

## 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*.

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### Compassion and Selfishness in Gissing’s Slum Novels

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Gissing’s acute consciousness of the issues of his time did not overlook the reaction of philanthropists to the problem of poverty. His slum novels teem with people who endeavour to alleviate the suffering of the poor, as well as the many subjects of their benefaction, individuals who do not rely on themselves to escape poverty, but wait for others, including philanthropists, to help them do so. Many rich characters feel the necessity of doing something for the poor. In this article I shall examine the kind of characters who make it their duty to engage in philanthropic activities, their real motives, their endeavours to improve the lot of their destitute fellow-creatures, the obstacles they meet, those they create and which lead to the ruin of their projects. Compassion, that is “sympathetic consciousness of the suffering of others with a desire to alleviate it,”<sup>1</sup> is one of the most frequent feelings experienced by Gissing’s middle-class characters. He himself acknowledged his “passion of sympathy for the suffering poor” (*Commonplace Book*, p. 54).

The first time Gissing felt really compassionate towards the suffering poor was when he settled in London. In a letter dated 23 July 1880, that is, after the publication of *Workers in the*

*Dawn*, he wrote to Frederic Harrison:

For some years I have unavoidably come in contact with very poor, uneducated & ignoble people; I have seen with what utter apathy these natures regard the most horrible manifestations of mental & moral depravity; & then, reflecting upon those more cultured grades, which I have also known, *I was shocked by the gap between the two classes, – not in the mere commonplace matter of material comfort, but in the power of comprehending each other’s rule of life.* I assure you that, after listening to the talk of such people as Mrs. Pettindund, Mrs. Pole, Polly Hemp, (who are

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horrible facts,) after sitting for an evening in the gallery of a mean theatre, or in the pit of a Music Hall, whither I was led by morbid curiosity, after walking along Whitecross street or around Seven Dials late on Saturday night, I have involuntarily stood still & asked myself – What then is the meaning of those strange words Morality, Decency, Intelligence, which I have somewhere heard? Surely I have wandered out of the world in which those ideas have any significance; here they mean nothing, nay, their presence would be the intrusion of an utterly incongruous element. (*Letters*, Vol. I, pp. 293-94. My emphasis.)

What is remarkable in this quotation is not only Gissing’s great enthusiasm and zeal on behalf of the poor, but the shock he underwent on realizing the gap between the social classes, and more importantly the gap between his theoretical learning and the bitter reality of the lives of the poor, once he was confronted with their wretched condition and abject poverty. His slum novels of the 1880s are the stern product of this shock, whatever may have been the evolution of his attitude towards the poor in that decade. The letter he sent to Frederic Harrison to explain what prompted him to write *Workers in the Dawn* can also be understood as an elucidation of the reasons why he wrote his slum novels. He was determined

to show the necessity for a personal invasion of these realms of darkness by those who are able to teach their inhabitants not only to abandon crime, not only to esteem knowledge, – but to understand what is meant by the word *Ideal* [...] many tender natures must suffer greatly for their cause [...] And here is the tragic motive embodied in Helen Norman. (*Letters*, Vol. I, p. 294)

This concern for the “benefit of mankind” was also the aim of philanthropists during the last part of the nineteenth century. In “Three Ideal Secretaries,” an article by Clara Collet, the same concern is expressed and clearly described: “A philanthropist is someone who regards the whole as greater than the part, and loves mankind, or, at least, considers mankind more than men [...] He is a person who cares less for men than for mankind.”<sup>2</sup>

Many middle-class characters share this feeling. They make it their “life-controlling purpose” (*The Nether World*, p. 177) to help the poor. In *Workers in the Dawn*, Helen Norman, the rich, cultured philanthropist, thinks that “the feelings of infinite compassion for the poor are most natural” (Vol. 2, p. 268). In the same novel Mr. Tollady, a printer, fosters them in Arthur Golding, the youngster whom he is teaching his trade. Arthur duly comes to see it as his duty to

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do his best for the poor in general, and in particular for Carrie Mitchell, whom he loves and marries. In *The Unclassed* the same compassion is aroused in Waymark, who falls in love with Ida Starr and marries her. He writes a novel, urged by his conviction that art must become “the mouthpiece of misery” (p. 165). It is again compassion that moves Egremont in *Thyrza* to improve the condition of the poor through culture, while in *The Nether World* Michael Snowdon rates “the virtue of Compassion [...] above all other forms of moral goodness,” regarding “it as the saving principle of human life” (p. 99). This concern for human suffering coupled with a desire to better the lot of the poor is translated into philanthropy, “an active effort to promote human welfare.”<sup>3</sup>

It is characteristic that Gissing’s philanthropists are not actuated by religious motives. According to Helen Norman, “true religion, the Religion of Humanity” (Vol. 1, p. 217), that is Positivism, has superseded the Christian religion, and Humanitarianism is spreading.<sup>4</sup> In *Demos*, while Mr. Wyvern, a clergyman, does not acknowledge the fact that humanitarian action takes the place of a religious one – “I am a Christian, madam [...] and have nothing to do with economic doctrines,” he tells Mrs. Mewling (p. 79) – he nonetheless concedes that humanitarianism could mend the social breach created by a growing materialism in the commercial society of the late nineteenth century. He calls it, quoting Carlyle, “the detestable ‘nexus of cash payment’” (p. 354), thus contemptuously rejecting the alienating effects of the commercial competition which followed on industrial development. Underlying his opinion is his conviction that religion in such a society can no longer play its role of bringing people from different classes closer to each other. Humanitarianism, of which he thinks he has detected something in socialism, now seems to have that mission. He nevertheless remains pessimistic as to the future of relations between social classes, for according to him, indifference to the plight of the poor “will let poverty anguish at its door” (p. 355). In *The Nether World* Gissing describes the absence of religious motives thus:

[...] there is nowadays coming into existence a class of persons who substitute for the old religious acerbity a narrow and oppressive zeal for good works of purely human sanction. (p. 229)

Miss Lant in this novel is one such person. And old Michael Snowdon is not driven to philanthropic action by religious beliefs either. “It’s because men’s hearts are hard that life is so full of misery. [...] We struggle to get as much as we can for ourselves and care nothing for

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others,” he says (p. 100). As we have seen, for him “the virtue of Compassion [...] is the saving principle of human life” (p. 99). But it is not the kind of compassion preached by Kingsley and Mrs. Gaskell in the mid-century industrial novels. For the former writer, it is the only antidote to pauperism. Mrs. Gaskell evokes the “spirit of Christ as the regulating law between both parties.”<sup>5</sup> Disraeli in *Sybil* blames the Church for not playing the role assigned to it, and expects it to collaborate with the ruling class in trying to improve the plight of the poor. With Gissing’s novels, we are far from such hopes in the potential effects of religion as the healer. Detachment from any religious belief is expressed in *Thyrza* by Gilbert Grail, who is trenchantly dismissive: “religion has no hold upon intelligent working men in London,” he says, and Egremont passes his final judgment: “For good or for evil, [religion] has passed; no one will ever restore it” (p. 93). In *The Nether World* again, Jane Snowdon “betrayed no slightest tendency to the religion of church, chapel, or street corner” (p. 152). Her grandfather “attended no Sunday service,” but he still “used the Bible as a source of moral instruction” (p. 151).

These characters’ lack of interest in religion as such is an echo of their creator’s attitude to it. In fact, Gissing wrote to his friend Eduard Bertz that he had “*never* felt the least vital

interest in Christianity itself,” (*Letters*, Vol. 4, p. 46). His interest shifted from Positivism to Socialism and ended in Agnosticism. Helen Norman in *Workers in the Dawn*, when expounding her intellectual development – an opportunity for Gissing to display his wide reading – mentions Schopenhauer, Comte, and Shelley; she describes them as her “gods.” Her diary offers transparent evidence that Gissing’s compassion for the suffering poor was not awakened by religious fervour; it was rather fostered by those whom he called his “household gods,” Goethe among others:

Schopenhauer, Comte, and Shelley – these three have each in turn directed the growth of my moral life. Schopenhauer awakened within me the fire of sympathy, gave a name to the uneasy feeling which made my life restless, taught me to forget myself and to live in others.<sup>6</sup> Comte then came to me with his lucid unfolding of the mystery of the world, showed me why the fire of sympathy burned so within my breast, taught me the use to which it should be directed. Last of all Shelley breathed with the breath of life on the dry bones of scientific theory, turned conviction into passion, lit the heavens of the future with such glorious rays that the eye dazzles in gazing upwards, strengthened the heart with enthusiasm as with a coat of mail. Can I ever count myself an atheist when I worship such gods as these? (Vol. 1, p. 221)

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However, religion did have a certain use for Gissing: just as it is a source of moral teaching for Michael Snowdon and his granddaughter, so was it for Gissing “something of historical interest” (*Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 294). Besides, in a letter of 9 May 1880 to his brother Algernon, Gissing expressed his hope in the growing possibilities of science “to dispense with the aid of a blind faith” (*Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 269). Thus he expressed his belief in Positivism. Underlying his rejection of religious dogma was his conviction that religion perpetuated poverty, enslaved the poor and kept them in subjection. Through religion, the poor are taught

that in their poverty and nakedness lay means of grace and salvation such as the rich can scarcely by any means attain to; that they should proudly, devoutly, accept their heritage of woe, and daily thank God for depriving them of all that can make life dear. (*The Unclassed*, p. 114)

As noted above, Miss Lant in *The Nether World* is not moved by religious fervour. Earlier in the novel we are told that her altruism is “common enough in one who had been defrauded of [her] natural satisfactions” (p. 229). So here again, we have no genuine philanthropist like Helen Norman in *Workers in the Dawn*; nor can we say that Helen Norman will develop into a Miss Lant, as Gillian Tindall writes in her book on Gissing: “Miss Lant is Helen Norman ten years on and viewed with clearer eyes.”<sup>7</sup>

Of Gissing’s philanthropists who are not prompted by religious motives to help the poor escape poverty, Helen Norman is one of the most genuine. Her philanthropic attitude has been a characteristic of hers from early childhood. Besides giving alms to the poor she meets, she dreams of having her own school for “all poor children, who can’t afford to pay much” (*Workers in the Dawn*, Vol. 1, p. 134). Her diary reveals this concern for the poor, which is later strengthened in Germany when she studies Comte’s Positivism, according to which “the true destination of philosophy must be social, practical”; she also discovers Schopenhauer’s “wonderfully strong sympathy with the sufferings of mankind” (Vol. 1, p. 215). Her studies in Germany have increased her longing for “active life” (Vol. 1, p. 216) which she, a woman, considers her duty despite the widespread belief (that she hopes to disregard) that “such work is

not woman's true sphere" (Vol. 1, p. 220). Active life is very important to Helen, who means to achieve it, to go into the darker parts of London and "gauge the existent misery with [her] own eyes" (Vol. 1, p. 219). She refuses the conventional form of ladies' philanthropy and rejects

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the life of an ordinary wealthy lady, the life of "society," either altogether heedless of the sufferings of the poor, or occasionally satisfying my conscience with a perfunctory contribution to one or two ill-conducted charities. (Vol. 1, p. 219)

When back in London, she fulfils her ambitions and manages to educate the slum-girls who attend her evening class. Hers is a venture out of which she emerges successful – though consumptive. In his *George Gissing: A Critical Biography*, Jacob Korg maintains that Helen Norman "dies in an exile which she has sought as an escape from her failures in social work and in love" and speaks of her "disappointing experience among the poor" (p. 36). Grylls, in *The Paradox of George Gissing*, corrects him, showing that Helen's "social work is not a failure: it benefits not only her own moral nature, but also the girls at her evening-class, where 'her efforts received each week their unmistakable reward.' She only dies abroad because she has consumption" (p. 27). Yet, given her frail physique, unprepared for such a venture, she has paid for this success with her health and life when going into unhealthy corners and exposing herself to pitiless weather conditions. It is a hard-won and dearly paid success. Given the extent of wretchedness in the poorer districts, her success remains futile, especially when many poor people refuse to co-operate. She is both a heroine and a victim. Ida Starr in *The Unclassed* cannot claim to be either. Only through the narrator's strenuously sympathetic description of her endeavour does her philanthropy seem convincing, for it is less spontaneous than Helen's; we are eventually invited to believe that this street-walker, once so hard-pressed by poverty, is miraculously transformed into an "Angel of Mercy." On this point we agree with Adrian Poole that "Ida sets out to atone for the guilt of her release by energetic philanthropy towards the Litany Lane tenants,"<sup>8</sup> whereas philanthropy is rather "goodwill to fellowmen," which excludes selfish calculation.

