shine in fiction; but he warmly applauded "The Western Avernus" – a book of adventure which well deserves to be known by all readers of *The New Witness*.

Gissing readers, as it happens, are not, perhaps, very numerous, but they are persistent and tenacious. The name implies a large background to them, a horizon which, it may well be, they have explored pretty thoroughly – the dark places lanthorn in hand. To such as these Mr. Roberts probably has not very much that is new to tell. Yet it is interesting to hear, with so much emphasis, of Gissing's passion for words and rhythms; his favourite authors, Shakespeare first among them, were preeminently word-masters. Like Mrs. Radcliffe, who wrote *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, he liked to hear big sounding periods, even in cases where he might not understand them – the Russian of Turgenev for example. He was a good linguist though, especially for an Englishman. Another singular trait in him was his fondness for fat and grease, oily puddings, rich stews; his ideal of living was a Laplander's, "fatness and gross abundance," a succulent diet; the loss of this in France made him homesick and ill, he asked his friend to send him "a slice of roast beef with the gravy," in a letter. We are reminded of "the fine prodigality of the English platter" of which he speaks in "Ryecroft." The domestic economy of the two friends is engagingly contrasted. Gissing was astonished at Roberts's wild expenditure on fireirons and coal scuttles, and regarded a revenue of ten shillings a week as "gross and riotous wealth." Roberts regarded the other's habit of buying cooked meat peculiarly extravagant. "I ran a fire on sixteen pounds of coal a day... Maitland, who was an expert in coal, assured me that I was extremely extravagant and that a fire could be kept going for much less." Yet Maitland was impressed at the weekly expenditure on food of three shillings and sixpence, all told. Gissing's alternate or combined love and fear of life is one of his marked characteristics. "Damn the nature of things" (adapted from Porson) was one of his favourite expletives. Yet the more he suffered under the hands of this same nature, the more tenderly he seemed to cling to it. As at school, so later, he worked insanely, preposterously, impelled no doubt by the chronic terror of

the author—Marylebone workhouse over the way, the tell-tale clock of which he introduces with such telling force into “New Grub Street.” After breakfast at nine o’clock Gissing sat down and worked till one. ‘Then he had his midday meal, and took a little walk. In the afternoon, about half-past three he sat down again and wrote till six o’clock or a little after. Then he worked again from half-past seven till ten. I very much doubt whether there is any modern writer who has ever tried to keep up work at this rate who did not end in a hospital or a lunatic asylum, or die young.’ He often destroyed “hurried” work in batches – a whole volume at a time! We are not surprised, after this, at the lack of any wide range of vision or consistent philosophy of life in Gissing’s work. His outlook was that of the bookworm. He wrote beautifully, but had little to say except when he dilated upon the habituals of the Bloomsbury

-- 37 --

Dome, “New Grub Street,” or wove a story of feminine caprice, as in *Eve’s Ransom*, or a sentimental city-idyll after the fashion of *Thyrza*. This is the substance of the verdict of Gissing’s latest critic, Mr. Swinnerton, as I read it, though I do not think it expresses quite all the truth. Gissing embalmed all his fiction in a beautiful style. Like Shorthouse, Pater, and very few other romancists, he wrote in a beautiful English which he most sedulously cultivated. The effect of this is seen at its best, in the general opinion, in *Henry Ryecroft*. Mr. Roberts, like Gissing’s other friends, runs this down on the score of its languor, palpable artifice, lack of truth and sincerity. Like Mr. Hudson, Mr. Wells and Edmund Roden (Edward Clodd), they discover the true Gissing, the real Simon Pure, in *By the Ionian Sea*. It may be the truer Gissing, but after all, Ryecroft interests us most. And then there is the book on Dickens. In this Gissing shows himself a critic of the very highest order. There have been two and only two heaven-sent interpreters of Dickens, G. G. and G. K. C., of whom the latter told me himself that he regarded the study by his predecessor as a product of genius. Upon the whole, then, after reviewing the field and reading this trusty report upon the top of Mr. Swinnerton’s able, calculated, rather remorseless depreciation, I am inclined to revert to my old view of Gissing. This was disturbed by “Horace Egerton’s” optimistic version and conviction that Gissing’s “squalid poverty” was grossly exaggerated, and that he suffered from a constitutional dislike of money-earning rather than from a total inability to earn it. I believe now that the earlier version of the story was the truer; and that George Gissing was a man who had been born to inherit grief – an artist destined to sorrows as the sparks fly upwards, whose sorrows entered somehow into his voice and gave it an abiding quality which it could in no other possible way have attained.