Similar to Michael Snowdon's in *The Nether World* is Mr. Tollady's zeal in helping others, a zeal which is subjected to Gissing's bitter irony: it results from their feeling of guilt and from the desire to atone for past cruelty. But Snowdon's is marked with power, for it originates from a "horrible intensity of fanaticism" (p. 308). For all his good intentions and philanthropic drive, he is made ridiculous in the presence of his frail granddaughter. He chooses the moment when she has just heard of Sidney's breach of their engagement to ask her to give up any idea of marriage and to devote her life to achieving *his* philanthropic schemes in the nether world. Readers can only view his good intentions as a curse upon the poor girl who,

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Gissing observes, has not the "face of a stern heroine" (p. 308).

Although moved by compassion, Richard Mutimer in *Demos* is no born philanthropist in the way Helen Norman is, but he has no guilt to atone for, either. His major concern is to win support during a parliamentary election. He nonetheless succeeds in improving the lives of the workers in the newly-founded Owen-like Wanley Community.<sup>9</sup> Yet he proves later to be motivated by no better feelings and aims than Bounderby's in *Hard Times* or, as Gillian Tindall shows, Dagworthy's in *A Life's Morning*, or even Dalmaine's in *Thyrza*. Mutimer's selfishness and insincerity are sure signs of a dangerous innate inconsistency, according to the narrator, who later comments sarcastically: "Domestic perfidy was in the end incompatible with public

zeal” (p. 125). Nor is the Wanley community’s industrialization to bring him the support of his middle-class neighbours, in whose eyes he is a devastator of nature and a destroyer of beauty. A contemporary critic described Mutimer’s case as one of “coarse and hesitating philanthropic selfishness or selfish philanthropy.”<sup>10</sup> Selfish calculations are not in keeping with genuine philanthropy.

As for Jane Snowdon in *The Nether World* she is only a philanthropist *malgré elle*, and for a short time at that, during which she looks forward to being helped by her future husband, Sidney Kirkwood. Her abortive experiment in the soup-kitchen and her lover’s rejection of her, increase her weakness, driving her to give up the role imposed upon her by her grandfather. Jane is truer to herself and to reality than is Ida Starr in *The Unclassed*. For Jane has no pretence. She does not attempt to conceal the effects upon her of years of thralldom at the Peckovers’. She does not pretend either (could she, even if she would?) to transcend the feeling of humiliation which has been hers since then. Her grandfather, Michael Snowdon, a hardened old man, stubbornly denies her the “happiness such as ordinary women may enjoy.” This “[f]or [his] sake, and for the sake of her suffering fellow-creatures” (p. 255), who, in a meaningful episode, express their ingratitude by spilling the content of their dishes on the floor, an unambiguous sign of their dissatisfaction with the food they are given in the soup-kitchen. There is no misapprehending Gissing’s point here. Yet it has been misapprehended by John Goode who, while observing quite rightly that Miss Lant “comes straight out of the Charity Organisation Society,” declared in his essay “George Gissing’s *The Nether World*,”<sup>11</sup> that the soup-kitchen scene is “a bitter protest against philanthropy,” whereas Gissing’s real aim is to show up the

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inability of the poor to adapt themselves to better food and treatment. Their unconscious refusal to keep up their self-respect and not to submit to the harsh and insulting language used by the Batterbys, the former managers of the kitchen, is remarkable. To assert, as Goode does, that the poor in *The Nether World* do not feel grateful for philanthropy because it offers them a “much more vicious kind of insult,” or that they “are insolent to Miss Lant because her zeal derives from the recognition of the necessity of the nether world,” amounts to endowing them with fine sensibilities, the lack of which Gissing clearly points out when he reports the significant conversation between Miss Lant and Jane Snowdon:

“Wasn’t it rather a pity,” [Jane] suggested, “that the old people were sent away?”

“You think so?” returned Miss Lant, with the air of one to whom a novel thought is presented. “You really think so, Miss Snowdon?”

“They got on so well with everybody,” Jane continued. “And don’t you think it’s better, Miss Lant, for everybody to feel satisfied?”

“But really, Mr. Batterby used to speak so very harshly. He destroyed their self-respect.”

“*I don’t think they minded it,*” said Jane. (My emphasis; p. 253)

This scene is symbolic of the class breach and the impossibility of any kind of communication between the people in the nether world and the rich; each class is equally strange to the other. Despite her philanthropic activities, Miss Lant is as alien to the poor as they and their rudeness are to her. This lack of communication was the first thing that struck Gissing when he came to live in London: “I was shocked by the gap between the two classes,” he wrote to Frederic Harrison in the letter quoted above, “not in the mere commonplace matter of material comfort but in the power of comprehending each other’s rule of life.” The poor in *The Nether World* refuse the better food and better treatment they get from Miss Lant and Jane Snowdon,

preferring poor food and coarse and rude language. They “had the pleasure of being rebuked in their native tongue,” Gissing ironically comments (p. 253). Their insolent attitude is contemptuously satirised by the narrator: “Of all forms of insolence there is none more flagrant than that of the degraded poor receiving charity which they have come to regard as a right” (p. 253). Which shows that the poor do not refuse philanthropy *per se*, as John Pether in *Workers in the Dawn* tries to make Helen Norman understand:

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“I have been told [...] that you try to do good to the poor, to satisfy their hunger, and to clothe their nakedness. Stop, if you are wise, and don’t trouble yourself with what does not concern you. What are the miseries of the poor to you? [...] Do you lack amusements? [...] Do you know that every penny you give in charity, as you call it, is poison to the poor, killing their independence and that sense of liberty which is the only possession they can hope to boast of?” (Vol. 1, p. 369)

Nowhere else in Gissing’s five working-class novels is the humiliation vehemently deplored by Pether discernible. Characters like Pether are extremely uncommon. Even if some poor people do refuse the help offered them, the refusal is due to other reasons than humiliation. For instance, to Ackroyd in *Thyrza* philanthropy is a devilish capitalist machinery. He does not fight it because he need not; but he is quite suspicious of its goals. Hearing of the wealthy philanthropist Egremont and his plan to educate working-class people by giving lectures on English literature and opening a library, he comments:

“Sops to the dog that’s beginning to show his teeth! [...] It shows you what’s coming. The capitalists are beginning to look about and ask what they can do to keep the people quiet. Lectures on literature! Fools! As if that wasn’t just the way to remind us of what we’ve missed in the way of education.” (p. 25)

Working-class distrust of the intrusion of capitalists into the world of the poor is here at its height. We do have characters, like Sidney Kirkwood in *The Nether World*, who brood on the exploitation of the poor, but such a virulent attack on capitalists as Ackroyd’s is only to be found among the educated, formerly rebellious, but now settled characters like Wyvern, the clergyman in *Demos*, who summarises exploitation in the nether world as follows:

“I denounce the commercial class, the *bourgeois*, the capitalists – call them what you will – as the supremely maleficent, [...] They it is indeed who are oppressors; they grow rich on the toil of poor girls in London garrets and of men who perish prematurely to support their children.” (p. 354)

We later hear from him that, although he condemns Mutimer’s transformation of Wanley Manor into an industrial area, he encourages “sympathy and humanity,” whereby he means compassion and charity, urging philanthropic actions.

Most of the people benefiting from philanthropy are shown as willing to take what they are given. Being unintelligent, slow-witted and submerged mortals engaged in hard toil for their

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daily bread, they are only too ready to do so. In the soup-kitchen scene, the poor do not refuse

charity as such; it is the strangers, the unsympathetic middle-class philanthropists they object to. They prefer to be served by people from their midst, and philanthropic action resumes its normal course with the return of the Batterbys. In *Workers in the Dawn* Helen tells Mr. Heatherley, the clergyman who assists her, about a wretched woman whom she scarcely ever sees sober, and for whom she has bought “a warm gown and a cloak. I feel almost sure that before to-morrow they will both be pawned for drink” (Vol. 2, p. 296). This example shows how the poor are unable to avail themselves properly of opportunities to alleviate their poverty, and if possible to escape it. Their lack of gratitude is striking. Earlier in the book, Helen has already been confronted with this attitude:

[...] wherever she went among the destitute poor, she was almost always met with the most open feelings of distrust and suspicion. She found at the very entrance to her work how terribly deep and wide was the gulf set between the class to which she belonged by birth and these poor wretches whom her heart was set on benefiting. Too often *her kind words met with surly and ungracious replies, and sometimes her benefits were repaid with the basest indifference or even ingratitude.* (My emphasis; Vol. 2, p. 22)

She then comes to the full realization that the poor are “complete strangers to her” (vol. 2, p. 373). Mr. Heatherley speaks of the “hereditary belief [of the poor] that the rich are their enemies” (Vol. 2, p. 27). The pathetic irony of the narrator’s satire stressing the ungratefulness of the poor, and the widening gap between the classes, is eloquently voiced in *The Nether World*:

Gratitude, mesdames? You have entered upon this work with expectation of gratitude? – And can you not perceive that these people of Shooter’s Gardens are poor, besotted, disease-struck creatures, of whom – in the mass – scarcely a human quality is to be expected? [...] Gratitude, quotha? – Nay, do *you* be grateful that these hapless, half-starved women do not turn and rend you. At present they satisfy themselves with insolence. (p. 252)

It is worth noting that even poor characters may be conscious of a stratification within their own milieu, made up as it is “of the various classes which subdivide the great proletarian order” (*Thyrza*, p. 37). In *The Nether World* Gissing speaks of “the subtle gradation” (p. 69) which, however subtle, is not missed by even one of the weakest and most foolish women in his slum novels, Pennyloaf Candy. She, the Shooter’s Gardens dweller, looks down on Jane

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Snowdon – now a rich heiress, whose financial and moral help Pennyloaf needs so badly – for she remembers that Jane was the “Peckovers’ dirty servant” while

[s]he herself had never been a servant – never; she had never sunk below working with the needle for sixteen hours a day for a payment of ninepence. The work-girl regards a domestic slave as very distinctly her inferior. (p. 213)

This superior attitude among the poor and the contempt they feel in the presence of presumably poorer creatures is an aspect which Gissing stresses in *Thyrza*, where the servants of Mrs. Ormonde, the wealthy philanthropist, refuse to serve the “little ragamuffins” whom she welcomes in her home. One of these servants “in particular had explained that she made no



objection to doing it only because she regarded it as a religious penance” (p. 80). Even the kind-hearted Sidney Kirkwood in *The Nether World* finds Jane’s mission to supervise the soup-kitchen hateful. He “could not think of her handing soup over a counter to ragged wretches” (p. 257). What is striking about Sidney is his mixed feelings regarding the people of his own class. Despite his compassion for them, he cannot help responding with disgust and even repulsion to whatever characterizes the poor and their environment. This is what he experiences daily on his way home:

Kirkwood was *irritated* by the conversation and laughter that fell on his ears, *irritated* by the distant strains of the band, *irritated* above all by the fume of frying that pervaded the air for many yards about Mrs. Tubbs’s precincts.  
(My emphasis; p. 31)

Years spent in the neighbourhood have not made him used to it, “his nature was not subdued to what it worked in, and the present fit of disgust was only an accentuation of a mood by which he was often possessed.” This, in Gissing’s slum novels, illustrates the consciousness among the poor of a stratification within their world.

Unsurprisingly, disgust in the presence of lower-class people is also to be found among middle-class characters. Mrs. Ormonde does not escape the feeling when she is crossing the Gandles’ “very dirty” kitchen, “a factory for the production of human fodder,” where utensils are wiped with “a very loathsome rag” (*Thyrza*, p. 320). Disgust is similarly aroused in Mr. Woodstock, the money-lender and slum-owner in *The Unclassed*, when he is visiting his property in Litany Lane (p. 279). Here Gissing stresses another facet of his consistent attitude towards the poor: his own unwavering disgust in their physical presence, a reaction mentioned in his diary, letters and *Commonplace Book*.

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As David Grylls put it, philanthropic schemes in these novels fail because “a love affair is superimposed on a social question.”<sup>12</sup> In *The Nether World*, Jane Snowdon’s acceptance of the role of philanthropist does not outlive the breach of her engagement to Sidney. In *Thyrza* Egremont’s and Thyrza’s love wrecks the whole philanthropic scheme and prompts Grail, her former fiancé, to give up his librarianship, which is part of a venture intended for the benefit of his fellowmen. Egremont, when in America away from Thyrza, goes as far as to admit that he “drove on the rocks of philanthropic enterprise. No more risk of that” (p. 428). Earlier in the novel, he despondently declares: “I am suffering a greater loss [...] Let it [the library] go! *Let the people rust and rot in ignorance!*” (My emphasis; p. 343). In *The Unclassed* “lack of interest in social reform is linked with lack of pity for Ida Starr.”<sup>13</sup> This is what Gillian Tindall calls “philanthropy-confused-by-sex muddle,”<sup>14</sup> which in *Thyrza* applies only to men. When poor female characters in love happen to get money, they lay it at the feet of their men as Totty Nancarrow does in *Thyrza*, and Jane plans to do in *The Nether World*. Most of Gissing’s philanthropists are women.

Indeed, for their part, the few male philanthropists are in the main content to urge other characters to philanthropic action. They are not as active as their female counterparts. Arthur’s philanthropy cannot compare with Helen’s or with Lucy Venning’s in *Workers in the Dawn*. Both girls assiduously endeavour to improve the lives of their sisters in the poorer districts of London. Nor can Egremont’s chimerical enterprise match Mrs. Ormonde’s practical work in *Thyrza*. In *The Unclassed*, Mr. Woodstock’s fortune does not serve philanthropic schemes, for he has none, but those of Ida; the latter becomes an eager philanthropist in the Litany Lane slums. It is Thyrza and Lydia in *Thyrza* who give Mr. Boddy an overcoat and food, Totty Nancarrow who offers her legacy to Bunce in the same novel. Is it that women are better

motivated and better-hearted than men? Or are they better appreciated by those who benefit from their kindness? Not according to Pether in *Workers in the Dawn*; he says to Helen:

“Go home, go home! [...] you have a pretty face, and perhaps a good heart, but you are only a woman. The work that you make your play, the amusement of your leisure hours, is not for women’s hands. Men will set to it before long, and you will see then how it ought to be done.” (Vol. 1, p. 370)

Pether’s hopes to see society improved after a rising of the people recalling the French Revolution are too optimistic: there are no signs of a forthcoming revolution, and the few male

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philanthropists in the next novels will not prove as directly efficient as Pether expects them to be. They are engaged in teaching philanthropy: Mr. Tollady teaches Arthur how he can best serve the interests of the poor; Waymark preaches philanthropic action in his writings. Speaking of Waymark’s first novel, Julian Casti remarks that “such a book will do more good than half a dozen religious societies” (p. 211). Egremont’s philanthropy does not aim at improving the immediate material conditions of the poor, but at raising them intellectually through lectures and the foundation of a library. Michael Snowdon’s action consists in urging his granddaughter to learn how to become a philanthropist, and providing the means to carry out his schemes. Male philanthropists are at their best when they think it their duty to teach their wives and raise them to their own level. In this respect we can but agree with David Grylls, who observed that in Gissing’s novels “the woman’s educational process is often masterminded by a man.”<sup>15</sup> Arthur Golding is very enthusiastic and even overwhelming when he is educating Carrie Mitchell. Richard Mutimer behaves in the same way when describing to the innocent and bewildered middle-class Adela Waltham the miserable life of the multitude and trying to make her understand why it is her duty to help the poor (*Demos*, p. 91). This is what John Sloan calls “sordid enslavement to the psychology of sympathy and sacrifice.”<sup>16</sup>

Male characters are also concerned with philanthropy when it takes a political dimension, like Mutimer’s or Dalmaine’s, or an intellectual one as is the case with Egremont and Waymark, or an artistic one in that of Arthur Golding. These male philanthropists are content to give money or a “baked potato” to the poor they meet in the streets. They do not visit them in their homes to bring them material help, except Mr. Heatherley in *Workers in the Dawn*, but then he is a clergyman. Helen Norman, with all her studies of “the religion of humanity,” her intellectual attainments and high culture, displays a kind of efficient philanthropy which none of Gissing’s male characters with her culture can boast of. Nor does she adopt their distant intellectual or political attitudes when trying to improve the lot of the poor.

It is surprising to find Helen Norman advising Arthur not to let himself be led astray by his feelings of compassion for the poor. As it is, Arthur Golding, the first artist character in Gissing’s novels, is torn between devoting himself to art, to the painting of the beautiful, and labouring in the cause of the poor. Drawing on Shelley’s concepts of art as the “real source of morality,” Helen Norman explains to him how art “works so powerfully for the ultimate benefit of mankind” (Vol. 2, p. 269), how he is to make use of his exceptional artistic genius, for,

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according to her, the spirit of a beautiful picture “permeates every layer of society [...] ultimately leavens the whole mass” (Vol. 2, p. 269); for her, the result of “the labour of men of genius” “stands as mile-stones on the highway of civilization,” and the works of “great men [...]

direct the history of the world” (Vol. 2, pp. 268-69). Helen stimulates Arthur’s humanitarianism, but on a higher level, encourages him to put his art in the service of civilization and humanity in general. She is thus expressing the attitude of many philanthropists of the time, such as Clara Collet, as we have seen. However, Arthur is accused by his fellow-workers, mainly Will Noble, of dodging militancy for their cause, which is not a groundless accusation. By advising Arthur to devote his time and energy to art, Helen Norman is also expressing one of her creator’s dearest beliefs, subsequently recorded in the letter he wrote to his sister Margaret on 12 May 1883:

[...] the only thing known to us of absolute value is artistic perfection. The ravings of fanaticism – justifiable or not – pass away; but the works of the artist, work in what material he will, remain, sources of health to the world. (*Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 135)<sup>17</sup>

In *The Unclassed*, after an early period of “ranting radicalism,” Waymark acknowledges that “in art alone I could find full satisfaction” (p. 212). He explains the egoistic motive in such a choice by the fact that he “no longer [has] a spark of social enthusiasm”:

“That zeal on behalf of the suffering masses was nothing more nor less than disguised zeal on behalf of my own starved passions [...] I identified myself with the poor and ignorant; I did not make their cause my own, but my own cause theirs.” (p. 211)

Thus art, or the study of art, is an escape into a world of one’s own. This is what David Grylls calls “art as an antiseptic alternative to life.”<sup>18</sup> Characters such as Golding or Waymark create “a world within the world.”<sup>19</sup>

In the last analysis, Gissing seems to believe that if any improvement occurs in the condition of the poor, it is due to reformers, for, in all his novels, only Dalmaine, the MP in *Thyrza*, has brought about some such improvement, not the idealist Egremont, despite his fortune and good intentions. It has taken time for him to realize the impertinence of his philanthropic venture which, he acknowledges at the end of the story, makes him “bitterly ashamed of [himself]” (p. 422). He goes as far as describing Dalmaine as “the rain-shower which aids the growth of the corn” (p. 426). Yet Dalmaine is the object of Gissing’s satire, for

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his zeal on behalf of the poor is merely the outcome of his selfish calculations. Of Dalmaine – for whom it is “mere common sense to regard his factory hands as his enemies” (p. 9) – another character, John Tyrrell, says:

“[...] who are the real social reformers? The men who don’t care a scrap for the people, but take up ideas because they can make capital out of them [...] hardheaded, practical, selfish men. [...] Look at Dalmaine. How much do you think he cares for the factory-hands he’s always talking about? But he’ll do them many a good turn; he’ll make many a life easier; and just because it’s his business to do so, because it’s the way of advancing himself. [...] There’s your real social reformer.” (p. 140)

Richard Mutimer in *Demos* is another self-interested reformer; he, too, is the object of Gissing’s “savage satire,” partly on account of his being a working-class socialist. Dalmaine’s motives are not any more generous than Mr. Gresham’s views of the poor in *Workers in the*

*Dawn:*

“It is my firm belief [...] that you might as well endeavour to teach a pig to understand Euclid as to teach one of these gaol-birds to know and feel what is meant by honesty, virtue, kindness, intellectuality. That they have become such is, I say, the result of their own vices. Unless you can take all the children, one by one, as they are born in these kennels, and remove them to some part of the New World where they shall grow up under the best influences of every kind, so, by degrees, letting the old generations rot away in their foulness and then, when they are all dead, set fire to the districts they inhabited, totally rebuild them, and fetch back to their renovated homes the young men and women who have grown to maturity, healthy, clean, and educated – unless you can do all that, you need never hope, Helen, to better the condition of the poor of London.” (Vol. 1, p. 258)

Mr. Gresham calls philanthropy an “ailment” which requires “vigorous treatment” (Vol. 1, p. 266). Another opponent of philanthropic action is Mr. Tyrrell in *Thyrza*, who contemptuously calls it a “craze” and hopes his daughter Paula will not be affected by it (p. 139).