* * *

Notes and News

A hundred years ago Gissing’s life took a new turn when he received a letter from a young Frenchwoman who sought his permission to translate *New Grub Street*. Few of his novels had by then been translated but, despite various disappointments, he hoped that some day the importance and originality of his work would be recognized abroad as well as in his own country. Now if Gabrielle Fleury, who survived him by fifty years, still shared these hopes after the Second World War, she must have been remarkably optimistic, considering that, with the exception of Japanese, Gissing’s works were translated into very few foreign languages in the first half of the present century. Is this situation likely to change radically? The answer given by the *Index Translationum* for the last two decades does not altogether rule out this possibility. Foreign editions have been mentioned in the present journal whenever some evidence of their

-- 38 --

existence reached us, but it is now obvious that several recent translations escaped our notice. Two of them are listed under "Recent Publications," and a two-volume Korean translation of *New Grub Street* (1995) will be described in our next number as well as an older one of *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* if a copy can be located in a Seoul library or bookshop. The translator of the 1995 Japanese edition of the latter title, Mr. Sen Matsuda, Shigeru Koike reports, is not a man of letters or an academic, but a graduate of the Department of Economics of the University of Tokyo who became a banker and an editor (of the Japanese edition of the *Reader's Digest*). He has translated many English books, but this is the first literary classic he has rendered into Japanese. Although next to no personal information about him is available and he does not say in his translator's postscript how he came to be interested in Gissing or the *Ryecroft Papers*, we can surmise that he first read the volume as a textbook at school in the 1930s (he was born in 1913), that is when Gissing's book was widely used among learners of English. Vassilis Kallipolitis, the translator of *New Grub Street* into Greek, and Maria Dimitriadou have sent us some details about this apparently first publication of a Gissing title under an Athenian imprint. The Greek title could be translated back into English as something like "The Quill-Pushers" or "The Quill-Drivers." The series in which the translation appeared, the Modern Classical Library, is a popular one with over 60 titles, and Mr. Kallipolitis has translated about as many books. He had thought of translating *The Odd Women* for the same series, but the publishers have declined his suggestion. Perhaps another firm would look upon this project more favourably.

One more Japanese translation will appear later this year. This time Mrs. Harumi Kuramochi, who is known to us for her Japanese versions of *The Odd Women* (1988) and *The Nether World* (1992), has chosen to give us *The Unclassed*. In England a new impression of John Goode's edition of *New Grub Street* (World's Classics) with an updated bibliography, is to appear soon as the novel will be an Open University set book next year. Let us hope the publishers will not disregard for economic reasons the list of misprints in the editorial material they have received. In the same series a new edition of *The Odd Women*, edited by Patricia Ingham, is scheduled for publication in late 1999, doubtless in the new larger format announced by O. U. P. earlier this year. This will compensate for the disappearance of the Virago edition, which was remaindered in March.

-- 39 --

A number of first editions were listed in Jarndyce's last two catalogues (nos. 125 and 126). In the first, on the covers of which can be seen the renovated ground floor, 46 Great Russell Street, a copy of a three-volume *Nether World* bound in "handsome half blue morocco by Bayntun, Bath, gilt spines" is for sale at £680. In the second catalogue, "Turn of the Century 1890-1910," items 209 to 228 are first or early editions, generally in original bindings, ranging from *The Emancipated* to *The House of Cobwebs*. Prices vary from £20 (for a copy of the Nelson edition of *The Odd Women*) to £380 for *New Grub Street* and *Born in Exile*.

* * * * *

The Collected Letters of George Gissing

Winner of the Modern Language Association's Morton N. Cohen Award for
a Distinguished Edition of Letters

Special Offer

Expiring 31 December 1998

Complete Set: \$450.00 (instead of \$630)
Individual Volumes: \$55.00 (instead of \$70)

Plus shipping and handling

Mail order to:

Ohio University Press, UC Distribution Center,
11030 S. Langley Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60628

* * * * *

Looking for references to Gissing on the Web is likely to become a part-time occupation for some fortunate readers and scholars. The information one comes across ranges from useful information about the availability of books in some unknown shops through plenty of trash to original articles well worth reading. An example of this is to be found on Wincent's Web Site where an article on *New Grub Street* by Greg Hurrell awaits you. Readers interested in the history of the Modern Library editions should turn to Modern Library Collecting <http://www.dogearred.com/> where they will discover a page on "Running Torchbearer Colophons 1917-1970." The person who has bravely begun to explore this extensive field is bound to make substantial progress before long as the matter of torchbearers is a good deal more complex than he or she or perhaps even Henry Toledano surmises. And it is only one of the many

-- 40 --

characteristics that differentiate the dozens of variants of Gissing's two titles in the Modern Library, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (no. 46 in 1918) and *New Grub Street* (no. 125 in 1926).

Alan Clodd and the Enitharmon Press has been published by his successor at the Press, Stephen Stuart-Smith, in time for the celebration of Alan's eightieth birthday. As is well-known, he is a grandson of Edward Clodd, often described in reference books as banker and author, although it would be more adequate to say that he was Secretary of the London Joint Stock Bank and a writer on scientific subjects, essentially a popularizer of the theory of evolution. How Alan Clodd came to found his press, which mainly brought out modern verse, in 1967 is told by himself in a three-page introduction which, along with an undated portrait facing the title page, is the most personal aspect of the book. The various Gissing publications are carefully described, including several ghosts entitled "Gissing and his Publishers," "Gissing at Manchester" and "Extracts from My Reading," the last of which, however, ceased to be a ghost when an American publisher put it on the market. The role played by Enitharmon publications in Gissing studies from 1968 to 1981 was an important one – unpublished literary texts and correspondence were made available, as well as some valuable criticism like that on Gissing and Germany – and, with the possible exception of the last named, they are becoming rather scarce. This finely produced, illustrated edition is limited to 250 copies. The first 50 are slipcased and accompanied by a wallet containing signed and numbered poem sheets by David Gascoyne, John Heath-Stubbs, Harold Pinter and Kathleen Raine (£60). Copies 51-250: £25. Orders should be sent to the Enitharmon Press, 36 St. George's Avenue, London N7 OHD.

Wulfhard Stahl reports that there have been several reviews of his edition of Bertz's *Philosophie des Fahrrads* (Paderborn: Snayder Verlag, 1997, DM 29.80): Ludger Lütkehaus, "Wiedergefunden," *Badische Zeitung*, 2 December 1997, p. 4; L. L., "Auf Bücher: Hinweise," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 13-14 December 1997, p. 48; Anon., "Kleines Abc des Lesealltags,"

Basler Magazine, 6 September 1997, p. 11. A longer review appeared in the Dutch monthly *Fiets* ("Gezien Gehoord"), by Marlou Wijsman, November 1997, p. 86. Together with Karina Of, the German translator of *The Odd Women*, he also notes that *Die überzähliger Frauen* was

-- 41 --

reviewed in the *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, "Frauen mit eigenem Kopf," 30 October 1997, p. 23 (erl, i.e. Katharina Erlenwein), and in the Munich journal *Die neue Bücherei*, no. 5 (Friederike George). The book was also discussed by Rolf Vollmann in a radio programme on 20 May 1998 (Südwestfunk, "Buchzeit," in his series "A Chat on novels, part 135"). A paperback edition, published by Insel Verlag, will be available in March 1999.