In the whole gallery of philanthropists depicted by Gissing, hardly is there one to be found who has entirely succeeded in his humanitarian mission; the rich Helen is too pure and sincere for that; the redeemed prostitute’s philanthropy is not very convincing; the failed novelist turned rent-collector’s is not sincere; Egremont the idealist has wrecked his philanthropic scheme with his romantic love; the middleclass spinster’s action has widened the gap between the classes and provoked the anger and violence of the poor. All these

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philanthropic endeavours are doomed to miscarry. Each character either stumbles on a number of obstacles and difficulties which lead to an imminent frustration of his efforts, or reveals the deep flaw in him which makes for that frustration. Never does philanthropic enterprise produce, in Gissing’s novels, the expected results. It rather caves in and widens the gap between people who grow even more aware of class differences. Hence Gissing’s attack upon the philanthropists’ aims and endeavours. From his novels we gather that if philanthropic action fails, it is due on the one hand to philanthropists, to the extent of poverty and destitution, to “the terrible social evils” which were not “sternly grappled with” in time, and have therefore grown uncontrollable. On the other hand such a failure results from the absence among the poor of any will to cooperate and give themselves a chance of improving their own lot. To which reasons may be added the strong class feeling in both the poor and the philanthropists. The latter’s vain labour is only one facet of the world as Gissing saw it. Many critics have emphasized, or overemphasized it. Edith Sichel called Gissing a philanthropic novelist “representing the pessimistic school” of philanthropy.<sup>20</sup> She wrote that after reading *Thyrza* we become convinced that “any effort is failure, idealism a lovable folly, the practical philanthropist an impossibility.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary.*

<sup>2</sup>Clara Collet was a member of the Charity Organization Society. See Pierre Coustillas (ed.), ““A Great Deal of Brain to the Square Inch’: A Forgotten Essay by Clara Collet,” *Gissing Journal*, April 1992, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary.*

<sup>4</sup>Gissing’s enthusiasm for Positivism in the early 1880s was due, as is well-known, to the influence of Frederic Harrison’s writings. Harrison is first mentioned significantly in a letter

from Gissing to his brother Algernon, dated 9 November 1878.

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 458.

<sup>6</sup>In discussing the influence of Schopenhauer on Gissing, Patrick Bridgwater underlined the fact that the novelist's "intellectual development [...] [was] quite different from his heroine's. Unlike Helen Norman, Gissing moved from Comte to Schopenhauer, using Schopenhauer to demolish the influence of Positivism." See *Gissing and Germany* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1981), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup>Gillian Tindall, *The Born Exile* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1974), p. 121.

<sup>8</sup>Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 68.

<sup>9</sup>For Gillian Tindall, with the legacy which has fallen to him Richard Mutimer is "enabled to make his vision of a Robert Owen Community come true." She is one of several critics who have stressed this similarity between the two communities. See *The Born Exile*, p. 116.

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<sup>10</sup>Unsigned review, *Athenæum*, 10 April 1886, in *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Pierre Coustillas and Colin Partridge (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 85.

<sup>11</sup>John Goode, "George Gissing's *The Nether World*," in *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, ed. Howard, Lucas and Goode (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 215-16.

<sup>12</sup>David Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), p. 47.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup>Gillian Tindall, *The Born Exile*, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup>David Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing*, p. 146.

<sup>16</sup>John Sloan, *George Gissing: The Cultural Challenge* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 18.

<sup>17</sup>Among other critics, Jacob Korg draws a parallel between Shelley's concept of the role of the poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" in "A Defence of Poetry" and Gissing's view of the artist's mission as expressed by Helen Norman in *Workers in the Dawn*. For further development of this point see Korg's "Division of Purpose in George Gissing," in *Collected Articles on George Gissing*, ed. Pierre Coustillas (London: Cass, 1968), pp. 64-79.

<sup>18</sup>David Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing*, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup>See Gissing's letter of 22 September 1885 to his brother Algernon, in which after commenting on William Morris's involvement in an East End demonstration, he added: "Why cannot he write poetry in the shade? He will inevitably coarsen himself in the company of ruffians. Keep apart, keep apart, & preserve one's soul alive, – that is the teaching for the day. It is ill to have been born in these times, but one can make a world within the world" (*Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 349).

<sup>20</sup>Gissing's refusal to be called "a philanthropic novelist" might be accounted for by the fact that Edith Sichel made too much of his short-lived philanthropic inclinations. Gissing's deep-felt compassion for the poor abated soon after he wrote *Workers in the Dawn*. He might have accepted John Goode's more moderate description of this novel as a "highly philanthropic novel." See *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction*, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup>Edith Sichel, "Two Philanthropic Novelists: Mr. Walter Besant and Mr. George Gissing," *Murray's Magazine*, April 1888, in *Gissing: The Critical Heritage*, p. 119.

#### Bibliographical Note

The editions of the novels quoted from are: *Workers in the Dawn* (Brighton: Harvester, 1985, which reproduces Robert Shafer's edition in two volumes); *The Unclassed* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1976, which reproduces the revised edition of 1895); *Demos: A Story of English Socialism* (London: Dent, [1915]); *Thyrza: A Tale* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1974); *The Nether*

*World* (London: Dent, 1973).

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### Gissing's Dream and Reality, between Wives

SYDNEY LOTT  
Eastbourne

The “educating Nell” experiment initiated by Gissing at Owens College in 1876 came to a tumultuous end when the lady in question stormed out of their Chelsea home on 27 December 1882, taking half the furniture with her to Brixton. It was the last time he saw her until she was dead. In spite of this ignominious failure he obstinately clung to the theory that it should be possible to educate a working-class girl to the standard he had set for a reasonable life. It seemed the only course of action as chronic lack of money appeared to rule out marriage to an equal in the years ahead. Perhaps he had been unlucky with Nell. A girl with a sweeter nature would perhaps be more likely to succeed – at least in the dream world of fiction. In a little over three years the working-class Thyrza was created. Few could have a sweeter nature than Thyrza.

A letter to his sister Ellen of 16 January 1887 reads:

“Thyrza” was finished yesterday morning. Thyrza herself is one of the most beautiful dreams I ever had or shall have. I value the book really more than anything I have yet done. The last chapters drew many tears. I shall be glad when you know Thyrza & her sister.<sup>1</sup>

The choice of the name “Thyrza” is interesting. Thomas Seccombe in his introduction to *The House of Cobwebs* suggests it comes from Byron’s “Elegy on Thyrza.” Seccombe is too often guilty of inaccuracies but on this occasion he may be right, as we know that Gissing read Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, which includes the poem lamenting the untimely death of a Thyrza, young and fair. On the other hand, unlike to-day, the name was a favourite among the lower classes in England following the popularity of *The Death of Abel*, an idyll by the eighteenth-century Swiss poet Salomo Gessner. Thyrza was the name of Abel’s wife. In this case Thyrza would have been used by Gissing as a popular name, current at the time, and the choice would not have been significant.

As the story progresses it becomes apparent that outside influences leading to the eventual social compliance by the male “educated” partner can wreck the experiment just as effectively as the drunken antics of the female “uneducated” partner did in reality. Hence the tragic fictional outcome in the book, Gissing’s tears and his search in real life for a partner of the middle way.

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The mysterious Miss Curtis, whom he met in Eastbourne just after the publication of *Thyrza* about the time of Nell’s death in 1888, appeared to meet his requirement. She lived with her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Thornborough, who owned a tobacconist shop at 13, Church Street, near the Brightland Road address where Gissing was lodging when he received the telegram announcing Nell’s death. Miss Curtis may have been a librarian in Gowland’s Library where he borrowed books during his stay in the town. All went well until the dramatic events recorded in the diary during April and May, 1888.

On Monday, 23rd April, he records a sudden visit to Eastbourne solely to look at 13, Church Street and have a long talk with Miss Curtis. The next day he sent a copy of *Thyrza* to

her aunt. On Thursday, 26th, an acknowledgement from Miss Curtis put him in a good humour. On Tuesday, 8th May, he recorded a longing for Miss Curtis and declared he could not live this hideous life any longer in solitude. The next day, 9th May, in a fever pitch of anticipation, to Eastbourne again, with high hopes, only to be decisively crushed. The diary records, "All gone off in smoke. Never mind; the better perhaps." No further explanation for this sudden reversal in fortune, although a letter to his brother Algernon, from 7K, dated the same day as the visit and presumably written after his return home, contains a significant remark. After discussing local centres outside London he goes on to write – "I suppose lack of religious conformity shuts one out from the society of such places."<sup>2</sup>

In spite of this major setback, Gissing's fertile mind was ready for fresh encounters both in dreams and reality when he set out for his first visit to Italy later in the year.

Marcus Aurelius ruled the Roman Empire when, in Sicily, c. A.D. 177, the young Cecilia met her martyrdom in defence of her Christian faith. Her association with music is very obscure. There is a theory that it arose from a misreading of an antiphone for her day. The first recorded musical festival in her honour c. 1570, at Evreux in Normandy, triggered an explosion of interest. Innumerable paintings and stained glass windows throughout Europe depict her playing an organ – always a model designed many centuries later than A. D. 177. Many musical compositions have been made in her honour from Purcell's "Ode for St. Cecilia's Day" in 1692 to Britten's "Hymn to St. Cecilia" in 1942. She certainly became a great favourite in the Western Church.

Gissing fell under her spell in the Accademia in Bologna which he visited briefly on his way from Naples to Venice during this visit to Italy. He wrote to Ellen on 5 February 1889 – "I

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got an hour next morning to look in at the Picture Gallery & see Raphael's Saint Cecilia. A glorious picture! I wish I could have stayed longer."<sup>3</sup> A letter to Bertz on the 13th again refers to the all too brief visit and calls it a divine picture. In the same letter to Bertz he confirms that Italian experiences during this visit would be used for the background of the new novel – *The Emancipated*.

The book opens with a reference to a large and indifferent copy of Raphael's picture which hangs on the wall of Miriam Baske's sitting-room looking out to the Bay of Naples. Her friend, Cecily Doran, the second dream woman of the period, is on her way from England to become the leading figure in the complicated personal relationships which follow. Unlike *Thyrza* there is no doubt about the origin of her name.

The adulation lavished on Cecily in the early Italian scenes is unsurpassed in any of Gissing's works:

Noble beauty can scarcely be dissociated from harmony of utterance; voice and visage are the correspondent means whereby spirit addresses itself to the ear and eye. One who had heard Cecily Doran speaking where he could not see her, must have turned in that direction, have listened eagerly for the sounds to repeat themselves, and then have moved forward to discover the speaker. The divinest singer may leave one unaffected by the tone of her speech. Cecily could not sing, but her voice declared her of those who think in song, whose minds are modulated to the poetry, not to the prose, of life.<sup>4</sup>

As in *Thyrza*, the dream falters when idealism meets the harsh reality of human weakness. Once again, in the real world, Gissing must seek a rational, if less romantic companion. A letter to Ellen of 9 August 1890 seeks her opinion of Connie Ash, a Wakefield girl he had met the previous day. Connie was the daughter of a corn merchant known to Gissing's father through

the Mechanics Institution. Her sister, Gertrude, played the mandoline and Connie sang a good deal and beautifully. Her social standing, now important for Gissing, was no doubt similar to that of Miss Curtis. He declared in a letter to Ellen that he had fallen in love with Connie but notes the warning given by his family regarding the girl's alleged slatternliness. He then worries once again about his lack of money which, he considers, would prevent him from making a place in any social circle. Once again the romance fades.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of these reversals there was still room for dreams, at least in fiction. Sidwell Warricombe, named after Exeter's legendary, virgin saint, was just around the corner. Mean-

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while, in reality, he becomes increasingly convinced that a working-class girl will provide the only solution to unbearable loneliness. The spectre of Edith begins to take shape. In his letter to Bertz of 15 August 1890 he confesses – “This solitude is killing me. I can't endure it any longer. In London I must resume my old search for some decent work-girl who will come & live with me. I am too poor to marry an equal, & cannot live alone.”<sup>6</sup>

Fiction provides one last fling with the third dream woman, Sidwell Warricombe. Perhaps “fling” is hardly appropriate for the somewhat dignified Sidwell, although Gissing was undoubtedly attracted by his creation. Through Godwin Peak he declares that she

exhibited all the qualities which most appealed to him in her class; in addition, she had the charms of a personality which he could not think of common occurrence. He was yet far from understanding her; she exercised his powers of observation, analysis, conjecture, as no other person had ever done; each time he saw her (were it but for a moment) he came away with some new perception of her excellence, some hitherto unmarked grace of person or mind whereon to meditate. He had never approached a woman who possessed this power at once of fascinating his senses and controlling his intellect to a glad reverence. Whether in her presence or musing upon her in solitude, he found that the unsparing naturalism of his scrutiny was powerless to degrade that sweet, pure being.<sup>7</sup>

Alas, the old problem Godwin shared with Gissing –he was too poor to marry an equal. He also feared his past hostility to orthodox religion would be discovered and count against him. One bold step could perhaps overcome both obstacles. He could study to take holy, if hypocritical, orders. His hypocrisy was unmasked and Godwin was condemned to a bleak and lonely future.

Meanwhile, in reality, Gissing had already taken the fatal step and had married Edith Underwood, a situation in which money and religion were less likely to wreck the prospect of an end to the lonely life. In spite of the Nell experience, desperation blinded him to the pitfalls ahead and it was left to Edith to teach him that loneliness was not the only evil.

Reality had shattered the dream world of Thyrza, Cecily and Sidwell. Miss Curtis and Connie Ash had opted out and Edith was poised to contribute a nightmare scenario. Another seven years must be endured before Gabrielle appears on the Gissing stage.

<sup>1</sup>*The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, eds. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, Pierre Coustillas, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, vol. 3, 1992, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, vol.3, p. 209.

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 4, 1993, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>*The Emancipated*, London: Hogarth Press, 1985, Part 1, ch. 2, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup>*The Collected Letters of George Gissing*, vol. 4, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 232.

<sup>7</sup>*Born in Exile*, London: Hogarth Press, 1985, Part 1, ch. 4, p. 245.

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### “Catanzaro Judged by an English Journalist”

PIERRE COUSTILLAS

Such is the title of the leading article published in an obscure Catanzaro weekly, *La Giostra* (Merry-go-round) on 29 October 1900. “*Catanzaro giudicata da un giornalista inglese.*” And the English journalist was George Gissing, whose “notes of a ramble in Southern Italy” were being serialised in the *Fortnightly Review*. The passage commented upon by the anonymous writer in *La Giostra*, very likely its editor, had appeared in the September number of the review. So that at least one Italian reader, perhaps two if the chapters on Catanzaro were passed on to him by a fellow-countryman living in England, knew of *By the Ionian Sea* months before its publication in book form.

The *Giostra* article, which is reproduced in translation below, is an arresting piece of writing on several counts. First of all it is the earliest public comment on Gissing’s work in Italy. His reputation as a novelist had not reached the shores of the Mediterranean Sea at the time. Secondly, it was not a book of his that attracted notice, not a novel in its original form or in translation, but part of a travel narrative that was to become widely known in English-speaking countries only after his death. Thirdly, Gissing is referred to, most unexpectedly and inappropriately, as a journalist, which shows how ignorant the commentator was of the nature and status of the *Fortnightly Review*. Lastly, considering the flattering picture of Catanzaro drawn by the traveller, one is dismayed to read a rejection of his compliments, a rebuttal of his arguments, on the assumption that no foreigner could possibly have understood what Gissing was reporting.

To the mysteries with which the original publication of this article is fraught, another is attached. Why haven’t these comments, which very likely never reached Gissing, sunk into oblivion? For indeed the conflicting opinions of the English traveller and of the Calabrian journalist have reverberated in a puzzling manner in the last hundred years, but so far the echoes

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had, as it were, been circumscribed to the Calabrian mountains, and might have remained unheard by the outside world, if a Reggio doctor of medicine, Vincenzo Misiani, hearing that some of us were anxious to recover old comments in Italian on Gissing’s life and work, had not drawn our attention to a remarkable quarto volume edited by Beppe Mazzocca and Antonio Panzarella, *Cara Catanzaro* (1987), which no serious student of *By the Ionian Sea* can afford to ignore. Besides photographs of places visited and described by Gissing, the Albergo Centrale among others, the book contains an article by Nicola Siciliano De Cumis, entitled “Nel mare Jonio,” which, quoting at length from *La Giostra*, first brought the 1900 article in it to our notice. Far from claiming to have discovered it, De Cumis observes that in the most authoritative literature on the South, when Catanzaro and its intellectual standard happen to be discussed, it is a commonplace to quote Gissing’s encomiums and to contrast them with the view expressed in *La Giostra*. Doubtless quotations from *By the Ionian Sea* in Italian books and articles on Calabria have become quite frequent since the publication of Margherita Guidacci’s

translation of the book in 1957, but the uninterrupted vitality of the objections to his opinion still have to be documented. During the recent symposium which took place at Catanzaro, Gissing's testimony had pride of place. No one celebrated the objections made by *La Giostra*. In fact, if the writer of the article had read the *Fortnightly Review* more carefully, that is if his understanding of Gissing's literary English had been more thorough and if, as we suspect, some political grudge had not been at the back of his mind, there would have been little or no ground for disagreement.

Thus wrote the *editorialista* of *La Giostra*, who had an axe to grind:

*Mr. George Gissing, in his article entitled By the Ionian Sea, published in the September number of the Fortnightly Review draws a parallel between life in Catanzaro and that in English provincial towns, observing that no comparison can be made between café life among middle-class English people and that in Catanzaro. The contrast is greatly in favour of the Italians. Among the men, young and old, in Catanzaro the tone of conversation is incomparably better than among clusters of English provincials. In Catanzaro people do converse, a word rarely applicable to English talk under such conditions. Mere gossip in the cafés of the towns by the Ionian Sea is the exception; the customers exchange genuine thoughts and reason lucidly about abstract subjects.*

*The choice of topics and the way of discussing them is markedly intellectual. These people have an innate respect for things of the mind which is wholly lacking in a typical Englishman.*

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*One must not forget that the animation of the Calabrians is supported by a tiny cup of coffee or a glass of lemonade; this is a matter of climate and racial constitution. But it should be emphasised that they consume no alcoholic drinks at all.*

*From an English bar-parlour one goes away with tedium or disgust; whereas a Catanzaro café seems a place of assembly for wits and philosophers.*

*This is what the English journalist says.*

*There is very little foreign interest in Italy and comments are almost always unfavourable; therefore we should be grateful to Mr. George Gissing for his interest and his judgements.*

*But we should say that these observations do not strike us as accurate, at least concerning our town.*

*First of all it is very unlikely that Mr. Gissing was able to understand much of the conversations he heard in the cafés of Catanzaro, because it is not customary here, any more than practically anywhere in the world, to speak the true Italian language (the only one that a foreigner would comprehend) especially among friends and confidentially.*

*Besides, none of us is unaware that our cafés have nearly all been reduced to gambling dens and common and constant meeting-places of vagabonds, most of whom are ill-educated or even illiterate.*

*From such people Mr. Gissing certainly cannot have heard philosophical discussions, indeed perhaps not even civilised conversations.*

*At all events, if one admits the truth, at least in part, of the English journalist's assertion we should have to come to the melancholy conclusion that, if our city abounds in philosophers, they have all sought refuge in cafés.*

*And to tell the truth, such places would not be the most suitable...*

To anyone familiar with Gissing's engaging chapters on Catanzaro, where he was so pleased to spend a couple of days after narrowly escaping death in fever-ridden Cotrone, it is clear that the author of the leader was not prepared to ponder Gissing's complimentary remarks on the conversations he had heard in the principal café and consider them in context. He wrote

as though the English traveller had come straight from England to Catanzaro and promptly related his experiences. All the aspects of local life lovingly discussed by Gissing, though implicitly acknowledged, are ignored. Gissing is thanked rather perfunctorily for his interest in and opinion of Catanzaro. He has written in a way which is pleasantly different from those of his predecessors, but – we are given to understand – it is poor solace for *catanzaresi* for the simple reason that his appreciation is faulty.

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Albeit surprised by the abrupt dismissal that follows, we should be prepared to lend an ear to the leader writer if we were convinced that he caught all the *nuances* of Gissing's thoughts and expression. He read selectively the passage at issue near the end of chapter XIII, ignored the fact, casually mentioned by the narrator, that it was at the *principal* café of the town (and we presume, the best, "where a pianist of great pretensions and small achievement made rather painful music") that the foreign visitor had heard the conversations the tone of which he was at some pains to describe. The journalist also overlooked Gissing's warning that he was not being misled by the classic origin of the Italian language, which gives it a distinction in which the more homely Anglo-Saxon is lacking. The grudge that the journalist bore his commoner fellow-townsmen somehow glanced off on Gissing who, being a foreigner, could not be a sound judge. True, the Italian language was one that Gissing had taught himself, not a language he knew as well as his native English, but his understanding of it, in writing and orally, was pretty good as we know from various sources, the latest to have become available being Brian Ború Dunne's memoirs of the months they spent together in Siena and Rome, just before and after his ramble along the Ionian Sea. Gissing had an ear for both music and languages. In addition he was genuinely interested in linguistic variations, those he heard wherever he happened to be outside England – the United States, France, Germany, Spain and naturally Italy – not to speak of England itself, as is testified by some passages in his *Commonplace Book*. Besides, if some Italian dialects are very different from standard Italian (those of Milan and Bergamo, so we are informed), the Calabrian dialects (the plural form is in order) cannot properly be said to count among the most difficult ones. As for the statement that, "practically anywhere in the world," it was dialect, not the standard language of the country, that was spoken in the circumstances of daily life, it will not bear examination. This was the simplistic approach of a man overmuch fond of generalizations. That some of the local cafés had by the turn of the century been reduced to gambling dens and meeting places of vagabonds may well have been true, but there is no room for doubt that Gissing's reported experience is that of a man who had found himself for a while surrounded by well-behaved middle-class people, not among the riff-raff of Catanzaro. The worst misinterpretation occurs at the end of this scrappy article. The *Giostra* writer missed Gissing's witty point when the latter contrasted the talk and general atmosphere of bar-parlours in English country towns with those on that particular evening in Catanzaro, where the café

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"seemed in comparison, a place of assembly for wits and philosophers."