Like his earlier books, Geerten Meijsing's latest novel, *Tussen Mes en Keel* (Betwixt the Knife and the Throat), contains, Bouwe Postmus tells us, a number of allusions to Gissing: "It is a crime, wrote George Gissing, to encourage anyone down the road to authorship"; "That one of my inspirations, George Gissing, had not got beyond the age of forty-four [*sic*], because by then he had written himself out, worn out and exhausted, only caused me to smile a smile of pity." The reference to Gissing's chair in the novel is intriguing. It is extant and the writer of these lines sees it every day, but Mr. Meijsing probably only refers to it in the way Gissing referred to Dickens's armchair, though of this last item Gissing had certainly seen photographs in contemporary books and periodicals.

The Hon. Sec. of the Gissing Trust has sent us a cityscape of Wakefield published by Cityscape Limited, of London. It is chockful of miscellaneous information on the various activities in the city, commercial and cultural. The Gissing Centre is duly mentioned in the short history of the town, on the map and among places of interest, but Thompson's Yard is not represented exactly where it should be.

Yorkshire Television did a short feature on the Gissing Centre in early May. It is a pity most of the time was spent in discussing the fact that the Centre has been receiving few visitors since its foundation. What is needed is a good programme on Gissing's life and works, stressing the originality of his contribution to the English novel, and eschewing the old sapless commonplaces retailed by literary historians whose statements are based on secondhand knowledge of his novels, short stories and volumes of belles-lettres. In its number for 3 April the Wakefield *Express* reminded its readers that a public relations firm, Green PR, offered free help last August after reading about the Centre's plight and they have "a string of schemes designed to put Gissing firmly on the map." One of their plans has been put into practice. Copies of *New Grub Street* have been given away to the first fifty visitors to the Centre.

-- 42 --

Ms Geeta Subramonian, of St. Catherine's College, Oxford, submitted a PhD thesis on the Influence of Schopenhauer's Philosophy on the works of Gissing and D. H. Lawrence before the Faculty of English, University of Oxford, on 30 March.

* * *

Recent Publications

Volumes

George Gissing, *Henry Ryecroft no shiki zuisô*, Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha (2-32-2, Sendagaya, Shibuya-ku, 151 Tokyo), 1995. The publication date is given as 25 April 1995. Cream-coloured boards with bluish grey titling. Pictorial dust-jacket. 284 pp. 2500 yen. ISBN 4-309-20243-8. Translation, notes and translator's postscript by Mr. Sen Matsuda. See "Notes and News."

George Gissing, *Oi Kondylophoroi*, Modern Classical Library no. 47, Athens: Exantas, 1995. Brown imitation cloth, gilt titling on spine. White dust-jacket with a 1893 portrait of Gissing and black and red titling. ISBN 960-256-087-8. Translation and introduction by Vassilis Kallipolitis. The text of the novel covers pp. 17-674.

George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, edited by Arlene Young (Broadview Literary Texts), Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1998. Green and white paperback. Canadian \$15.95, US \$12.95. ISBN 1-55111-111-X. The editorial material includes an Introduction, a Note on the Text, a brief Chronology, and six Appendices: A: Contemporary Reviews. B: Attitudes towards Women and Marriage in Victorian Culture. C: Debate over the "Woman Question." D: Women and Paid Employment. The Limitations of Aspirations and the Actualities (texts by Clara Collet and Eliza Orme are reprinted here). E: Conditions of Work for Men in the White-Collar Section. Attitudes towards Male White-Collar Workers. F: Map of London. The book ends with a two-page bibliography.

George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Penguin Classics, ninth impression [1998], but the fifteenth published by Penguin since 1968), and *The Nether World* (O. U. P. World's Classics, third impression [1998]). The illustrations on the covers of both books are the familiar ones.

-- 43 --

Articles, reviews, etc.

Christopher Keep, "The Cultural Work of the Type-Writer Girl," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 40, no. 3, Spring 1997, pp. 401-26. Both Gissing (*The Odd Women*) and Clara Collet (*Educated Working Women*) are present in this article. A review of *Victorian Families in Fact and Fiction* by Penny Kane (1995) suggests that *New Grub Street* is probably discussed in this book.

Charles Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace: The role of newspaper syndicates, 1860-1900*, Cambridge University Press, 1997. Carries a few allusions to Gissing but fails to answer some crucial questions. See pp. 81, 97, 214 and 263.