Is it to be regretted that the author of *By the Ionian Sea* was given no opportunity to read this odd piece of journalism? If Pasquale Cricelli, the genial Don Pasquale whom Gissing liked so much, despite his astonishment that an English vice-consul should be unable to speak a word of English, sent him a press-cutting, he is likely to have dismissed the matter with a toss of the head. His visit to Catanzaro dated back to 1897. Was it worth bothering him, if he could be reached at all? He was at the Villa des Roses, Saint-Honoré-les-Bains, in Central France, and was on the point of leaving with Gabrielle and her mother for the Château du Chasnay at Fourchambault. So we can at least imagine in what surroundings he would have read the page

from *La Giostra*, and possibly, again with a toss of the head.

But the story ends with the publication of the article.

[Warm thanks are due to Vincenzo Misiani, Giacomo Borrino and Renato Santoro for their help at various stages of my research, as well as to Russell Price, with whom I had a very profitable exchange of views about the original article in *La Giostra* and its translation.]

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### In Gissing's Footsteps to Magna Græcia

John Keahey, *A Sweet and Glorious Land: Revisiting the Ionian Sea*, New York: Thomas Dunne Books/ St. Martin's Press, 2000.

For the last century or so, literary travellers to Calabria have been forming something of a conga dance across the generations. As he moved through the region in the winter of 1897, Gissing had a copy of *La Grande-Grèce* in his baggage, and was consciously following in the track of François Lenormant a decade or two earlier: he was thrilled to see the French scholar's signature in a visitors' book at Reggio. A few years later, before the First World War, Norman Douglas pursued Gissing into and out of the hotels he had immortalized – if that is the right word for it – and already found much improvement. The ever-informative H. V. Morton, head full of the memories of his illustrious predecessors and others even earlier, joined the procession in the 1960s, writing up his impressions as *A Traveller in Southern Italy*. The Coustillases followed the Gissing trail first in the summer of 1965 and again in October 1998: their typically

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thorough and charmingly personal enquiries, under the title “Revisiting the Shores of the Ionian Sea,” appeared as a supplement to this *Journal* as recently as October last. Sometimes it seems as if the only traveller to the South who was *not* in quest of some admired predecessor was Alaric the Goth. He, at least, had had nothing more elevated on his mind than getting off the peninsula altogether, with his Roman loot.

In the autumn of 1997, John Keahey, a Salt Lake City journalist, chanced across a copy of *By the Ionian Sea* and found it entrancing. Although he knew little or nothing about its author, he realised that he was reading the book at a propitious moment because the centenary of Gissing's trip was approaching. He decided to retrace its course through the cities, both extant and extinct, which are strung along the edge of the Italian boot – the Magna Græcia, or Greek colonial settlements, of antiquity. Like Gissing he started from Naples (though not by sea) and then passed through Paola, Cosenza, Taranto, Metaponto, Crotona, Catanzaro, Squillace and Reggio, trying everywhere to see what Gissing saw, and comparing his own impressions with his. Everywhere he goes he finds change; and everywhere he finds continuity too.

Keahey describes *A Sweet and Glorious Land* as “a personal narrative and a work of journalism, not a footnoted history or a scholarly work.” That is a description, of course, that would also serve quite well for the impressionistic “ramble” of *By the Ionian Sea* itself. And therein lies a problem. Any book of travel which belongs, like this one, to the sub-genre of “in the footsteps of the master” is apt to be read as a pale shadow of its inspiration, and to invite invidious comparisons which are probably unfair and unreasonable. This must be especially true when the “master” in question is from the literary world and has written a book fairly similar in nature to its successor.

There are many ways in which *By the Ionian Sea* is a hard act to follow. Like much of Gissing's work, it has an obsessional quality about it. It has a peculiar tone: a mixture of

romantic exaltation over the irrecoverable past and a prolonged lament for it, all salted with a good deal of saturnine humour. This surely reflects the peculiar circumstances that produced it. The experiences behind *By the Ionian Sea* and its composition span the whole gamut of emotions in Gissing's life. The writer who left England in September 1897 was a harried man indeed. He was not merely taking a trip. He was abandoning his second marriage and his two young sons. He was able to get away at all only because of the altruism of his sisters and women

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friends in coping with his children and his vengeful wife; he was perfectly aware of that and, not surprisingly, he carried a heavy load of guilt in his luggage. On top of that, he had a difficult critical book to write (he did it in Siena) before he was able to free himself for his trip to the south.

Entirely different was the situation when he began to write up his travels eighteen months later at the end of June 1899. Externally at least his life was transformed. He had moved to France and started a new life with Gabrielle Fleury, and he began the book in her mother's apartment in Paris, completing it during an idyllic August holiday in the Alps. It would not be long before Gissing's old devil, neurotic restlessness, would start troubling him again. But in that magical summer of renewal, he felt, as he wrote to his friend Bertz, that "for the first time in my life, I am at ease." Surely not many travel books have gathered their material in one extreme state of mind and been composed in another at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum.

Naturally (we presume), *A Sweet and Glorious Land* did not emerge from circumstances even faintly resembling these. The persona of the narrative is that of a relaxed, humorous, urbane, middle-aged, happily-married American, off whose back the familiar minor irritations which beset every tourist in Italy bounce fairly readily. Where Gissing is carping and ill-tempered (as he is from time to time: think of his references to the "coarse and bumpkinish" faces at Crotona, for instance), Keahey is sunny and untroubled. Actually he had more personal reasons for complaint than Gissing; for though the latter occasionally felt uneasy about the predicaments he got into, he was never really threatened; whereas Keahey's pocket was picked and he was set upon by a mugger and bag-snatcher in Naples even before his journey started, and during a bus journey he was taunted about being a "rich American," with more than a hint of violence in prospect.

Then again, Keahey travels as an informed and intelligent tourist who is open to all that he sees and hears. But Gissing did not pass his month in Calabria out of any broad touristic impulse. His appetite for the region was a purely romantic one; it was, in the absolutely literal sense of the word, *escapist*. He is quite explicit about this in his first chapter. He went to the South, he says, "to escape life as I know it and dream myself into that old world"; the world of "vanished life so dear to my imagination." He wanted to "wander endlessly amid the silence of the ancient world, to-day and all its sounds forgotten." It reads like an act of renunciation. Given the well-known dangers of travel at that time, and remembering Gissing's personal circumstances and the fact that he did nearly succumb to an illness, one wonders whether he

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was not, in some covert fashion, tempting Fate, if not actually courting suicide.

Another problem is that the reflective traveller-historian is hard put to see something to write about. Gissing's choice of southern Italy, for a man bent on soaking himself in the remnants of classical antiquity, was not the best one. Sicily would have offered him more; and for a man who had already visited Greece, North Africa or south-western Turkey would have offered more still. For, of course, the truth is that earthquakes, ecological disruption caused by

deforestation, shifting coastlines, malaria and human despoliation over many centuries have left few remains south of Paestum for the imagination to feed upon. Apart from a few new excavation sites which are comprehensible only to students, and some better exhibits in the museums, nothing much has changed in this respect since Gissing's time. The region is still, as H. V. Morton said, pre-eminently a country for scholars. There is a passage in Edward Hutton's old *Naples and Southern Italy* which conveys this very well. Hutton is summarising Reggio's (Rhegium's) calamitous history. He picks up the story after a siege in 387 B. C., when the city was laid waste and all her citizens sold as slaves. In 191 B. C. it was half-wrecked by an earthquake; then "it fell to Alaric in 410 [...] it was taken in 549 by Totila, in 918 by the Saracens, in 1005 by the Pisans, in 1060 by Robert Guiscard, and was burnt out by Frederic Barbarossa. Rebuilt, it was sacked by the Turks in 1552 and burnt to the ground by them in 1597. Rebuilt again, in 1783 it was totally destroyed by an earthquake, as it was again in 1908." The town was still mostly rubble when Hutton passed through. This paragraph adequately explains why there is little of the past left in Calabria; and what there is of the present is not especially inviting. As it happens, both Paul Theroux in *The Pillars of Hercules* and the anonymous writer for *The Rough Guide to Italy* independently quote Gissing's comment on Crotona ("this squalid little town") with the notation that it is still not a bad description. Few of the towns are of much intrinsic interest: whatever charms they once had – if any – have been wrecked by careless industrialisation and illegal property development.

Gissing himself solved this problem triumphantly by merging his vivid historical musings with wonderfully acute contemporary observations. Of the former, the high point is of course his famous account of the hallucinatory visions of antiquity that visited him as he lay on his sick-bed in the grip of *la febbre*. But the latter linger equally in the memory. His eye for the compelling concrete detail is unailing. It is one thing to say that he found Squillace a desolate

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town. It is quite another, though, to notice that the sole sign of animation in the place was a pig and a cat playing together, rolling over and over in a muddy gutter. It is one thing to speak of the unhygienic and sluttish habits in the hotels: it is another to capture their essence by noting that the butter is being served up in an eaten-out cheese rind, or to notice the diner who puts his hands over his eyes and actually weeps tears of "indignant misery" at what is put in front of him. Not for a moment do we forget that we are in the hands of a master novelist.

Keahey's comments on modern Italian life, while often quite amusing and informed, cannot match this acuity. He complains that Gissing "voiced numerous laments that today, against the backdrop of modern Italy seem silly"; but his own observations on modern life are perhaps a bit too clichéd to be memorable. He does not seem to have his intended reader quite in focus. His lengthy description of his Naples *pensione* seems aimed at those entirely unfamiliar with Europe, and he is not the first visitor to Italy, nor will he be the last, to rue the "quiet town squares" that have become "gigantic parking lots," or the "small darting cars," or the "careening teenagers" on scooters. Indeed, if Keahey's book has a fault, it is that parts of it make for rather mundane reading.

That is not altogether his fault, of course. As the books of Paul Theroux and many others illustrate, a sense of boredom, disgust and loneliness does lend spice to travel narratives. Gissing's trip through Calabria had all these things in plenty. It was altogether a stronger, and a much stranger, experience than can be obtained easily a century later. Nowadays the intrepid traveller would have to work a lot harder and go a lot further to get the experiences Gissing had all for the cost of a few days on a train from London. The shocking roads, the verminous beds, the vile and sparse food, the medieval living-quarters, the tedium, the risk of contracting a lethal infectious disease: it is only the remotest regions can provide their like today. Calabria, nowadays, is no dark place of the earth. The lodgings, even in the smallest and most remote

places, are now almost beyond criticism; the food is varied and agreeable; journeying is easy and reliable. Forty years ago H. V. Morton was loud in his praise for what the Cassa del Mezzogiorno has done for the South: the alleviation of really grinding poverty, the smiling cornfields replacing gloomy marshland, the bright promise of tourism. But even those remarkable feats were achieved long enough ago to be taken for granted today. Keahey complains, not about malaria, but about the Mafia, but it is no substitute really and seems rather forced. A century ago

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the omnipresent malaria could quite easily kill you; whereas organised crime is hardly likely to touch the casual foreign visitor.

Where Keahey does most usefully is to supplement Gissing in his role as historian. He is much better – or more explanatory, at any rate – than Gissing in supplying a straightforward account of the long, long history of Magna Græcia. Most people who read *By the Ionian Sea* today must be puzzled by its allusiveness. Gissing was writing, of course, for readers who had been educated as he had been, and he takes a great deal for granted. He translates few of his Latin quotations, for example. For the modern reader, for whom Virgil and Horace are but names, and who has never read an original line of either, Gissing's eager search for, and disappointment over, the little Galeso river at Taranto must seem rather mystifying. Keahey has an appealing sense of wonder at the remoteness of these events – the fact that these fantastically opulent cities grew, flourished and started to decline before anyone had ever heard of Rome – and his determination to get the sequence of events right, to understand motives and historical causation, makes him a good instructor. He repeats himself a good deal (the book could have been more firmly edited: we are told three times in as many pages that Crotone gained its current name in 1928, for example), but this is itself a teacher's trick.

For this reviewer the most memorable detail in this cheerful and unassuming book has nothing to do with Gissing or Italy. According to Keahey, who learnt it from a movie about wolves, you can keep off aggressive dogs by urinating around the perimeter of a circle and staying inside it. As a dog-hater and dog-fearer on a par with Keahey himself, I intend to try out this tip at the first decent opportunity.

Peter Morton, Flinders University, Adelaide

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### Other Book Reviews

George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, edited with an Introduction and notes by Patricia Ingham, Oxford University Press, 2000.

This is the fourth Gissing title to appear in the World's Classics or, as they are now styled, the Oxford World's Classics, but only three are available currently, since *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, the first to be thought worthy of that distinction, did not sell quickly enough to be acceptable for a second edition. *The Odd Women* was ignored by publishers for half a century, from 1915, when Sidgwick and Jackson last reprinted Bullen's one-volume edition, to

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1968, the year in which Anthony Blond in England and Stein and Day in America, decided to give the book a new lease of life. But the best way to achieve this commendable aim assuredly did not consist in publishing it with a mistake-ridden and sadly uninspired introduction by Frank Swinnerton. The resuscitation took place in 1971 when Norton published *The Odd Women* in

paperback. The New York publishers have had a number of successors, the latest one last year, when the reliability of the text first loomed large in the eyes of both editor and publisher.

Patricia Ingham, the editor of this welcome Oxford World's Classics edition, is aware of the problem posed by the unavailability of the manuscript, and her text is sounder than any on record, including perhaps its only rival, published in 1998. With the possible exception of "tawny" for "blue" on the first page, Gissing's copy of the novel bears no corrections, so that any conscientious editor must be content to compare the text of the three-decker with that of the first one-volume edition (Lawrence and Bullen, 1894, but also Macmillan, 1893), for the novelist is only known to have read the proofs of the texts printed by Henderson and Spalding, of Marylebone Lane, for the first two editions. This is what Patricia Ingham has done and, by her own admission, the crop was meagre – about twenty discrepancies.

Her substantial introduction is more historical than literary. With the passing of time a number of openly expressed or subjacent ideas as well as of words and phrases have become far less clear (to the younger generation in particular) than they were when the novel was first published. The comment offered by the editor is essentially of the socioeconomic kind and it not infrequently expands into the notes, which are particularly informative. Money, food, social values, manners, sex, opinions and prejudices are discussed at length, not in the light of the analyses offered by such commentators of the 1970s and 1980s as Duncan Crow, Jenni Calder, Nina Auerbach, Patricia Stubbs and Gail Cunningham, but by comparison with the opinion of the traditionalists John Ruskin and Samuel Smiles and of minor figures of late Victorian fiction like Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, George Egerton, and the undismissible Grant Allen. The discussion, from which polemics are refreshingly absent, is leavened by brief parallels with narrative situations in novels by Trollope and Hardy. Among Gissing's novels *The Unclassed* is obviously that which caught Patricia Ingham's attention most forcibly, and it may prove significant in retrospect that she refers to the 1884 version, which clamours for reprinting.

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Equally refreshing are the enlightened considerations on Gissing's feminism, as seminally expressed in his letter of 2 June 1893 to Bertz, that is only a few weeks after the publication of *The Odd Women*: "My demand for female 'equality' simply means that I am convinced [not 'concerned' as we unfortunately read on p. xvii] there will be no social peace until women are intellectually trained very much as men are." A phrase like "sexual anarchy," used by Gissing with clairvoyance, has become famous, partly thanks to Elaine Showalter's critical work, and it should – in its original context – remain a landmark of intelligent discussions of his fruitful ideological ambiguities, which, we are glad to be reminded, were by and large clearly perceived by contemporary reviewers.

This edition, as academic users and their students, perceptive readers and collectors will realize, has many strong points. Very few textual difficulties are left unsolved (who will offer a reliable explanation for the story of the lady and the glove?). The explanatory notes are worth reading and rereading – critically here and there (*vide* the notes on photography, on the new Gilbert and Sullivan opera, which ignores the fact that *The Odd Women* was published in 1892, etc.). Tracing to its source the phrase "the so-called nineteenth century" in chapter X is assuredly an editorial feat, as none of the reference works we have consulted mentions it. It is quite in character that this forgotten phrase quoted with relish by Everard Barfoot should be borrowed from Oscar Wilde's "Woman's World" (1888). Other words and phrases which were trendy at the time are shown to have been turned to good account by Gissing. On page xxiv, Patricia Ingham breaks new ground in this respect.

The critical apparatus contains other useful elements than the introduction and the explanatory notes. The map of "The London of *The Odd Women*" will be of help to all readers, but essentially to foreign readers, who will not fail to notice with a smile that the scale is given



in both miles and kilometres. The Note on the Text will be pronounced indispensable by students of the novel, but they will wonder why the *Letters to the Family* and those to Bertz have been included in the Bibliography below the nine (not eight) volumes of *Collected Letters* as though they contained something vital that the editors of the nine volumes inadvertently left out! Under Criticism a few more titles might have been added, notably David Grylls's *The Paradox of Gissing*.

When a new impression is called for, some corrections should be made: *The Odd Women*, p. xix; marriages in the sight of God, p. xxii; Mattheisen, wherever his name appears. Some

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dates are wrong. *The Critical Heritage* was published in 1972, not in 1968, the date of *Collected Articles on George Gissing*. In the Chronology, 31 May 1876 is not the day when Gissing met Nell, but that on which he was arrested. In 1877 he did not publish in England short stories written in America; the only one he succeeded in getting republished was "The Artist's Child," in *Tinsleys' Magazine* for January 1878. More importantly, on p. 377, the notion that Edith, like Nell, became an alcoholic, should be eradicated before it has a chance to spread. Gissing himself dealt with this suggestion authoritatively in a letter to Clara Collet of 17 February 1897: "She is perfectly sober – in everything but language." When such corrections have been made, perhaps with a few others like "London particular" for "London peculiar," this critical edition will be one of the very best of a remarkable novel which Patricia Ingham calls the most detached of all Gissing's novels. May she convince Oxford University Press to publish other titles – preferably out of print ones – by the same author.

Pierre Coustillas

Francesco Marroni, *Silverdale*, Palermo: Edizioni della Battaglia, 2000, pp. 128.

"I believe that in any genuine critic lies hidden a story-teller or an artist," Paolo Lagazzi writes in his introduction to this collection of short stories by Professor Francesco Marroni, of the Università Gabriele d'Annunzio of Pescara. "There always comes a time when the 'good' exegetist discovers that his professional tools no longer satisfy him, that the world of writing demands of him something quite different – that he should in turn become the author of a literary work." And this is what the author of these short stories, who is mainly known abroad for his writings on such literary figures as Jane Austen, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, not to speak of Irish literature, has done during his sleepless nights. One of the stories, entitled "George e Nell," offers a reconstruction of Gissing's life as we imagine it about 1880 when reading some of the more graphic letters to Algernon, or as we could have imagined it still more graphically if we had access to those early letters to Bertz which were unfortunately destroyed by the recipient.

The story is set in working-class London at Christmas time. George has just finished writing a short story for *Preston's Magazine*, a commissioned story it would seem, for which a title will have to be found by the editor. Nell has gone out. Will she come back home before midnight? From this moment, which is powerfully described, Marroni explores the past of the

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budding novelist, an avatar, if a rather more mature one, of the main character in "The Last Half-Crown." We are treated to naturalist scenes devoted to the past common life of George and Nell, from the time when, aged eighteen, he met her in a street off Oxford Road, Manchester, through his encounter with Eduard Bertz's name in a newspaper advertisement to the days when, after his marriage celebrated by "il Reverendo Terence Talbot," he thinks of moving to the West

End, so that all Nell's ill-famed friends should no longer be within easy reach. The story contains strong scenes between George and Nell, with vivid descriptions of their lodgings, of a bout of physical violence when George deals her a blow on the face; also some erotic visions like that glimpse we are allowed of Nell lying on the couple's bed with this Zolaesque comment: "*Quasi tutto il suo corpo era in mostra.*" Bentley would have been horrified to read an English equivalent of this in "Mrs. Grundy's Enemies." In other places – but of course Francesco Marroni is writing fiction, not a biography based on quotable sources only – we catch sight of a Gissing who may be more imaginary than real. Thus can we imagine young Gissing, a radical agnostic, sanctimoniously quoting the Gospel? Can we imagine Nell alluding to the legend of St. George and the dragon? Conversely, her distrust of Bertz [*il tedesco*], whom she enjoins George no longer to mention in her presence, is quite in character and, although there is no record of Nell's dislike of lentils, we can't refrain from smiling when the narrator has her taunt her husband for his failure to cook lentils properly. In Nell, it is not improbably suggested, George sought the affection that his mother, by his own admission, never gave him.

Not all episodes are sad ones. We read of George's happy hours when as a child he dreamt of Magna Græcia and his favourite poets or of the blue Mediterranean: "*La ragazza aveva la freschezza di una divinità nata dalle acque.*" The picture of George and Eduard looking about for Nell in the streets of London is among the best, and there is no other epithet than "truthful" available to describe Eduard's presentation to his friend of Schiller's Correspondence with Goethe. The two volumes are in front of the present reviewer as he is writing these lines, dated by Bertz "Tottenham, 1880." Empathy is here strengthened by thorough scholarly knowledge of Gissing's life.