Xavier Baron (ed.), *London 1066-1914: Literary Sources and Documents*, Mountfield, East Sussex: Helm Information, 1997. "The London of George Gissing" (Vol. 3, pp. 542-57) consists of "On Battersea Bridge" and extracts from *Isabel Clarendon*, *Demos*, *Thyrza*, *The Nether World*, *New Grub Street*, *In the Year of Jubilee*, *The Town Traveller* and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Baron's genial comment is not faultless.

Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*, Cambridge

University Press, 1997. Occasional references to Gissing.

David Grylls, "An Anxious Buoyancy," *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 January 1998, p. 25. Notes a few errors among others in the Gissing entry in *Edwardian Fiction* by Sandra Kemp, Charlotte Mitchell and David Trotter.

Masahiko Yahata, "Fleet-footed Hester," *Bulletin of Beppo University Junior College*, no. 17, January 1998, pp. 135-43. A Japanese translation of Gissing's short story.

Francesco Badolato, "Novembre-Dicembre 1897: il romanziere in Calabria. Gissing lettere dalla Calabria," *Il Corriere di Roma*, 30 March 1998, p. 8. With portraits of Gissing and Badolato.

A. D. Harvey, "Good-bye to Bloomsbury," *Salisbury Review*, Spring 1998, pp. 14-15. On the British Library new premises, with a passage on *New Grub Street* and Marian Yule. Also,

-- 44 --

on pp. 55-57, an article by Martin Tyrrell on the film version of Orwell's *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* with some remarks on this novel as an interwar version of *New Grub Street*.

Anon., "'Popular' move for museum," *Wakefield Express*, 3 April 1998, p. 16. On the Gissing Centre.

Paul Stokes, "Shrine to author is an open book," *Daily Telegraph*, 9 April 1998, p. 7. Again on the Gissing Centre, with photographs of Gissing in August 1888 and Douglas Hallam in the Gissing Centre.

Christine Huguet, "Naissance: Nouement et dénouement," *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens*, no. 47, April 1998, pp. 279-92. With examples taken from Gissing's work.

Simon J. James, "He told us so: The Letters and Opinions of H. G. Wells," *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 May 1998, p. 14. Corrects a gross mistake about Gissing and Clara Collet.

L. R. Leavis, "H. G. Wells, D. H. Lawrence, and Literary Influence," *English Studies*, May 1998, pp. 224-39. Gissing is used as a term of comparison throughout.

Anthony Curtis, "Margaret Lushington and the Stephens," *Charleston Magazine*, Issue 17, Spring-Summer 1998, pp. 39-43. Gissing is a background figure. The same author, whose writings on Gissing range from the 1960s to the present decade, recently published a substantial volume of recollections, *Lit Ed: On Reviewing and Reviewers* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), in which Gissing appears in a dozen places.

Barbara Leah Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England*, Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998. Chapter 4 is a study of *In the Year of Jubilee*.

Steven Halliwell (compiler), *Alan Clodd and the Enitharmon Press: A checklist of his publications 1967-1987 and private printings 1958-1988*. With a tribute by Jeremy Reed. London: Enitharmon Press, 1998.

* * * * *

Subscriptions

The Gissing Journal is published four times a year, in January, April, July and October. Subscriptions are normally on a two-year basis and begin with the January number.

Rates per annum are as follows:

Private subscribers: £10.00

Libraries: £15.00

Single copies can be supplied as well as sets for most back years.

Payment should be made in sterling to *The Gissing Journal*, by cheque or international money order sent to:

The Gissing Journal
7 Town Lane, Idle, Bradford BD10 8PR, England.

* * *

Information for Contributors

The Gissing Journal publishes essays and notes on Gissing and his circle. Contributions may deal with biographical, critical, bibliographical and topographical subjects. They should be addressed to the editor, Pierre Coustillas, 10 rue Gay-Lussac, 59110 La Madeleine, France.

This journal is indexed in the *MLA Annual Bibliography*, in the Summer number of *Victorian Studies* and *The Year's Work in English Studies*.

* * *

Editorial Board

Pierre Coustillas, University of Lille
Shigeru Koike, Tokyo Christian Woman's University
Jacob Korg, University of Washington, Seattle