This short story is one of seven, the first of which gives the title to the collection. They are all inspired by the life and work of writers whom Professor Marroni has had plenty of opportunities to teach; about whom he has written in a large number of books and journals. Paolo Lagazzi throws useful light on the sources. No one will be surprised to find Elizabeth

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Gaskell's life and works among them. Besides the variety of inspiration (we are told that another collection is ready to be published) the aspect of this type of fiction most likely to attract the notice of commentators is its growing popularity. Oxford University Press have tested it in their World's Classics, with John Sutherland's volumes devoted to literary enigmas, but it is with a novel like *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* that the comparison is compelling. We had known for ages about *romans à clef*, among which *The Private Life of Henry Maitland* may perhaps be classified, although it is more satisfactory to call it a fictionalized biography; we also knew the type of fiction of which Sylvère Monod's *Madame Homais* is an excellent example – it retells the events in Flaubert's masterpiece, *Madame Bovary*, from the point of view of a minor character in it. We also knew the "imaginary reconstruction" by E. F. Matthiason of Gissing's "Veiled Period," which appeared in the January 1969 number of the *Gissing Newsletter*, and we wonder, feeling caught in a spiral ascent, when and where developments will stop. That we have more and more fiction on fiction no one can deny – the way was shown years ago by Conrad, who in "The Idiots" was openly imitating Maupassant. But what is to be expected next? Recognition of "fiction on fiction" as a genre most certainly, but also a new branch of criticism devoted to it and awaiting recognition as gender studies did in the wake of the women's lib movement? Well, pending the big publishers' answer to this question, let us turn to *Silverdale* and look forward confidently to the availability of its successor.

Pierre Coustillas

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## Notes and News

On 17 June, in the Swiss village of Aigle, Xavier Pétremand, Gissing's great-grandson, married Sylvie Descombaz. Our hearty congratulations to the young couple.

Foreign travellers are favourites in some intellectual circles of Southern Italy, and it is now clear that Crotonese remembers Gissing as well as Catanzaro does, largely thanks to Signora Teresa Liguori, who teaches English locally at the Istituto Tecnico Nautico Statale "Mario Ciliberto," and who is President for the Province of Crotonese of a national cultural association called Italia Nostra. With some of her pupils she decided to enquire into Gissing's stay in the

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Calabrian town mainly known to his readers as that in which he nearly died, and was attended by Dr. Riccardo Sculco, whom Norman Douglas met in the early years of the century (see his chapter "Memories of Gissing" in *Old Calabria*). The local press devoted a good deal of space in the last year or two to Gissing and his impressions of Cotrone, as it was then called, and quite naturally to the town as it was about a hundred years ago. Among the many articles that Prof. Liguori has kindly sent us, one of the shortest and most striking is that by her pupil Caterina Fuoco who, to the question "*Quale progresso per le ferrovie ioniche?*," bluntly replied that, as regards travelling by train along the Ionian Sea, it was still very much what it used to be in Gissing's time. Paul Theroux, in his *Pillars of Hercules*, rather confirms this opinion of a fifth-year student girl, which the regional authorities might profitably bear in mind. The students' work began in the 1998-99 school year and a full description of the research project is given in a booklet printed by the Istituto Nautico, entitled "Progetto di ricerca: Itinerari nella Crotonese di G. Gissing." The booklet contains information about the Sculco family, an account of an interview of Dr. Alfeo Sculco, a grand nephew of Gissing's doctor. The research covers a number of areas: linguistic, biographical, historical, archeological, literary and, as regards the Sculco family, genealogical. The relevant chapters of *By the Ionian Sea* are reproduced in English.

**Bibliography:** Caterina Fuoco, "Viaggiare in treno sulla tratta a un binario Paola-Sibari-Crotonese: Da Gissing a oggi nulla è cambiato," *Il Crotonese*, 5 February 1998; reprinted in *Arcobaleno*, no. 14, Anno scolastico 1998-99, Istituto Tecnico Nautico Statale, Crotonese, p. 71, preceded by Prof. Liguori's description of the Gissing project; Valter Crugliano and Rodolfe Ape, "Studenti a lezione di storia dagli Sculco," *Il Crotonese*, 11 June 1999; Ape and Corigliano [*sic*], "Un incontro interessante" [with Dr. Alfeo Sculco], *La Provincia KR*, 11 June 1999; Mimmo Stirparo, "Gli studenti del Nautico indagano: Gli itinerari nella Crotonese di Gissing," *La Provincia KR*, 3 July 1999; Teresa Liguori, "Un Parco per George Gissing a Crotonese," *La Provincia KR*, November 1999; *Progetto di ricerca...*, the 50-page pamphlet described above, 1999; Caterina Fuoco, "Quale progresso per le ferrovie?" *Noi Magazine* (Supplement to *La Gazzetta del Sud*), 24 February 2000; Teresa Liguori, "Progetto di ricerca..." *Noi Magazine*, 2 March 2000; g. g., "Una ricerca degli studenti...: Dagli giorni di Gissing alla città d'oggi," *La Gazzetta del Sud*, 25 March 2000; Giulio Grilletta, "Italia Nostra rinnova l'appello per la creazione di un parco letterario a Crotonese: Ricordando George Gissing," *La Provincia KR*, 14 April 2000; Teresa Liguori, "Ci hanno scritto: George Gissing a Crotonese," *Noi Magazine*, 27 April 2000.

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Interestingly, after the talk given by Francesco Badolato to the Rotary Club at Crotone, on 8 April, some progress was made in the ongoing efforts to identify the staff of the Albergo Concordia in Gissing's time, in particular the proprietress and the waiter.

William Levy has reminded us of an epigram on Gissing by Dorothy Parker:

When I admit neglect of Gissing,  
They say I don't know what I'm missing.  
Until their arguments are subtler,  
I think I'll stick to Samuel Butler.

It will be found in the Viking Portable Library *Dorothy Parker*, introduced by W. Somerset Maugham (New York: The Viking Press, 1944, p. 323). The quatrain is one of a series of such "efforts," eleven in number, among which Wilde, D. G. Rossetti, Carlyle, Dickens and Tennyson received Dorothy's attention. They all make us think that we know *par coeur* what came from the pen of Parker. Her piece is interesting on two counts: it was apparently first published in *Sunset Gun* (1928), at a time when there were a number of new editions of Gissing's novels in both England and America, after the publication of the deplorably edited *Letters to the Family*, and the series of quatrains is appropriately entitled "A Pig's Eye View of Literature." William Levy has sent a countercuff which we dare not print, but if he publishes it in another journal, we promise to give the reference.

Miscellaneous news. *The Wakefield Express* (31 March, p. 3) published a short article, "City's hidden gem," about the reopening of the Gissing Centre, whose Honorary Secretary was interviewed by Phil Butler on the local radio station at lunch time on 3 April. – At the University of Tunis, Mrs. Chérifa Mbarek gave a talk on Inclusion and Exclusion in *New Grub Street* on 13 April. – There will be a special session on Gissing at the MLA Convention in Washington, D. C., next December. The session will be chaired by John Halperin. The speakers will be Constance Harsh, Arlene Young and Christine DeVine. We shall give further details in the October number.

**Correction:** the address of Deborah McDonald's web site on Clara Collet was given erroneously in the April number, p. 41. It should have been [www.claracollet.co.uk](http://www.claracollet.co.uk)

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## Recent Publications

### Volumes

George Gissing, *Of Human Odds and Ends/ Was so alles geschieht*. Selection and translation by Richard Fenzl. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000. The cover illustration is a detail from "The Little Flowers of the Field," by George Clausen. 184 pages. DM 16.50. ISBN 3-423-09394-3. The stories are "Our Mr. Jupp," "The Tout of Yarmouth Bridge," "A Profitable Weakness," "The Little Woman from Lancashire," "The Justice and the Vagabond," "The Poet's Portmanteau," and "In Honour Bound."

John Keahey, *A Sweet and Glorious Land: Revisiting the Ionian Sea*, New York: Thomas Dunne Books/ St. Martin's Press, 2000. xxiv + 200 pages. \$23.95. ISBN 0-312-24205-0. Cream paper-covered boards with silver titling. Pictorial dust jacket. This is an account of

the author's recent journey in Gissing's footsteps by the Ionian Sea. A map of Southern Italy and a chronology precede the text which contains many illustrations from photographs taken by the traveller, as well as other maps. *Kirkus Reviews* reviewed the volume as early as 15 April.

Articles, reviews, etc.

Marshall Brooks (ed.), *The Romance of the Book*, Delhi, N. Y.: Birch Brook Press, 1995. The passage on the "ragged veterans" in *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* is included in this pleasantly old-fashioned anthology.

Miriam Sette, "Recensioni," *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, no. 6, July 1998, pp. 133-35. Review of the French translation of *By the Ionian Sea*, together with one by Laura Braconni of the Everyman editions of *New Grub Street* and *In the Year of Jubilee*, pp. 135-39.

Helen Killoran, *Edith Wharton: Art and Allusion*, Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1998. Gissing's influence on *The House of Mirth* is discussed in various places.

Anon., "Society Reports: Gissing Centre," *Wakefield Express* (City Edition), 19 November 1999, p. 13. Xerox copies of the serialized translations of *Demos* into Polish and of *New*

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*Grub Street* into German have been deposited at the Gissing Centre.

Edgar Rosenberg (ed.), *Charles Dickens: Great Expectations*, New York and London: Norton, 1999. Quotes at some length from Gissing's critical comment on this novel.

Renato Santoro and Enzo Misiani, "Gissing a Catanzaro," *Calabria Sconosciuta*, no. 85, January-March 2000, p. 80. About the Gissing symposium and the unveiling of a plaque commemorating him in Catanzaro on 23 October 1999.

Mauro Francesco Minervino, "Mr. Paparazzo, I presume..." *Diario della settimana*, Anno V, no. 13, 29 March-4 April 2000, pp. 20-31. Long, illustrated article on the Paparazzo-Gissing developments. An abridged English version by Mauro Francesco Minervino and James Panichi appeared in *Italy Daily* (published with the *Corriere della Sera*) for 11 April 2000, p. 3, under the title "Italian Living: When Paparazzo Was a Grumpy Hotelier; Why the Photographer in 'La Dolce Vita' Made History; Few Know of the Writer Behind the Name." With three illustrations.

Anon., "Cronaca di Crotone: La Città di Gissing," *La Gazzetta del Sud*, 7 April 2000, p. 30. About the talk on Gissing that Francesco Badolato gave at the local Rotary Club.

V[irgilio] S[quillace], "Iniziativa del Rotary Club: Una targa al 'Concordia' per ricordare Gissing," *La Gazzetta del Sud*, 26 April 2000, p. 25. With a photograph of the Albergo Concordia in the early twentieth century.

D. J. Taylor, "Revised Editions," *Sunday Telegraph*, 7 May 2000, p. 13. Article in praise of *Born in Exile*, with portraits of Taylor and Gissing.

Mark Knight, "Chesteron, Dostoevsky, and Freedom," *English Literature in Transition*, Vol. 43 (2000), no. 1, pp. 37-50. Chesteron discovered Dostoevsky through *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*.

Francesco Marroni, "Gissing e Nell," a short story in *Silverdale*, Palermo: Edizioni della Battaglia, 2000, pp. 89-100. See the review of this work in the present number.

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